



# KING OF THE COURT

*a standalone romantic comedy*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**R.S. GREY**



## **King of the Court**

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Author's Note:

**King of the Court** is a full-length standalone novel. At the end, I've included an excerpt from my #1 bestselling sports romantic comedy **Scoring Wilder**.

**King of the Court** concludes at around 90% on your device.

Happy Reading!

XO, RS Grey

# **KING OF THE COURT**

**USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

**R.S. GREY**

# Part One

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# Chapter One

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The persistent buzz from my phone is starting to grate on my nerves. It's been going off all morning, and though I'm tempted to go right on ignoring it, I force myself to roll away from the window and grab it. I rub sleep from my eyes, sit up, and unlock the screen. It's worse than I was expecting. I have 58 missed calls and 237 unread text messages. Another one rolls in; this one from my agent.

*You're a legend. Find a newspaper. Turn on the TV. You're everywhere.*

I don't heed his advice. It's early and I'm still exhausted from last night. Before I face the world, I could use some coffee and breakfast. A lot of breakfast. I'm starving. I set my phone back down on the nightstand, face down so it's easier to ignore the barrage of people trying to get in contact with me, and then shift up and off the bed. My body screams at me to lie back down. Sore muscles, achy joints—a long playoff run will do that to you. I look down at the substantial purple and black bruise on my ribs. Carmelo Taylor elbowed me pretty damn good last night when he was trying to block my game-winning shot. Ref didn't call the foul. Not that it matters. Nothing says *Fuck you* like crossing a dude over and hitting a step-back three in front of his own bench. I smile thinking

about it. Without a doubt, that's the moment everyone will be talking about this morning. The row of press positioned underneath the hoop likely captured it from every angle. Hopefully Carmelo gets a copy.

A feminine curse rings out from the living room, and I roll my eyes. I told Anthony I didn't want him bringing any girls back to our suite. The idiot didn't listen, which means before I head out of my room, I grab some sweats and tug them on, ignoring the protests from my ribs when I bend over.

I'd stay holed up in my room until she's gone, but I'm hungry and thirsty.

I step out into the living room, and confetti crunches underneath my bare feet.

Clearly, Anthony had himself a little celebration after I fell asleep last night. His door's flung open wide and there's a girl sleeping beside him on his bed. Another one walks out of the bathroom; fortunately, this one is fully dressed.

"Where's my shoe?!" a third girl groans.

She pops up from the other side of the living room couch and shrieks when she sees me standing there. She presses her hand to her chest as a long string of profanities escape her lips.

I actually smile, which makes it twice in one morning. A record as of late.

Her shock gives way to surprise. I scared her at first, but now that she's registered who I am, her face goes beet red.

"Ben Castillo..." Her mouth drops open, and she looks around as if she wants to share this news with someone. "You—you were in this suite last night?" she asks, pointing to the door behind me.

I nod.

“No way.” She laughs and shakes her head. “Had I known...”

What? She would have kicked my door in? Mauled me?

From the way she brazenly scans down my bare chest, I don't think I'm that far off the mark.

I wait for something to stir inside me. Want. Need. Desire. A fucking blip of life. She's not bad-looking. Anthony's as shallow as they come. He likes women with curves and sex appeal, so on paper, this woman ticks every box of what *should* turn me on...but she just doesn't. I'm broken. Bored. Put off by every woman I've encountered in the last five months.

“Do you need help getting home?” I ask, trying to move this awkward situation along. Just in case she has the wrong idea, I clarify. “I can get you an Uber or a cab, whatever's easier.”

Her face changes then. Her smile reaches her eyes and she looks relieved, maybe even grateful for my kindness.

I rub the front of my neck, up along the stubble beneath my chin I haven't shaved in a few days. I'm about to tack on *Forget I asked* when she finally speaks up.

“That would be great, actually. Thanks. I just need to find \_\_\_”

I point up. “Your shoe?”

Her strappy sandal is hanging from a limb of the suite's chandelier.

She laughs. “Right. Of course. Why *wouldn't* my shoe be dangling from the ceiling?”

She moves around the couch to try to get it, but seeing as I'm the professional basketball player here with the height to prove it, I take it upon myself to reach up and grab it before handing it down to her. Her cheeks heat with new color and she tucks her dark hair behind one of her ears.

“Thank you.”

I nod and walk away, giving her space to finish collecting her things.

“Anthony!” I shout, waking him up like I'm his crotchety parent. “Your friend is ready to leave!”

He groans and picks up a pen off his nightstand so he can throw it in my direction. It clatters against his doorframe before falling limply to the floor. “It's the middle of the night!”

“Nice, yeah. Good manners, bud. It's ten AM. Get up and help me clean this place.”

He refuses to comply, so I walk into his room and find his wallet on the TV console. I rip a couple hundred dollars out of it and head back out to the woman in the living room who's now been joined by her friend who was in the bathroom.

“That's for getting home,” I tell them. “Do you know the woman in the bed?” I ask, nodding back toward Anthony's bedroom.

Before they can answer, the woman in question scurries past me, clutching her purse and shoes to her chest. At least they don't seem like they're going to linger. They're already starting to head for the door.

“Hey! Come on, ladies,” Anthony protests. “We have all morning!”

“Don’t listen to him,” I argue. “He’s about to get up and help me clean this suite. You don’t want to stay for that.”

“Like hell I am! That’s why hotels have housekeepers!” Anthony protests, burying his head under his pillow.

He knows full well we aren’t leaving it looking like this. The housekeepers—who get paid shit all—shouldn’t be subjected to this. My mom used to clean houses, and she’d slap me on the back of the head if she saw the state of this place.

I shepherd the trio to the door, ensuring none of them get distracted on their way out of the palatial suite. We’re walking through the foyer where a five-foot flower arrangement sits in the center of a gaudy table when chandelier shoe girl turns back to me.

“Congratulations by the way. National champs.”

I nod. “Oh, yeah, thanks.”

The right side of her mouth lifts in a tentative smile. “Could we get a quick picture with you before we leave?”

What was left of my good mood vanishes.

“No.”

She shrugs, unfazed by my curt tone. “Right. Can’t blame me for trying.”

I’ve been in the game long enough to know not to take a picture with them. These women seem nice, but the last thing I need is one of them running their mouth on social media, spreading rumors about me and what activities I get up to off the court. I don’t invite jersey chasers into my life for a reason. Even without a picture, nothing’s stopping them from going to the press and talking about this encounter right now.

Anthony's going to get an earful as soon as I finish escorting them out. He's five years younger than me and still green in so many ways. Maybe I'll take after my mom and smack him upside the head.

Outside the suite, the women head toward the bank of private elevators, waving to me over their shoulders. Once those metal doors slide closed, I sigh in relief and I look down to the pile of newspapers waiting on top of the room's welcome mat.

The *Chicago Tribune* sits on top.

*CHAMPIONS AGAIN!*

*LA SWEEPS CHICAGO FOR FOURTH CONSECUTIVE  
TITLE*

Underneath the headline, there's a picture of me holding up the gold NBA Championship trophy with my teammates crowded around me, smiling big. Beside that photo is another image of me just as my three-point shot swooped through the net in the last second of the fourth quarter, clinching the game for Los Angeles.

"I'm up now," Anthony says with a groan behind me. "You happy?"

I pick up the newspapers and carry them inside. He'll want to take a look at them. This was his first title, hence why he went all out last night.

I slap them against his chest as I pass by, and he hurries to catch them before they slide to the floor.

"Now that's what I like to see," he quips, glancing down at the *Tribune*. "My face right on the front page. I mean, sure, from this angle you can only see half of me, but at least I'm smiling." He crinkles the paper as he holds it up for me to see.

I heave a sigh as I throw myself down on the living room couch and drop my head back to look up at the ceiling. I'm more than exhausted; I'm bone-weary. I need a month off, but I'm not going to get it. I won't even get a week. We're due to start training for the Games in two days.

"Would it have killed you to look happy for the photos?" he prods.

"That *is* my happy face."

He barks out a laugh as if that's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

The shrill sound of the hotel's phone ringing startles us both. I knew it would happen eventually; I can only stay off the grid for so long. I can silence my phone and turn it upside down, but my agent, my manager, my coach, my publicist, my good-for-nothing father—they'll always find a way to reach me.

"I'll get it," Anthony says, dropping the newspapers on the coffee table on his way to the phone.

I listen to him talk, placing bets in my head for who could be on the other end of the line. He's not flirting, so it can't be my publicist. She's three times his age, but he doesn't let that stop him.

"Hold on, give me that address again," Anthony says, snapping his finger at me before he mimes writing something down.

I don't move a muscle as I arch an eyebrow as if to say, *Snap that finger at me again and I'll break it off.*

He rolls his eyes and puts the person on hold so he can grab the pen he tried to throw at me earlier. Once he finishes

with the phone call, he picks up the piece of paper and waves it in the air.

“Who was that?” I ask, curiosity winning out.

“A rep from the Olympic committee.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Turns out they finally found somewhere for us to train. Pack your cowboy boots, buddy boy. We’re heading to Texas.”



## Chapter Two

---

**D**ale's Diner is filled with gossipmongers. Every spot at the counter is accounted for, and all morning I've been running around like my feet are on fire trying to refill coffees and run meals and clear dirty dishes.

"I heard they've had big city contractors out there for months, redoing that old ranch," Jeananne declares with a smug smile like she's dropping some real titillating bit of information.

"I saw the moving trucks myself," Doyle swears, leaning forward and raising his voice so the whole diner can hear his confident claims. "A whole line of them drove into town last month. Must have been a dozen carrying in lord knows what."

"You done, Mable?" I ask, reaching out for her plate.

"Not yet, honey," she says, shooing me away as she listens to Doyle.

Not one of these people care that my shift is going to end soon. I've been breaking my back all morning waiting on them, and if I leave before they do, I can kiss my meager tips goodbye. There isn't a system in place at Dale's for sharing tips. In the wise words of my grandmother, *You get what you get and you don't throw a fit.*

I leave Mable's plate where it is and move on down the line, trying to clear what I can. No one wants to vacate their spot and miss out on the conversation taking place.

With a roll of my eyes—hidden, of course (this is the South after all)—I tug the dish towel out of the back of my apron and get back to wiping the counter.

This gossip is nothing new. It's all anyone in Pine Hill has been talking about for the last few weeks. Our small town, population: too few to count, is hosting the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team for the next month while they prepare for the Summer Games. No one really knows for sure why they picked Pine Hill, but word is, the team's head coach bought a piece of land not too far out of town last year and has been building a huge training facility there. A few of the local guys have even been commissioned to work out there, though apparently, they signed some kind of contract promising they wouldn't blab their mouths about it because it's all been pretty hush-hush.

"I saw a red Lamborghini *speeding* down Main yesterday," Mable tells the group with an admonishing tone. I smile at the way she pronounces the fancy car's name, stretching it out real good so it takes twice as long for her to say.

Doyle tsks. "There's no telling what kind of riffraff they'll attract to town."

I bite my tongue for the hundredth time this morning. If you ask me, this town could use some "riffraff". Maybe all that "riffraff" would shut their traps, eat their meals, and leave promptly after giving me big fat tips.

Two plates of food slide through the gap between the counter and the kitchen.

“Order up!”

I drop my towel and take the hot plates quickly, deftly delivering them to a couple by the window. I didn't recognize them when they first arrived and normally their presence would be the talk of the morning, but with the diner filled to capacity, the old-timers sitting at the counter haven't even noticed them. The couple is definitely from out of town. Journalists or reporters from the looks of it. They've got their laptops out alongside notebooks. They've kept their heads bent together, and they only separate when they have to make room on their table for food.

I head back to the counter for a fresh pot of coffee and carry it back to top off their mugs. “Y'all need anything else? Syrup? Ketchup?”

The woman—a skinny brunette wearing a monotone cream outfit—wrinkles her nose at the suggestion of condiments. “This is fine. Thank you.”

I watch her lift a portion of her scrambled egg whites with her fork, clearly distraught about the fact that they've been cooked in bacon grease.

“Sorry 'bout that,” I say, leaning in and dropping my voice. “I did try to tell Cook you wanted your eggs cooked ‘healthy’, but between you and me, I'm not sure he's ever heard that word before.”

I tack on a teasing smile that she doesn't return, and then I glance at her companion.

He's wearing pretentious glasses and a flat expression. Seems he's not too pleased with his breakfast either. I eye his eggs and bacon and hash browns. It all looks pretty good to me. I mean, *I* wouldn't eat it, but that's only because I'm

surrounded by breakfast food every day for hours on end. A girl can only smell bacon so many days in a row without losing her appetite for the stuff.

“Well, holler if you need anything,” I say, spinning on my heels, distraught over the fact that I likely just lost myself *another* tip for the morning.

It’s nearly eleven o’clock and I’ve been at Dale’s since half past five. Thinking about the meager cash I’ve earned makes my stomach twist with anxiety. I would stay and help Christine with the lunch rush—maybe nab a couple more dollars—but then I’d be late for my housekeeping job.

I replace the coffee pot and try for the last time to politely suggest that the old-timers at the counter pay their bills and be on their way, but no one bites.

I’m untying my short apron when Christine pushes through the kitchen door and hustles over.

“Birdie, if I were you, I’d clear out quick,” she says, her voice low. “I saw Patrick out back smoking. He’ll probably storm in here any second pissy about somethin’ or other.”

A shiver of fear runs down my spine and I waste no time in gathering my things. Christine and I are a well-oiled machine. She knows I’d never leave her in the weeds straight off. All my tables are well taken care of, so she can get to work right away rolling silverware and making more iced tea for the lunch rush. She’s the one who will end up getting most of my tips when these people finally mosey on out of here, but I don’t mind all that much. She’s got four little mouths depending on her; she needs the money as much as I do.

“See you tomorrow?” she asks with a tired smile.

“Tomorrow.” I nod.

Just then, Cook dings the bell for another order up, pushing a Styrofoam to-go box my way.

I smile and hold it up in thanks, appreciative that he takes the time to feed me before I leave my shifts. Today, it's likely some of that chicken salad I saw him prepping a little while ago. My hungry stomach gives a grumble as I scurry out the front door, avoiding the employee parking lot in an effort to bypass Patrick. I'm not supposed to, but I always park on the side of the diner rather than out back. I'm smart enough not to put myself alone out there and tempt fate. Patrick's fairly harmless most of the time, but there's no need to dangle myself in front of him for no reason.

As I head to my nan's old maroon sedan, I finish untying my apron and yank it off from around my hips. Before I get to my next job, I'll pull off the road and swap out my 1950s-style diner dress for a nondescript black t-shirt and workout shorts. I wish I had time to shower—I smell like I just crawled out of a vat of grease—but there's no time. I'm cutting it close as it is, especially once I crank my key in the ignition and the gas light flickers on above the steering wheel. *Why?! Why* does this always seem to happen at the worst possible moment?! Didn't I just get gas like...okay, sure, now that I think about it, it's been a while, and yes, last time I only filled it up halfway because I didn't have enough cash on me for a full tank.

Annoyingness aside, I'm lucky the town's one gas station is just across the street from Dale's. I cut across the two-lane highway then swoop around to park by the first available pump. Once I've paid my ten dollars inside and get the gas going, I realize Dr. Tully is on the other side of my pump with a trailer hitched to the back of his truck. Inside of it, there's a huge gray horse looking back at me with soulful brown eyes. I nod in greeting to Dr. Tully then glance back at the horse.

“I’m taking her to the clinic,” he explains.

“She’ll be okay?”

“Hope so.”

I nod, feeling sorry for the poor thing.

“I have an apple in my bag. Can she have it?”

He shrugs as if to say *Why not?* and I hurry around the side of the car to get it. My stomach protests me offering up my afternoon snack to someone else, but I have my lunch to tide me over.

“Here, take it,” I tell the horse, holding it up to the bars of the trailer. She doesn’t go for it at first. She clears her nostrils and bucks her head, trying to get me to leave her alone. “It’s not gonna hurt you. It’s just an apple. Here, look.”

I take a bite out of it then hold it back up to the horse so she can get a good long sniff. That does the trick. She takes it from my hand ever so gently and stays by the back of the trailer long enough to let me pat her nose while she munches on it.

“Dr. Tully’s the best in town,” I whisper to her. “He’ll fix you up good as new.”

I’m still patting her when a black SUV pulls off the highway and slows to a stop at the pump behind mine. I don’t know jack diddly about cars, but I know this one’s nice. All the little coordinating bells and whistles tell me it was likely custom made. What a silly thing to spend money on. Give me that same amount and I’ll feed every hungry mouth in this town ten times over.

My opinion of the car must be written on my face because when the driver of the fancy SUV opens his door and looks

out at me, his brows furrow, mirroring my expression.

I smooth my features, but it's too little too late.

He thinks I was judging him, and well...I was.

He slams his car door closed, and I finally register the full package he presents. If my nan were here, she'd whistle long and low, maybe even fan her face and tack on a *Lord almighty* for good measure, all just to let the world know how handsome she found this stranger. He's definitely a looker, starting at his brown wavy hair, trimmed short on the sides and left slightly longer on top, down to his heavily lashed brown eyes and sharp jaw, covered in dark stubble. His tan skin makes it look like he's just been on some wonderful summer holiday. I haven't been on one of those, say, *ever*, but god, just looking at him is like taking a mini vacation.

He's still frowning at me, but I've let go of my earlier annoyance. *You can drive whatever ol' car you want, stranger. Don't let me stop you.*

I'm not even hiding my obvious perusal of him, and why should I?

There's nothing fun to look at in this town, nothing but farmland and boys I've known since I was in diapers. This man's only stopping here on his way to someplace else, so there's no harm in letting my attention linger.

Besides, I haven't been staring all that long. His friend is only just now getting out of the passenger side of the SUV, making a big show of stretching out his back.

"Jesus, we're in the middle of nowhere," his friend says, turning in a circle. "Do you think we're going the right way? I swear we should have turned left back there. My phone barely even has a signal out here." He bangs his phone against his



palm as if that might help. “We’ll have to get them to install a cell tower so we can actually connect to the civilized world.”

I’m back to scowling.

My town might not be New York City, but we’re civilized enough. Well...*most* of us.

The stranger doesn’t bother paying attention to his friend’s complaints, still looking at me. We’re right back to being angry at each other. It’s funny, really. What crawled up his butt, anyway? Why’s he looking at me like that? I know why *I’m* scowling, and I have a good reason—his friend just insulted my home.

A tongue licks my palm, and I realize with a start that I still have my hand on the gray horse. I step back, wiping my palm on my dress. Dr. Tully finishes up at the pump and heads toward his driver’s side door.

“Good luck fixing her.”

He nods and hops into his truck, peeling out of the gas station and leaving me with the two guys.

I keep my back to them as I walk back to my pump, but then out of my periphery, I see the stranger’s friend waving to get my attention.

“Hey miss, could you tell us where we are? My maps app isn’t working.”

This guy clearly knows you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. He’s flashing me a big friendly smile, and though he didn’t say please, his tone was friendly enough.

“Pine Hill.”

“No shit?” He looks to his friend. “That’s great. We’re not far then. We’re supposed to be heading to this address.” He

looks down at his phone and rattles it off for me before glancing up again, hopeful. “Have you heard of it?”

I shake my head and point him toward the gas station store. “Head in there. Sheryl might know.”

“Thanks,” he says, tipping his head to me before he follows my instructions.

I’m left on my own with Tall, Dark, and Handsome. And boy, is he tall. Tall enough to be one of those basketball players everyone can’t shut up about. I hum under my breath. Wouldn’t that be interesting? Looking like that *and* playing professional basketball? I wonder how many hearts lie at his feet.

At the pump, I check to see if my ten dollars has somehow magically stretched into enough money to fill my whole tank. All the while, I think I feel the stranger’s eyes on me, but when I glance over at him from beneath my lashes, he’s busy swiping his credit card. I make myself busy too.

I check the screen on the pump, annoyed to see my transaction ended two cents shy of ten dollars. I know it’s not much. Two cents will likely only get me one more drop of gas, but that one drop could be the difference between making it back home or sleeping on the side of the road one night. I jostle the trigger of the gas nozzle, trying to get it pumping again.

“Come on, you stupid thing,” I say.

I want that last drop of black gold, and I don’t have time to head in and argue with Sheryl about it. Sure, I didn’t have time to feed that horse an apple and scowl at random men either, yet here I am, running late and wanting my gas—all of it.

I look up to find the stranger watching me again.

He's leaning back against his car without a care in the world, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His head's turned in my direction, and when I catch him looking, he doesn't have the decency to look away.

"It owes me two cents more gas," I explain, as if that will make me look less crazy.

He opens his mouth to say something, but then his friend bounds out of the store.

We both turn to watch him approach.

"We're saved!" he shouts. "I know where to go! We're not stuck here!"

The stranger looks to me, and then his friend follows suit.

"No offense," he tacks on for my benefit.

I roll my eyes and give up on my gas, returning the nozzle to the pump. I might not like this town any more than they do, but I grew up here, so I'm allowed to make fun of it. They aren't.

I slide into the front seat of my nan's car and glance back at them in the rearview mirror as I pull away. *Welcome to town, jerks. I hope you learn some manners while you're here.*

# Chapter Three

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“**D**amn. Did you get a look at that blonde girl back at the gas station?” Anthony asks.

“No,” I lie.

I catch his grin in my periphery.

Anthony shakes his head. “Almost made me sad we figured out the directions. I’d be just fine going wherever she was headed.”

When I don’t respond, he plows right on.

“Would you mind U-turning and heading back? She might still be there. I could get her number.”

Finally, I bite. “Are you done?”

His grin widens. “You’re telling me you didn’t even register her?”

“We’re here for three weeks,” I remind him, ignoring his question.

“Almost four weeks, actually. That’s plenty of time.”

I purposely turn up the radio as we continue driving down the highway.

He trudges right on, raising his voice over the music. “If all the girls in Texas look like that...maybe I’d be okay getting traded to the Spurs or the Mavs.”

“I know what you’re doing.”

He wipes a hand down his face. “Whatever. Would it kill you to get back out there? Date a woman? *Look* at one for Christ’s sake? It’s been—”

“I know how long it’s been.” My tone could slice through steel.

He points his thumb through the back windshield. “That blonde back there...she was fucking *beautiful*, and if you didn’t notice, well”—he shrugs—“maybe there isn’t hope for you after all.”

I glare over at him, regretting that I let him ride with me from the airport. He would have been fine walking. It would have taken him a few days, and maybe with all of that time, he would have come to his senses and learned to keep his nose out of my business.

Of course I noticed the blonde at the gas station. That girl was pure sunshine. Spun-gold hair, mile-long legs, blue eyes that punched right through my fog of indifference.

Right off the bat, she didn’t like something about me. That much was clear. Her scowl was plain to see, though it didn’t do all that much to warn me away from her. Maybe she would have looked more intimidating if she weren’t hand-feeding that horse looking like a damn Disney princess.

I met her scowl with one of my own, but not for the reasons she probably thinks.

I was confused—no, utterly *dumbstruck* by her as soon as I slid out of my car and met her gaze.

My stomach squeezed tight as she stared on, not shying away, not blushing bashfully like I expected her to. She stared right at me as every hair on my body stood up, taking notice of her.

*Her*, my body screamed.

*HER*.

*Fuck*. Am I an idiot for not asking for her name? Her number? Something?

What if I never meet someone who elicits that response again?

It's not an outlandish concern. It's been years since I've felt that way about a woman—even counting Shelby. God, that's depressing to realize.

When I eventually turn off the highway and head down a long winding dirt road, it takes us another fifteen minutes to arrive at Coach Dalton's hideaway, and my head is no longer back with the blonde. I'm wondering what Coach has in store for us. Sequestering us here in the middle of nowhere isn't exactly common practice. I played in the last Olympic Games and we trained at LeBron's place in Miami for a few weeks before heading to Rio. Everyone stayed in rentals or hotels.

“This feels like summer camp,” Anthony notes, pointing to the small modern cabins interspersed among the trees.

“You went to summer camp?”

“Oh sure. My mom dropped me off every year on her way to a yoga retreat.”

I chuckle, knowing he's full of shit. Anthony and I share a similar story—no story-book childhoods for us and no family to speak of now. My mom died when I was young and I've

fully cut ties with my dad. I've known for a long time that he was a user. Someone who'll suck the life right out of you if you let him. Yesterday, I got a call from my agent asking me why I was selling my old basketball memorabilia online. When I told him I wasn't, he sent me the link to the website. The usual stuff was listed, some signed game balls and NBA rookie cards, but alongside those were trophies from my youth basketball league tournaments, cheap medals, grainy childhood photos with signatures my dad must have forged. Items I didn't even know he had. Items I would have liked to keep if he'd offered them to me.

I could pursue legal action against my father, but it's not a road I'm comfortable going down. I had my agent contact the site so they'd remove the products knowing full well my dad would only take the crap elsewhere. He left me two voicemails after my win the other night. One of them was sugarcoated and sweet, all about how my "old man" is so proud of me; the other was straight to the point. *I need money, rent's due any day now.* Apparently the stipend my financial managers send him every month isn't enough anymore.

"Think they'll have us staying in those cabins?" Anthony asks, craning his head to get a good look at the one we just passed.

"Who the hell knows. You know how Coach Dalton is."

Jerry Dalton is an NBA legend with more wins under his belt than any other coach in history. He's also led the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team to four gold medals, and this year, he wants to make that five. He has more sway than any other coach I've worked with, as evidenced by the fact that I'm here in the woods right now.



When we first got word that he wanted us in Texas for a few weeks before the Games, we all rolled our eyes. We're the best of the best—the top twelve professional players from the United States. We could show up in Tokyo tomorrow, tie our hands behind our backs, cover our eyes with a blindfold, and still dominate the playing field, but Coach Dalton has it in his mind that we need practice and privacy, so that's what we'll get.

This land is his, and he must own a lot of it. Most of the acreage is still covered in dense forest, but the cleared area at the end of the winding road boasts quite a few buildings. The assistant who gives us a tour of the place explains that there's a main house, a large indoor basketball complex with three regulation-sized courts, a training facility where the physical therapists and nutritionists are housed, a few outdoor practice courts, and then our individual cabins. The assistant also gives us our cabin assignments. There's not enough space for everyone to have their own. Some players are bringing family with them, so they get first dibs. I don't have a family, but I have seniority. Anthony doesn't; he's bunking with Carmelo Taylor, and he's got my deepest sympathies.

“Oh you feel bad for me?” Anthony taunts. “Good, then switch. I'll take your cabin.”

I clap him on the shoulder. “Never gonna happen.”

These situations are always tricky. Trey, Anthony, and I are all coming from Los Angeles, but our other nine teammates are from all over the country. For most of our careers, our loyalties lie with our respective franchises. My blood, sweat, and tears belong to my fans back in LA, but the Olympics are different. Until we walk away with that gold medal, our

enemies during the regular season—Carmelo included—are our new teammates. Starting today.

# Chapter Four

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I visited Nan last night, and I'm still in a bad mood from it. I know she's likely to start having more bad days than good days, but my optimistic heart just can't give up hope that she'll pull through and somehow be the first person in history to beat Alzheimer's. Her caretakers have warned me that it's futile to pretend she's going to recover. They know each day she's going to slip further away from the person I used to know. There are no exceptions. No special miracles. No matter how much I might wish for one.

Yesterday was a particularly hard day, a day I knew was coming: the first time she didn't recognize me when I walked into her room at the nursing home. She blinked up at me with watery eyes and unfurled a smile devoid of any recognition. She assumed I was one of her caretakers, and she patted her bed with a shaky hand and told me to sit down.

She had her dinner sitting on a tray but wasn't touching much of it. I asked her if she wanted me to help her eat it.

She nodded, and for a while we sat in silence as I cut up tiny bites of chicken and held them up to her mouth.

She studied me while she ate, and I naively held out hope that she was trying to place me in her mind.

Eventually, she spoke.

“You have the prettiest eyes. They remind me of someone.”

*You.*

*They're your eyes.* The same pale cerulean blue.

“Order up,” Cook says, drawing me out of my worries.

I refocus my attention on the plates piling up, ready to be delivered around the bustling diner. The place has been packed the last few days, so much so that Christine came in early today to help me out. There's no denying that the rumors about the Olympic basketball team coming to town are true. There's been a flood of people into Dale's recently: fans and press hoping to get a glimpse of players, groups of people wearing jackets and t-shirts embroidered with the Olympic symbol, and today, the players themselves.

Two of them arrived thirty minutes ago, and I knew right away they were part of the Olympic team. Two young, confident guys who had to bend to make it past the doorway and walked in with an untouchable swagger. Yup, doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Since then, more have arrived. They've pushed tables together and nearly taken over the whole diner.

Old-timers still surround them on the perimeter and press linger outside, trying and failing to get in thanks to two bodyguards stationed out front. I'm not sure it's legal to bar them from entering, but I have no stake in the game so I've been minding my own business.

“You gonna get those?” Christine asks, rounding the side of the counter with a tray topped with dirty plates. Her tone implies she's slightly annoyed with me for just standing here,

but I've been working my butt off all morning too. I only stopped for a second to make another pot of coffee, and then I got distracted thinking about Nan.

"I'm on it," I say, reaching for the plates Cook just placed near me before I start to strategically arrange them on my arms. I'm a master at delivering food, and the guys take notice.

"Whoa, whoa. You need help?" one of them asks, jumping to his feet. He's an Asian guy with a smooth complexion and sharp, handsome features.

The guy beside him tugs him back down to his chair. "She's got it. Look at her—she's a beast."

I chuckle. "Honestly, if you try to help, you might make it worse. You're better off just staying put and letting me finish."

A guy down the table coughs and mumbles a "That's what she said" under his breath.

There are a few laughs and a lot of grumbles.

"Ignore him," the Asian guy says. "LaMarcus, you're an idiot."

"I didn't mean anything by it," LaMarcus says to him, then he turns to me with big puppy dog eyes. "Hey, ma'am, I didn't mean anything by it. You forgive me, right?"

I smile and shake it off. "No worries, but please don't call me ma'am. I'm probably younger than most of you."

They laugh as I finish placing their plates down in front of them, and then I run back to get the next bunch so I can deliver those too. Soon, the place quiets down while they all get busy eating.

“Can I get y’all anything else? Some strawberry jam for those biscuits?” I ask, propping my hands on my hips.

“Do you hear her? *Jam*. I think I’m in love,” another guy says, this one with fiery red hair.

“You think she wants you fawning all over her?” the Asian guy says. “She’s probably got a boyfriend.”

“Do you?” the redhead asks.

There’s a sudden commotion outside, the likes of which we’ve never seen before. The press and media people who’ve been lingering outside twiddling their thumbs are now pushing and shoving each other for a chance to get to the guys walking toward Dale’s from down the sidewalk.

“Move back,” one of the security guards yells. “*Move!*”

The little bell dings as the diner door opens and camera flashes sneak inside, momentarily blinding me. I blink as white dots dance in my vision, and slowly, my gaze clears just in time to watch the handsome stranger from the gas station walk through the door.

*“Ben! BEN! Can we ask a few questions?!”*

*“How do you feel about being named captain of the Olympic team?”*

*“Ben! Do you think Ray Murry should have been invited to join the team as an alternate?”*

Their questions die off as the door slams closed behind him and his friend, the same guy who was with him at the gas station. Either one of them could be Ben, but my gut tells me it’s my stranger’s name. Ben. What a perfectly average name for an extremely *un*-average man.

I'm pleased to see he's just as handsome as the last time I saw him. No imagined gorgeousness here. In an act of cruelty, he's dressed in a way that shouldn't be all that impressive—unassuming black t-shirt and dark jeans—but the t-shirt cuts across his toned biceps in a way that tightens my stomach. He's picked up even more color in the few days he's been in town, and his healthy tan emphasizes every one of his good features. His brown hair is more curly than wavy today, the short strands trying their damndest to look unruly and tempting. The scruff he hasn't cared to shave does nothing to dull the sharp cut of his jaw. Wonderful. Grand. Is my shift over yet?

I have a ridiculous urge to turn around and run as far away from this man as possible.

In the two days since I stood a few feet away from him at the gas pump, I've thought about him a lot more than I'm proud of. He'd crop up in my mind sporadically throughout my day and make my cheeks grow hot and my heart race. I'd delve into my remembered version of him, lingering on my favorite details, only to chastise myself once I realized what I was doing. I know full well this man hasn't given me even one passing thought. I should do the same.

He hasn't seen me yet, which I'm glad for, but his friend spots me right away.

His mouth spreads into a huge smile, and I find my mouth doing the same of its own volition.

“Hey! We know you!” He turns back to Ben. “It's the girl who saved us.”

“She saved you?” the redhead asks. “Anthony, what are you talking about?”



Chatter fills the table as Ben follows Anthony's gaze to find me. The weight of his stare is enough to buckle my knees. I couldn't move even if I wanted to. It feels like a two-ton boulder is pinning me down. But I'm not held hostage long. In mere seconds, he assesses me then flicks me away like I'm nothing more than a soiled napkin.

The guys at the table shuffle around without having to be told. Plates clatter, butts scoot, and two new chairs arrive for *his holiness* and Anthony.

They head over to take a seat, and I blink myself out of my stupor just in time to ensure no one has caught my awkward reaction to Ben.

"I didn't save either of them," I answer on behalf of Anthony. "They needed directions, that's all. Now, what can I get the two of you to drink?"

"You got any fancy coffee?" Anthony asks while glancing over a menu someone's passed down for him.

I smirk. "You must have mistaken Dale's for someplace better. Not to burst your bubble, but we've got water and we've got black coffee so strong it'll burn through the roof of your mouth."

Anthony laughs. "That's fine. Give me a cup of the mouth-burning coffee and a classic breakfast plate. Whatever eggs you like is fine by me."

It's impossible not to smile along with Anthony. He might be a professional basketball player, but he acts no better than the rest of us. His black skin is gorgeous and sets off his gray eyes. His hair is cropped short, nearly shaved off altogether. There's humor and a lightness to him that doesn't exist in Ben. At least, not on the surface.

“And for you?” I ask Ben, glancing down at my hands.

I’m such a wimp.

I can’t even look him in the eyes as I ask him his order.

“Coffee and water. Please.”

“Anything to eat?”

“Same as him. Breakfast plate, eggs cooked over medium.”

I rock back on my heels and glance up to look somewhere near his shoulder. “Sounds good. I’ll be right back.”

I rush back to grab two mugs and the freshly brewed pot of coffee. Christine and I cross paths, and she dips her head low beside mine.

“Tell me that man is real. Tell me I’m not making him up.”

I laugh and shake my head, knowing full well who she’s referring to. “He’s real.”

She steals a quick glance at him over her shoulder and sighs in bliss. “If they wouldn’t protest, I’d force you to switch tables with me.” I frown in confusion, and she laughs. “Oh come on. They’re eating you up, hun. One of them is about to ask if *you’re* on the menu.”

It just goes to show where my head’s at this morning, because I didn’t notice that at all. Sure, there was some playful banter a minute ago, but I wasn’t aware any of them had really taken notice of me. Then I return with the coffee pot and find the redhead grinning up at me again.

“Put me out of my misery and let me take you out on a date.”

Half the table erupts in laughter as my cheeks turn bright red.

“That’s the best you can do, Mallory?” someone calls. “Jesus, it’s a wonder you ever get laid.”

Mallory wiggles his eyebrows. “Women *love* me.”

“Too bad,” Anthony chimes in as I finish pouring his coffee. He’s loud enough to make the whole table go quiet as he continues, “Ben met her first. He has dibs.”

My heart sputters in my chest as a muscle deep in my belly clenches tight. I’m right beside Ben now, about to set down his coffee mug, and I know he’s aware of my presence, but he won’t look up at me. He sits there, filling up so much space it’s a wonder any of the rest of us fit inside the diner at all. I bend and try to curve around his arm, and I catch a hint of his body wash. I inhale out of some deep-seated need to memorize his scent. It’s heavenly. Manly. Nothing like what I’m used to around here.

“I have a fresh idea,” the Asian guy says. “Why don’t we stop objectifying and humiliating a person standing right by us? It’s like you guys have never left your damn houses before.” He looks up at me and shakes his head in apology.

“You’re right, Trey. My bad,” Anthony says, looking at me with his commercial-worthy smile. “But blame Mallory. He’s the real asshole.”

The guys all laugh, and the focus shifts away from me just as I finish pouring coffee into Ben’s mug.

With a quiet voice, I ask if he’d like any cream or sugar.

“This is fine. Thanks.”

His brown eyes flit up to me and we are a kissable distance away from each other, close enough that when he shifts, his shoulder brushes against my chest and a cascade of sensation rushes down my spine. My lips press together in an attempt to keep me from saying something dumb, and then I nod and all but sprint back to the safety of the counter.

*He has dibs.*

What in the world does *that* mean?

I look down to see my hand shaking, sloshing coffee around the pot near the rim. Quickly, I replace the pot on its warming pad then get busy behind the counter, refilling salt and pepper shakers, rolling silverware for lunch, and helping Christine make drinks for her tables. I feel safe behind the counter, like there's a forcefield between the basketball players and me. Even still, I can't help myself. Every now and then, when I think I can get away with it, I sneak a surreptitious glance at Ben. It's so interesting to see him among the rest of the team. He's with them, but not really one of them. His presence looms over the table like he's a deity who's only gracing us with his presence for the time being. He listens to the conversation and every now and then the edge of his mouth might hitch or he'll nod in response to something, but he doesn't openly participate, not like the rest of them.

It's subtle though—his ownership of the space. He's not being loud and authoritative. It's his quiet confidence that puts me so ill at ease. I have no idea what he's thinking. No idea if he's happy to be here or not. No idea if he "has dibs".

When Cook finishes up with Ben and Anthony's breakfast plates, I carry them over, aware of every step that takes me closer to their table. Just like with the coffee, I serve Anthony first, delaying the gratification of leaning over Ben again. I

love that they're all crammed in side by side. I love that I have no choice but to brush my hip against him and place my hand on his shoulder to stabilize myself as I lean over.

“Right behind you,” I say, dropping his plate down in front of him.

His shoulder muscles ripple under my hand as he moves to the side, trying to give me space. Then—and maybe I'm imagining it—I swear he leans back into my touch. My hand slips off him, the pads of my fingers barely skimming his shirt, and I notice the goose bumps that spread across the back of his neck. His subtle awareness of me is enough to drive me insane. What in the world is happening here? Why am I trying to play with fire?

Just then, the door between the dining room and the kitchen swings open, and Patrick strolls in. Like a bug to a flame, his attention falls on me almost instantaneously, and I quickly move away from Ben. He flicks his gaze from me down across the table filled with basketball players, and his eyes narrow with accusation.

Then he turns, picks up the first thing he sees, which happens to be an empty coffee pot, and calls my name.

“Raelynn, get over here and make more coffee. I don't pay you to stand around.”

*You don't pay me anything, I want to say. Your daddy pays me.*

Ben's head jerks in Patrick's direction as I slink around the table and hurry back behind the counter.

“Morning, Patrick,” I say, trying to ease his temper with kindness. Half the time it works, half the time it doesn't.

“It’d be a better morning if you weren’t taking advantage of my dad’s goodwill. What were you doing over there? Flirting?”

I know better than to argue with him. It’s futile.

“Have you eaten yet?” I ask. “Want Cook to fix you up some breakfast?”

For a long moment, he stares at me as if he’s not sure he wants to drop his previous line of questioning. Then eventually, he nods and points to a vacant spot at the end of the counter where he plops down with a cup of coffee. I don’t miss the flask he tugs out of the back pocket of his jeans, topping off his coffee with a heavy pour of liquor.

Some days, I feel bad for Patrick. He was popular in high school and good on the football field, but that luster has long worn off. Nowadays, he looks like he’s barely keeping himself together. His flat blond hair is receding and thinning. His stomach hangs over the top of his jeans, and his skin carries a sickly sheen to it that doesn’t pair well with the alcoholic bloat.

Most of the time, I can’t muster up any pity for him, though. I know he watches me while I work. I feel his beady little eyes slither down my body, and I wish I wore a chain mail suit instead of this old-fashioned diner dress.

Today my attention slips though. With Ben here, I’m distracted. That’s the only possible explanation for how I missed Patrick following me down the hall on one of my bathroom breaks. I don’t notice him until he corners me right outside the door, slapping his hand against the wall and making me jump out of my skin.

“Raelynn Birdie, you gonna let me take you out on a date soon like I’ve been asking?”

His other hand touches my shoulder, spinning me to face him. His words are meant to be seductive, but they make my skin crawl. Or maybe that’s just his rotten breath.

I turn around and force a tight smile as my stomach ties itself into a knot. This isn’t the first time Patrick’s tried to get handsy with me, pressuring me about going out with him, but I’ve been good at weaseling out of tight situations, good at easing his sour moods. Unfortunately, I know one of these days, he’s not going to take no for an answer.

I don’t want any trouble. This job is cushy compared to what most have to do to get by in this town. Pouring coffee, smiling at the regulars, minding my own business—I won’t let Patrick mess that up for me.

“Come on, Patrick. You know I don’t date.”

I try to sound easy breezy, but his brows furrow and he sniffs in an angry breath, his nostrils flaring.

He steps closer and I hold my hand up in self-defense, trying to push him away. He catches hold of my wrist and tightens his grip enough to make my skin smart.

“Yeah. Why is that, Birdie?” he asks, leaning in closer. “You think you’re too good for me? You were always such a brat back in high school. Stared down your nose at the rest of us like we couldn’t tell.”

He’s mistaken.

I would have bent over backward to join his group of friends. In high school, I sat by myself at lunch with a book or homework splayed out in front of me, sneaking glances at the popular table. I used to wonder how they did it—just smiled

and laughed without a care in the world. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to *be* them. I'd missed that part of growing up. Life had plucked me from childhood and thrust me straight into adulthood so that on the outside I might have looked like any other teenager, but inside, I felt a thousand years old.

I look away, down the hall, trying and failing to keep my voice even as I speak. "Come on, Patrick. I'm working."

"Are you? The way I see it, you're making eyes at those basketball players back there. You think one of them will notice you?" He snorts like the idea is absolutely ludicrous. "Don't hold your breath. You're no better than the rest of us, Raelynn—*trash*."

He spits when he speaks, the spittle landing on my cheek. His grip tightens on my wrist, stinging my skin and no doubt leaving a mark. The pain tangles with the disgusting feeling of his spit on my face and drives out the last of my good sense.

I turn back to look at him, jut my chin up, and yank my arm away with all my might. It throws us both off balance. I teeter back against the wall and he stumbles to the side, barely catching himself before he falls over. "You think I don't know that?" I hiss at him. "You think I have any hope of escaping this place?"

I did leave once and I thought it'd be for good, and yet here I stand, smelling like grease and coffee grounds, wearing a stained apron and threadbare sneakers. He thinks calling me trash is going to hurt, but I've shed any ideas of being good, or bad, or worthy, or worthless a long time ago. I don't have the time or the luxury to fixate on what I am. I'm too busy just trying to get from one day to the next, and in that way, I'm untouchable. Patrick's opinion of me doesn't matter, but there is someone I don't want looking at me with disgust, and he's



standing at the end of the long hall now, watching Patrick and me.

I don't know how long Ben's been standing there, but I straighten my dress and wipe Patrick's spit off my face as he starts down the hall toward us.

Patrick sees him a beat after I do, and he clears his throat and plasters on a big smile.

"Hey man." He extends his hand out for Ben. "You enjoyin' the food? Let me know if I can get you anything. I'm Patrick O'Neal. I own the place."

*No you don't, I want to snap. You don't own shit.*

Ben doesn't even look at him, much less accept his outstretched hand. His assessing gaze stays focused on me as if waiting for me to gain the courage to meet his stare.

Patrick glances between us, frowns, and then backs up down the hall, sensing that he'd be better off leaving before Ben turns his attention on him.

I stay right where I am, leaning against the wall as Ben walks closer to me, passing Patrick. I'm looking back down the hall at Patrick's retreating back, clenching my jaw to try to get a grip on my emotions.

"Are you okay?" Ben asks quietly.

Those three little words scrape against the edge of my resolve.

I nod and stay silent, keeping my profile to him so he can't see too much of my face.

"Has that happened before?"

*What? I want to press. Has what happened before? What did you see? The part where he put his filthy hands on me without my consent? Or the part where he called me trash?*

I can't get my mouth to work. Coherent words seem to be insurmountable at the moment. I've kept a tight lid on my life these last few months. There's no one I can call to blow off steam. No friends to drink away my sorrows with. Answering Ben's question and granting him access to me in this way is a horrible idea. Letting him act the part of my white knight will only end badly for me. He's not intervening because he cares. He probably had to take a piss and now here he is, forced to ask the poor waitress in the roadside diner if she's okay so he can sleep at night knowing he's a good guy.

Embarrassment washes over me, and the sensation is almost crippling. I feel nothing when Patrick calls me names, but knowing Ben might have heard, having him look at me right now, caught in this state of vulnerability is proof that my claims of indifference are bald-faced lies. I might not care what Patrick thinks about me, but I care a whole hell of a lot what Ben might think, and that pisses me off.

I sniff and finally gain the courage to look at him.

I plaster on an easy smile, pushing past the tightness in my cheeks.

"Has what happened before?" I ask, repeating his question, trying to sound carefree. "People bumping into each other in the hallway? Sure, all the time. Did you need something at your table? More water?"

His cunning eyes narrow and his dark lashes cluster together, emphasizing his sharp-edged beauty. For one, two, three seconds our gazes lock as my breath halts, arrested in my

chest. Then slowly, his gaze pointedly drags down to where Patrick left an angry red mark on my wrist.

I cover it quickly with my hand.

“Coffee burn,” I lie.

I have every reason to assume Ben only saw the tail end of my exchange with Patrick. He might not know what really happened, and I’m not going to fill in the blanks for him. The last thing I want is his handsome face contorting with pity for me. Besides, what’s he going to do to help? Threaten Patrick? Beat him up? Mess up those million-dollar hands for a girl he doesn’t even know?

Yeah right.

I push off the wall and try to move past him, but he steps smoothly in front of me, ever the agile athlete. I bet he’s good at blocking his opponents on the court.

“Do you want me to put a stop to it?” he asks simply.

I stare at his broad chest and mull over his question, wondering why it shocks me into silence, and then I realize it’s twofold. It’s the assured confidence that he knows he could absolutely put a stop to my issues with Patrick if only I gave him permission, mingled with the fact that he’s asking for consent. So many hotheads in this town would love to put on a good show on behalf of a woman if only to act like a Neanderthal. *I’ll go kick his ass right now! Let me at him!*

Not Ben.

He wants to know what *I* want.

“It’ll only make it worse,” I murmur.

He exhales a heavy breath as if he doesn’t like my answer, but he doesn’t push the subject.

He politely steps aside to let me past, and I scurry away from him like I'm scared he'll try to block my escape again.

I inhale deeply once I'm out of the secluded hallway, making a decision right then and there to never put myself in that position with Patrick again. From now on, I'll just hold my damn pee while I'm at work.

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This is not the life I saw for myself: working two jobs, serving food and cleaning houses, scraping by with hourly pay most people wouldn't get out of bed for. I've never known fatigue like this. I could fall asleep where I stand, but I still need to make it from Nan's car to my trailer door.

I sit in the front seat, staring out at nothing in particular.

Nothing about my life is pretty at the moment. Not the dent in the side of my rented trailer. Not the debris piled up around it. I don't even live in an official trailer park. I rent this hunk of tin from Sheriff Corbin. He's parked it out on a forgotten edge of his land in his tractor graveyard and hasn't touched it in years. When I moved in a few months ago, I tried my best to shine it up, but there was only so much I could do.

I sigh and let my head fall against the steering wheel, forgetting about the horn until it's too late. It lets out a piddly ol' *hooooonk* and some birds take flight outside, annoyed with me for disrupting the cicada-filled silence.

I need to get a move on. I have about an hour before I need to be in bed sleeping so I can wake up and do this all over again.

God, what's the point?

I squeeze my eyes closed, replaying the conversation I had with the billing lady from Nan's nursing home earlier. She wanted to remind me that I missed this month's payment and have now accrued a hefty late fee. It actually makes me laugh. Late fees are some dark humor shit. They think I need them to slap on a late fee to get me to pay up? I'd fork over the money if I had it, believe me.

Nan's nursing home costs so much it makes my chest burn to think about it. Good gravy. Who just has that amount of money lying around?

I know I could put an end to all this right now and put her in a state-run facility, a place where they pack them in like sardines and forget all about them, but Nan's disease requires special circumstances. I've put her in the town's only memory care facility, and it's run by a private company which means Medicare won't cover it. Her Social Security pays for half, and I make up the other half. Usually. I had a stomach bug last month so I had to call off work for a few days, which is why I'm behind on payments.

Those basketball boys helped me out today though. They left Christine and me a huge tip, and I didn't for one second feel bad about pocketing it. I'll be able to pay this month's bill from Nan's nursing home *and* get some groceries tomorrow. As it is, I have to make do with what's in the trailer for tonight. It's the thought of dinner that finally rouses me from my hopeless fatigue. Cook made me food when I left Dale's after my shift, but that was eight hours ago and I'm starving.

I slide out of the car and head into the trailer, letting the heavy door slam shut behind me. I kick off my shoes, and my bare feet ache with pain. I'll give them a break as soon as I make myself something to eat. I inspect the tiny cupboard over

the trailer's broken stove. I've got two packets of ramen left and a can of green beans. I've been saving the green beans, unsure of when I was going to be able to get more. With a tiny jolt of excitement, I reach for them.

Beside the trailer's broken stove—on the only good bit of counter space I have—I've set up a camping stove. That's where I heat up my ramen and green beans in separate pots, letting them both go for a second while I strip out of my dirty clothes. Every day, I go from smelling like greasy food to chemical cleaners, and I can't stand either. In a little while, I'll rinse off inside the trailer's itty-bitty shower and use some of the lavender soap Sheriff Corbin's wife makes and leaves for me, but for now, it's good enough just to be free of my work clothes.

I check my phone while I wait for my food to heat up. Usually there's nothing all that interesting to see on it. Not many people have the number for it, and it's just a cheap one I picked up at Walmart when I left Pine Hill two years ago so there are no games or apps. I don't always keep it active either; sometimes I'd rather save the cash during lean months.

But lately, I've kept it on in case of emergencies for Nan, and so my boss at the cleaning company can give me information about where and when I'm expected to show up for jobs.

Tonight, I have a rare missed call and a voicemail, both of which are from Professor Olmsted. I almost don't listen to it, but my trailer is dead quiet and I'm lonely tonight.

I can barely stand to hear her voice once I press the phone to my ear. She's wondering how I'm doing and if I have plans of returning to campus in the fall. She's also mailed more

textbooks to the address I gave her, which is Sheriff Corbin's house back toward the main road.

She finishes the voicemail by asking me to give her a call back, but I know I won't. What would I tell her anyway? That I'm delivering pancakes and rolling silverware for a living now? That her emailing me her course slides for the semester won't do a lick of good considering I have no computer and no internet to view them with?

Her reaching out is well-meaning and kind, and it also makes me feel like shit.

Instead of calling her back, I grab my ramen and green beans off the stove, slide into the bench seat at the small table, and leaf through to where I left off in my advanced electrical engineering textbook. Then I pick up my pen and grab my fork with my other hand, scooping up big bites of noodles while I read and take notes in the margins of the textbook.

# Chapter Five

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Sweat drips down the side of my face as I assess my options to get down to the top of the key. I dribble to the right and Trey's there, grinning like a madman.

"You gonna make this easy on yourself?" I quip, casually bouncing the ball back and forth as I taunt him.

Trey laughs and I fake left, but he's on me.

I double back and change course, giving my teammates enough time to read the court. Anthony's my right hand. He knows what I'm planning and where I'm headed better than anyone.

Trey tries to steal the ball, and I reverse-pivot around him while dragging the basketball with me. Punk. He almost stole the ball from me.

"Stop playing around," Coach yells from the sidelines. Anthony grins, and at that moment I raise my body and look up at the basket. It tricks Trey long enough that he hesitates for a split second, and then I explode past him, passing the ball down court to Anthony with ease and bracing for him to pass it back to me. I'm right in position at the top of the key when I get the ball back, and I make a clean distance shot, adding another three points to my team's score.

Coach Dalton blows his whistle, announcing the end of the scrimmage and waving us over so we can gather in a semicircle around him. Anthony bumps his shoulder against mine and I pat his back. Trainers rush over, passing out Gatorade and towels. I wipe the sweat from my brow and eye Trey across from me. He's pissed I got past him, and I only make it worse with a wink. He laughs and shoots some Gatorade into his mouth. He's not one to hold a grudge off the court, but a few of the other guys are. They're eyeing me like they wouldn't mind another five minutes of play.

Coach Dalton and his staff walk through the scrimmage with us while we catch our breaths. I listen to him critique Carmelo's ball handling and keep my mouth shut. He was playing like shit today, but he wasn't on my team so I didn't care. Next, Mallory gets it for his outside shot violation. That amateur shit won't fly when we're at the Games.

I get my own critique from Coach Dalton too, and it's one I've heard a thousand times before.

“Trust your team. Pass the goddamn ball.”

Easier said than done. I'd rather work myself to the bone and ensure I'm getting points on the board than rely on other people who might try and fail. I don't know most of these guys well, and I don't dole out trust on a whim. They'll have to earn it.

Still, I nod at Coach Dalton, letting him know I heard him loud and clear.

We break for the day and head back to the cabins.

It's late and we've been at it since eight this morning. Everyone's dragging. I'm walking back with Trey and

Anthony, and Anthony's reenacting how I slid past Trey at the end of the scrimmage.

"You should have *seen* your face," Anthony says, losing it to a fit of laughter.

Trey bumps into him and Anthony stumbles to the left, but it only makes him laugh harder. I meet Trey's gaze and shake my head. Trey's much more my speed. He's married and closer to my age, quiet and reserved where most of the other guys have personalities that are larger than life. Anthony keeps the two of us on our toes.

"Who wants to come to my cabin and play 2K21?" Anthony asks.

Trey rolls his eyes. "Why do you waste your time with that shit? Pick up a book."

"Are you kidding me? You want me to look like this"—he waves his hand down his body—"and play like that"—he points back to the basketball complex—"and be smart? Bro, the world couldn't handle it."

Jesus Christ, this kid. Half the time I want to punch him in the face. Fortunately, Trey beats me to it. He reaches out to sock him in the arm just as Anthony swoops to the right to avoid it.

A feminine voice interrupts their laughter. "Would you guys cut it out? Haven't you had enough time to beat each other up on the court?"

I look up to see Leanna, or Lele as we call her, sitting on the steps of the cabin she's sharing with Trey.

She's wearing sweatpants and a tank top, and her black hair is twisted up into a bun on top of her head. Even without a stitch of makeup, she's beautiful, and I look over to see Trey's

eyes light up at the sight of her. They've been married for two years and still act like newlyweds.

“Lele, babe, can I just say you are looking fine this eve—”

Anthony doesn't get to finish his statement because Trey finally lands a smack to the back of his head.

“Stop looking at my wife.”

Anthony makes a big show of rubbing his scalp as if Trey's hit really hurt him. “What?! I was just being nice. Jesus, can't a man pay a beautiful woman a compliment?”

“No. You can't.”

Lele tries to hide her smile as she shakes her head at us.

I nod in greeting. “Evening, Lele.”

She stands and grins as she walks down the steps to get to Trey. Her pregnant stomach is barely visible on her small frame. She's not far along, which is good because Trey's been worrying about being away from her when we head to Tokyo. Their initial plan was for her to go with him for the Games, but her doctor advised against it because of a few issues she's been having with the baby. I don't know much about it, but I know it's been weighing on Trey.

“How are my girls?” he asks, bending to kiss her cheek.

“We'll be better once you shower,” she says, teasing him as she scrunches her nose.

I'm relieved that I don't have to turn away from their show of affection. A few months back, their happy marriage would have reminded me too much of my failed one. Now, that ugly jealous voice is muffled by the genuine happiness I feel for my friend. He and Lele have been trying to have a baby for over a

year and a half, and I know how much it's affected Trey. They're good together. Better than Shelby and I ever were.

Alone in my cabin later, I still have a shit ton of stuff to get done. I have a dozen missed calls along with a full inbox of emails. My assistant is good about processing out the crap, but even the important correspondence adds up. I wish my job ended once I left the court every day, but half the role of being a professional athlete is managing a brand. The Olympic committee has been in coordination with my PR team in regards to a promo they want me to film with two other athletes who'll be competing in the Tokyo Games: Brie Watson, an Olympic gymnast, and Andie Foster, who plays on the U.S. women's Olympic soccer team. I'll have to miss a day of practice to fly to New York City this Friday to shoot with them. While I'm there, I'll also take a meeting with Nike executives to finalize the limited-edition Castillo sneakers they'll release in conjunction with the start of the Games. I'll shoot the campaign photos for the shoes that day too.

ESPN wants to interview me in two weeks, and they've sent the proposed questions to my PR team. They already cut what they saw fit and forwarded the questions on to me so I could shave them down even more. I don't mind them asking personal questions, but it doesn't mean I'll give them anything worthy of printing. They always want to ask about my parents, even though I've given the answer a million times: mom passed away, dad's a shady character but kept a roof over my head until I was old enough to fend for myself. End of story. I suspect this time around they also probably inquired about Shelby, but if those questions were present at the get-go, my team has already scrubbed them on my behalf.

I read through a few of the questions at the top of the list then lose focus as my mind wanders back to this morning

when I stood in the hallway of the diner talking to the blonde waitress. I saw that asshole, Patrick he said his name was, watching her while she worked. Everywhere she went, his eyes followed her. I read him for what he was straight off the bat, so when she went off down that hallway and he slid off his stool to follow her, I went after them. Not soon enough though. No, I was fighting my instincts at first, telling myself I was reading too much into the situation, but when I turned that corner and caught him hurting her, I saw red. I might not have had the best childhood, but even I know you don't put your hands on a woman without her consent.

When he let go of her and turned to introduce himself to me, I couldn't look at him, much less speak to him. I would have done something I regretted. I'd have grabbed him by the neck and slammed him back against the wall, squeezing his airway until he knew how fucking serious I was. I didn't let my blood boil over though. I let him pass and kept my focus on her, the one who truly mattered in the situation.

Who is she to me? No one, and yet here I am, thinking about her for the hundredth time today. I wish I'd pushed her for more information, pleaded with her to tell me the full story. How badly is he hurting her? How far would he have taken it had I not interrupted?

*Fuck.*

I close my laptop and decide I'll finish my work later. I need to get to sleep because tomorrow before our early-morning practice, I have somewhere to be.

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There's no one else out front when I pull up and park at Dale's in the morning. It's still dark outside so it's easy for me to look through the windows of the diner and spot the blonde waitress moving behind the counter, opening up the restaurant all by herself. I sit for a second, watching her while she works. I want my reaction to her to cool off, but it hasn't. Far from it. My heart started pounding the moment I spotted her.

Her pale blonde hair is loose and wild, like the kind of hair they try to sell girls with all that beach spray shit. She bends down then pops back up, carrying a huge canister for brewing iced tea. She turns to face my direction for the first time as she plops it on the counter, and I take her in with a strained tightness in my chest.

I know that as beautiful as she is from this distance, it pales in comparison to seeing her up close. Yesterday, when she bent over me to set down my breakfast plate, I took in the details. She has a hundred tiny freckles that dot her tan face, clustered across her nose and cheekbones. They're at war with her pale blue eyes to be her most prominent feature, but from way out here, I can't see them. I see the more obvious details: her lithe frame, her shapely legs, her all-out sex appeal.

God, she's young though, and sitting out here makes me feel like a pervert. Hell, maybe I am, but I can't make myself stop looking at her. It'd be hard to explain to someone else just how specifically I crave her. They'd confuse themselves with the fact that I barely know her, that we've barely said two words to each other, and that's fair, but they don't know the rest of it. They aren't inside me, feeling this rush. They aren't in my head as every single thought seems to hinge on how it's possible that this girl, out of every girl I've seen in the last few months, is the one who could bring me back to life.

I slide out of my car and head inside. The bell on the door announces me, but the waitress doesn't turn around.

"Mornin'. We're not open for another ten minutes, but you're welcome to take a seat and I'll be with you in just a second."

I open my mouth to speak and let her know it's me, but she's already pushing past the swinging door and heading into the kitchen, leaving me out here alone in the empty dining room. I head up to the counter and take a seat on a stool near the spot where she was working a second ago.

I grab a menu from the stack nearby and mull it over.

She walks through the swinging door a moment later, and I hear her stutter-step before I glance up. "Oh."

Again, I can't seem to form the words I want to. If Anthony were in here, he'd shoot the shit with her straight away, but I can't even work up the nerve to say good morning.

She looks past me toward the door, as if expecting more people to walk through, but when she realizes it's just me, she visibly swallows as if flustered.

"Hey, morning. Like I said, you're welcome to sit and I could start you off with some coffee, but Cook's still getting prepped back there."

She's already grabbing the coffee pot and heading my way before I can respond. She slides a mug in front of me.

"What's your name?" I ask, studying her face while she concentrates on her pour.

I watch her still then she finally flicks her gaze up to me, a soft smile playing at the edge of her mouth. "Did I not introduce myself? My nan would kill me for that."



She reaches across the counter with an outstretched hand, and when I take it, I curl my hand around hers, feeling her tremble. Maybe she's scared because we're alone in the dining room, or maybe my size is throwing her off. I'm not exactly small, but then she recovers and shakes my hand up and down twice before pulling away and plopping the coffee pot back down on its warming pad.

"You still didn't tell me your name," I point out.

She laughs and drops her chin to her chest before spinning back around to face me.

"I'm Raelynn."

"Raelynn," I repeat, making a subtle grunt of appreciation. "Cute."

Her cheeks burn pink from my minuscule compliment, and I decide even more so that the name fits her.

"I'm Ben."

Her grin stays put as she responds. "Oh, I know. Believe me. Ben Castillo, right? You've been the talk of the town these last few days."

I look down and reach for my coffee.

"Are you as talented as they say you are?"

I shrug, not denying it.

She hums and gets back to work rolling some silverware.

"You play basketball, right? In the NBA?"

I glance up at her and frown as I try to read through the bullshit. It's been a long time since I've met someone who had to ask me what I do. I almost don't believe the innocent act until she shrugs as if she really doesn't care.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to tell me. I was just making polite small talk. We can discuss the weather instead if you’d like.” I can tell she’s trying to clamp down on a cheeky smile, so I relent.

“Yeah, I’m in the NBA,” I say, leaning against the back of my stool and crossing my arms.

“Where do you play?”

“Los Angeles.”

Her brows hike up. “Really? I lived there for a while.”

Little Raelynn in Los Angeles? I can’t see it.

“Where?”

“Closer to Pasadena. What about you?”

“I have a place out in the Hills.”

There are other houses too, but I won’t tell her that. Her eyes are already wide.

“I always loved it over there, but I rarely made it out. I didn’t have a car in the city.”

“Really? How’d you get around?”

“Took the bus,” she says with a laugh, as if I’m a total idiot.

I’m not, I’m just a little out of touch with reality. Not like this girl in her diner dress and worn sneakers. She’s the epitome of harsh reality, and it’s with that sobering thought that I remember why I wanted to come in here in the first place.

“Can you tell me about your friend? The one in the hallway yesterday?”

The mere mention of him shatters her good mood. Her gaze shifts down, her shoulders slump, and her smile slips from her lips.

“He’s not my friend.” She points to the menu in front of me in an attempt to change the subject. “You gonna order?”

“I thought the cook was still getting prepped.”

She frowns. “Right. Yeah. I forgot how early it is.”

“Who is he then? The man who left that mark on your wrist?”

She sighs and props her hands on her hips as if to say, *Are we really going to do this?*

I don’t move a muscle, letting her know I have all day. Or at least the next thirty minutes.

“He’s the owner’s son. Dale’s oldest.”

“Not your boyfriend?”

I earn a scowl for that question. “No. *Not* my boyfriend. Listen, it’s not really any of your business who or what he is. We don’t even know each other. Did you come in here to get breakfast or to insert yourself into a situation where you don’t belong?”

“What would have happened had I not shown up in that hallway?” I press, trying to get her to take this seriously.

She sniffs and looks away, her jaw locked tight with annoyance. “The same thing that always happens. He’d have backed off eventually. He’s not as dangerous as he seems.”

My derisive chuckle causes her blue eyes to sweep back to my face.

“What is it you’re after anyway? A thank you? Because you’re not gettin’ it.” She huffs sarcastically. “Order or leave. You’re wasting my time.”

I lean forward as my heart pounds. She has so much life in her I want to bleed it out and take some for myself. She wants me to leave. Her eyes dart between me and the door, hoping I’ll vacate this stool and give her peace.

Instead, I slide my menu across the counter to her.

“I want the same thing I had yesterday,” I say, my voice harsher than I intended.

Her jaw ticks in annoyance as she takes the menu and disappears back into the kitchen. I hear pots and pans clanging. She’s gone longer than I expected as I sip my coffee and listen to all the commotion going on back there. It’s ten minutes later when she comes back out carrying a plate of food that looks nothing like what I ate yesterday.

She drops it down in front of me like it’s an insult to have to serve me.

“I know it’s nothing fancy, but just eat it and leave. You’re annoying me and I have better things to do than wait on some nosy jerk.”

“I’m not a jerk.”

“But you are nosy.”

I shrug, giving her that much.

I look down at my breakfast. There’s scrambled eggs and ham on my plate, along with some cut-up fruit. It looks good, but also not quite right. There’s no rhyme or reason to how the fruit’s been sliced. The scrambled eggs are a little runny. It’s

obvious my food's been made by an unpracticed hand, and when I look up at Raelynn, she's scowling at me.

"You cooked me breakfast?"

"What? Not fancy enough for you? See if I care."

I barely stifle a grin. I like this side of her as much as I like any other side of her. She's no shrinking violet, that's for sure.

I glance pointedly at the swinging door to the kitchen.

"Cook's not in yet. He had car trouble this morning," she continues.

I tilt my head in question, and she answers as if she can read my mind.

*Why'd you lie earlier?*

"I didn't want you knowing we were alone."

"Smart." I motion to the plate. "You want some?"

She rears back in confusion. "Do I want some of your breakfast? Absolutely not. What is it with you? Aren't you busy enough with all your basketball stuff without coming in here and tormenting me?"

"I'm hardly tormenting you. If I were...you'd know it."

I don't miss the shiver that runs down her spine at my words.

Good. I'm glad to know she's not immune to me, no matter how much she acts like she is.

I start eating while she goes back to work, trying her best to ignore me. A few minutes later, a bell chimes behind me and a Southern-accented voice calls out.

"Mornin', Birdie."

“Hey, Doyle. Cook’s not in yet, can I get you some coffee?”

“Sure. That’d be fine. I got nowhere to be this mornin’.”

I don’t turn back to see if Doyle recognizes me. If he does, he’s smart enough to leave me in peace as he takes a seat at a booth far enough away that I can’t see him in my periphery. I keep eating as Raelynn gets Doyle his coffee. When she makes it back behind the counter and finds me watching her, she scowls.

“What?”

“Birdie?” I ask, referring to how Doyle addressed her.

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, it’s my last name. Some people call me by it.”

I hum in interest, and she continues, “You don’t get to call me that though. *You* don’t get to call me anything. Are you done yet?”

She takes my plate out from in front of me before I can scoop up my last bite of eggs. My fork’s hanging in midair. I’m smiling, and that only seems to annoy her more.

“Well, thanks for coming in for breakfast, but you better get moving,” she says, pointing toward the door. “We need the counter space.”

My smile only widens.

There’s not a soul in sight waiting to take my place, but I have to get going anyway. I stand, drain the last of my coffee, grab some cash from my wallet in my back pocket, and then leave it underneath my empty cup.

“Thanks for breakfast, Birdie.”

She grumbles something under her breath that I can't hear, and I leave the diner with a full-fledged smile on my face, knowing I'll be back tomorrow morning for more.

# Chapter Six

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**I**t's noon and I'm still reeling about Ben coming into the diner for breakfast. I can't believe how I treated him. What I said! The attitude! I'm not usually like that. I mind my own business and try to be as polite as possible to everyone I meet, but he just kept needling me and there's only so much I'm willing to take before I have no choice but to needle right back. Even worse, I think he might have liked it.

I'm all over the place trying to pin down my opinion of him. I go back and forth between thinking he could be a bit shy and reserved, but then he opens his mouth and I realize that's not the case at all. He's arrogant and demanding. He thinks I owe him information about my life and who I'm dating? I should have lied and said Patrick *was* my boyfriend just to see his reaction, but ew, I wouldn't ever want to joke about dating a guy like him, even just to get a rise out of Ben.

I'm out on a two-lane highway, driving and eating my lunch at the same time. I'm in a hurry trying to get to my afternoon job. The cleaning company sent me out into the middle of nowhere today, and I'm none too pleased about it considering how much gas I'm burning trying to get there. A souped-up truck lays on its horn behind me and then swerves around Nan's car to speed away.

“Good. *Get!* I’m going the damn speed limit!” I say with a mouth full of burger.

Annoyed, I drop the rest of my burger back into the to-go container on my passenger seat and wipe my mouth and hands with a napkin. I should finish my lunch. Lord knows I need the calories, but thoughts about Ben have my stomach twisted into a gnarly knot.

I groan and check the directions I jotted down. The address sounds familiar, but I can’t put my finger on why. It’s definitely nowhere I’ve been before, I know that much.

Finally, up ahead, I see the street sign I’ve been looking for and I pull off the highway onto a dirt road. I wince when rocks start pinging the bottom of the car. The old hunk of metal is barely running as is; there’s no telling how much longer it’ll keep pattering along if it gets battered to hell.

I look around for a farmhouse or some place that needs cleaning, but there’s nothing on either side of the road. The dirt road slips through dense forest, and then there are a few breaks and stretches of farmland. Eventually I start to see some cabins popping up in the woods. They’re fancy A-frame structures with floor-to-ceiling glass. Nothing like your grandpa’s dusty log cabin, that’s for sure. These look like hidden treehouses that would rent for a thousand bucks a night, easy.

The cleaning company failed to pass on any helpful tidbits beyond a simple address, so I drive slow past the cabins until I come to a break in the trees that gives way to a large clearing. I stop the car and stare, shocked at what I see. This isn’t just a little cluster of cabins—this is an entire micro-city hidden in the woods. There’s a main house in the center of things with buildings spaced out strategically around it. There’s a paved

parking lot for cars and tons of people walking around. To be honest, it almost looks like it could be a weird cult village, but then I see the Olympic symbol blown up and painted on the side of what looks like a sports complex and everything clicks into place. So this is where the basketball players are training while they're in town. *Interesting.*

“Ma’am! Ma’am!” someone hollers, grabbing my attention. A guy in a black security outfit comes running for my car, clearly out of breath. “You can’t just drive in here.”

Oh crap.

I roll down my window.

“You blew right past me back there,” he says, bending over and clutching his knees, dragging in deep breaths. “We don’t allow press.”

“Oh.” I laugh. “I’m not press. I’m here to clean a house, I think.”

His features scrunch up in confusion. “Who’re you with?”

I rattle off the cleaning company and the address they gave me.

He nods. “Right. One of the basketball wives cleared it with security. I can’t remember which one it was. Stay here and I’ll go ask my supervisor.”

He walks away, in no big hurry at all. I sit back in my seat and look out my window, unabashedly scanning the horizon for Ben. There are plenty of folks walking around, but not him.

Ten minutes later, the security guard still hasn’t returned, and I’m growing impatient. I’m officially late for my job,

which I absolutely hate because chances are, the prissy wife is going to lodge a complaint with my company about it.

I decide to get out and see if I can't hunt down the security supervisor myself when I see a woman walking from the center of the village down the dirt road toward the cabins. She's going to pass by my car anyway, so I roll my window down and wave her over.

"Hi! Sorry to bother you, but I'm here for a job and I was wondering if you could help me out. I'm a cleaner and I'm supposed to be working for a woman—"

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Are you Raelynn?"

My relief is palpable. "Yes."

She unfurls an infectious smile. "Good timing! I'm Leanna, or Lele, whichever works. I'm the one who hired you."

I look past her, toward the main house, and try not to let on how overwhelmed I am. That place is huge and there's no way I'll be able to clean it all by myself in just a few hours.

She must follow my line of thinking because she points back down the dirt road. "I'm actually staying back in the cabins. There's room for you to park out front. Mind if I just hop in and we can go back together? My feet are killing me."

"Sure. Yeah. Of course." I barely have time to swipe my diner uniform from the seat and pick up my lunch before she opens the passenger door and hops in.

"Here," she says, taking the to-go container from me and setting it back on her lap. "Don't worry about all that. I'll only be in here for a second. My cabin is just up there on the right a bit." She turns her attention to my lunch. "God this smells good. What's in here?"

“Oh. Just a burger and fries.”

“Really?”

Her eyes go wide with interest, and I know it’s weird to just meet someone and offer them your meal straight away, but my nan ingrained Southern hospitality into me deeply.

“If you’re hungry, you can—”

“Would it be weird if I—”

We both laugh as she opens the lid and steals a few French fries. “God, sorry. I don’t mean to steal your food. I’m in my first trimester and having the weirdest cravings and aversions. Of course it doesn’t help that I’m stuck out here eating the food the nutritionists have set up for the guys. Every meal consists of healthy fats and complex carbs and all that crap, but I just want some French fries! *God* these are good.”

I laugh. “There’s a packet of ketchup in there you can open if you want.”

“No, no. I can’t. Look at me stealing your meal and I don’t even know you! You should eat your lunch,” she says, closing the container and crossing her hands on top of it as if to keep herself from eating any more.

“I’m done with it,” I insist. “Eat what you want. Is this the cabin?”

“Yeah, just park up there.”

I do as she says then kill the engine. Her eyes are down on my lunch again, and I shake my head. “I mean it. Take the rest. I didn’t touch the other half of the burger and it was cut down the middle by Cook back at the diner, so it’s not like I had my hands all over—”

That to-go container is whipped open in a flash and she's got a huge bite of burger stuffed in her mouth before I can even finish my sentence.

"You're an angel," she says with her hand covering her full mouth. "A literal angel. God, this is good."

I leave her in there to eat while I pop the trunk and start unloading my cleaning supplies. A moment later she joins me, shaking her head, still chewing.

"Here, let me help you."

I shoo her away. "No, I got this. I'm used to it."

I drag out my vacuum and mop, along with a caddy of cleaning products, scrub brushes, and sponges.

Leanna eats one last French fry then closes the to-go container. She wears a sheepish smile as she follows me inside.

The place is set up like a studio apartment with a small kitchen, living room, and bedroom. The only separation is between the main living space and the bathroom in the back corner. The walls are covered in a smooth blonde wood, there's a wood-burning stove that looks mostly for show, and the kitchen is modern. The furniture is all neutral whites and brown leather, and the black plumbing fixtures pair well with the artwork. The whole place is Instagram-worthy, that's for sure.

The thing is though, it looks nearly spotless.

Leanna's wringing out her hands. "So yes, as you can see, the place doesn't need much."

I nod and set my vacuum by the front door.

“Just some light cleanup, maybe...oh! And you could help me put away the laundry they send away for us.”

I glance over at her from beneath my lashes, seeing the worry lines between her brows.

I think she feels embarrassed by how little there is for me to do, but there is, in fact, nothing really. Still, I don't want to make her feel bad.

“Yeah, these floors could use a good vacuuming too,” I add. “There's dust everywhere.”

Her brows shoot up. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. Look at that,” I say, dragging my foot across the floor and gathering up absolutely no dust, but we both pretend we see something.

So begins an hour-long cleaning session where I wipe already clean surfaces and rearrange already neatly arranged items. Leanna follows me around, helping and talking. We put away her laundry and I give the bathroom a once-over. I'm supposed to be here all afternoon, and dread fills my stomach when I realize this job won't pay nearly as much as I thought it would. I'm paid by the hour, so a job this small is hardly worth doing, especially considering the gas I burned to get all the way out here.

“I think that should do it,” I say, starting to loop up the vacuum cord.

“Wait. Really?” She looks panic-stricken. “But what about \_\_\_”

She points vaguely at the windows I've already wiped with Windex, then at the kitchen where I've already loaded the dishes and cleaned the sink and buffed the fixtures. There's nothing keeping me here except Leanna's puppy dog eyes.

“Do you have another job to get to?” she asks as I start gathering my supplies near the door.

“No. This was my only house on the books this afternoon. Usually they take a little longer.”

“Oh right. Yeah. That’s okay though because maybe I could keep you on the clock and we could just...hang out?”

Her eyebrows are up near her hairline and her smile is brimming over with hope.

On paper, this woman has everything. I mean, she’s obnoxiously gorgeous: black skin a few shades lighter than her eyes, full lips, slice-through-your-heart cheekbones, and a high slicked-back ponytail. She’s dating or married to a professional athlete, living in a cute cabin in the woods for the foreseeable future. I bet she could be friends with anyone, and she wants to be friends with me? *Why?*

“I know how this looks,” she says, holding up her hands. “Crazy lady invites you to a cabin in the woods, steals your food, then pays you to hang out.” She cringes. “Yes, I’ll admit that all seems pretty weird. It’s just that I’m stuck out here in the middle of nowhere while my husband trains like a bazillion hours a day and I’m bored out of my mind. You’d think the other wives would be friendly, but”—she leans in close—“they’re actually super bitchy and cliquey. I’ve only been with Trey for two years, so they expect him to drop me at any moment and move on to some new hot thing. But Trey’s not like that. Not at all. We’re in love.” She rubs her belly. “I mean, *clearly*.”

I frown. “There are other basketball wives out here too?”

She nods. “Some. A few of them opted to stay back in Los Angeles, especially the ones who have kids.”



“Makes sense.”

“And just so you know, I’ve *tried* being nice to them. One of them—she’s like the queen bee—her name is Amanda. She is just so up her own ass, you know what I mean? Like she thinks she’s really God’s gift to the earth. She’s the one who badmouths me to the others. I’ll tell you more about her, but I’m already hungry again. You want something to snack on? I have candy hidden from Trey. I swear he’d eat it all if I let him.”

My afternoon has taken the most random turn. I should make my apologies and leave. This isn’t appropriate, and I don’t want it getting back to the cleaning company. I’ve never had a job where the person asked me to stay and hang out with them while offering to pay me for it. It makes me feel...a little too much like an escort, if I’m honest. A friend escort. But truthfully, it’s been a long time since I’ve had a friend, and Christine and Cook don’t count. Not really.

I watch Leanna as she opens the just-for-show wood-burning stove and retrieves an armful of candy bags. She grins wickedly and plops them down on the couch between us.

“Okay, pick your poison.”

# Chapter Seven

---

Leanna and I lose track of time talking and painting our toenails and going through lists of potential baby names online. I don't even realize how late it is until there are muffled voices outside.

“Oh!” Leanna says, jumping to her feet and gathering the half-empty candy bags. “That’ll be Trey! Hurry! Help me!”

She’s acting like she’s trying to hide a murder weapon, not a half-filled bag of Starburst.

“Will he really care if you eat candy?”

“No! Of course not. But I’ve learned my lesson—if he sees it, he’ll demolish the rest of my stash in like five seconds. I swear the man can unhinge his jaw like a snake if there’s sugar involved.”

We’re hurriedly scooping up the rest of the candy and stuffing it back into the stove just as the voices reach our cabin. Leanna closes the heavy iron door and sags against it, tossing me a conspiratorial wink before she reaches for my hand.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to the guys.”

She tugs me toward the door and we're outside before I can even think to protest or explain to her that I might already know them. In fact, I'm pretty sure I do. Trey was the guy at the diner the other day, right? The nice one who stood up for me.

The sun hangs low in the sky, hidden behind the thick wall of trees. Scattered golden light highlights the three guys chatting at the bottom of the stairs that lead to Leanna's cabin, and just as suspected, I recognize all of them.

Leanna keeps tugging me forward then thrusts me in front of her so I'm standing at the very top of the stairs, looking down on them.

“Raelynn, this is Trey, Anthony, and Ben.”

I was right about Trey. He's the tall Asian guy with short black hair and a wide friendly smile. Then there's Anthony, and Anthony is...Anthony, already grinning huge at this turn of events. Beside him stands Ben, and I don't know what he's doing because I can't look in his direction. I did for a split second right as I stumbled out of the cabin with Leanna, and it was enough to make me feel like the earth was falling out from underneath me.

They've just come back from practice, clearly. They're in workout clothes stained with sweat. Their hair is matted down with it too and...I can't help myself...I steal another glance at Ben and find he's looking at me, brows scrunched together with curiosity. He's not smiling exactly, and yet I don't think he's annoyed to find me here...

His brown hair looks almost black, wet with sweat. His USA Basketball team shirt is sleeveless, which means his tan arms are on *full* display. They're not overly bulky, but they're so damned cut and muscled I could chip a tooth on them.

“Guys, this is—”

“Our hero!” Anthony interjects, cutting Leanna off.

She frowns back at me in confusion. “Hero?”

I shake my head. “Ignore him.”

“She saved our life,” Anthony insists with a teasing smile.

I roll my eyes. “I gave them directions. That’s all.”

“She was our waitress the other morning too,” Trey says, filling in his wife as he walks up the stairs to press a kiss to her hair before offering me another welcoming smile. “Hi, Raelynn.”

I give him a little wave.

“Well good. I’m glad everyone knows each other,” Leanna says. “You guys want to shower really quick and then we’ll walk over to get dinner at the main house? I bet they’ll have everything set out soon. Raelynn, are you hungry?”

For once, not really. We’ve been snacking all afternoon.

Besides, I have things I need to get back to. Like my real life.

“Thanks, but I’m gonna get going.”

I’m a few stairs down before I remember to grab my cleaning stuff. I turn back for the cabin door. My cheeks tinge pink as I start to collect everything. I hate that I’m embarrassed by the fact that they’re all watching me, undoubtedly remembering that I’m just the help, no one important enough to bother with. Leanna might have spent her afternoon with me, but it was only because she was dead bored and I was marginally more interesting than staring at a blank cabin wall. I have no doubt that on any normal day, she’d be

skipping around Beverly Hills, buying whatever her heart fancies, and then having dinner with, I dunno, Miley Cyrus.

I want to evaporate into thin air. I wish I'd already loaded my stuff earlier when I finished cleaning. Usually, I'd make two trips to get everything back down to my nan's car, but I can't stand the thought of dragging this out, so I lug the plastic handle of my caddy up onto my forearm and try to carry the vacuum in my other hand. It mostly works until I stumble on the vacuum's dangly cord as I step out of the cabin door.

Ben's up the stairs and taking the vacuum out of my hands before I can even register that he's moved.

"Here, give me all that."

His tone leaves no room for arguing, but I don't let that dissuade me.

"I can take it," I say in protest, not letting him lighten my load.

"You almost just fell down the stairs and broke your neck," he points out.

I stare up into his brown eyes—eyes made of cold hard steel.

"I barely tripped."

"Let go of the vacuum," he says, holding my gaze.

"Stop being so bossy."

He licks his bottom lip to stifle a smile and turns away, looking at his friends for backup.

"Is this getting weird for anyone else?" Leanna asks jokingly.

"What's up with you two?" Trey asks.

Anthony just stands there smiling.

“I’m trying to help her out,” Ben says.

“Maybe she just doesn’t like you,” Anthony says, starting to walk up the stairs. “I’ll help you with your stuff, Raelynn.”

Ben flays Anthony alive with just one look.

Anthony stops dead in his tracks, laughs, and holds up his hands in innocence. “Or...not. Damn, cool it with the evil glares. You want to carry the damn vacuum, be my guest.”

“No one is carrying the vacuum except for me,” I point out haughtily.

At this point, I might as well be stomping my feet with how childish I’m being. I don’t know why I’m protesting so much except that it seems absolutely imperative to keep Ben from getting his way. I’d bet he always gets exactly what he wants. From morning till night the world bends for this man, and I refuse to join in.

Ben has his own plans though.

Finally having had enough of me, he turns back, steps toward me, and scoops me up with one arm, taking my vacuum in his other hand, then carries me down the stairs like I’m nothing more than pillow fluff.

“What a—”

“*Nice guy*,” he finishes for me as he continues carrying me to the car. I might as well be on an amusement park ride. My feet dangle a mile in the air as his strong arm holds me tightly against him.

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

He's still sweaty from practice and I (don't) hate it. I'm half tempted to turn my head, press my nose to his throat, and inhale.

Just that thought makes a new wave of annoyance wash over me. How dare he hijack my good sense?

"Are you done yet?" I press. "Being a brute? You can put me down now. Your friends have seen how strong and mighty you are."

"Just for that, I think I'll keep hold of you."

"I'll start kicking and screaming soon."

He laughs then and finally sets me down on my feet right beside the driver's side door, blocking me from the others. He sets my things down next to me then stands to his full height to assess me.

I look right back at him, not saying a word. If he wants a staring contest, I'll give him one.

He tips his head to the side, his lips slowly unfurling into a smile.

"Thank you, Ben, for helping me with my stuff," he says teasingly before switching back to his normal tone. "Oh, no problem, little Birdie. Any time."

"You think I'm going to thank you for that display of male chauvinism?" I reach out and poke him in the chest. "*God*. You just think so much of yourself, don't you? You know what's funny? At the diner that second time I saw you, I was under the impression that you might be sorta shy and sweet."

His expression sobers, his brown eyes narrowing down on the finger that touches his chest. "I can be shy."

But not sweet.



That's what he's hinting at. I drop my hand as a weird trickle of awareness suddenly makes the air around us feel charged. I look away from him first, breaking the spell and losing the unofficial war we've been waging.

He steps toward me again, invading my space ever so slightly. "You want sweet?"

I practically gulp.

What does it matter what I want? What are we doing here? Flirting? Teasing? Doesn't he care that his friends are all staring at us?

No. He doesn't.

His confidence radiates off him like a plume of smoke.

I feel him studying my profile, willing me to turn and meet his gaze. I'm too scared to do it. Too scared to see what he's trying to show me.

My chest rises and falls as I fist my hands by my sides, trying to endure this moment without my cheeks turning even *more* red, and then, out of nowhere, he steps back.

"Have a good night, Birdie."

Flustered, I whip my attention back to him just as he turns and walks away. I feel...bereft. Disappointed in my own cowardice.

*Come back, I want to say. Keep playing with me.*

Instead, I quickly pack up my car, wave goodbye to Leanna, and hurriedly drive away.

The next day is my scheduled day off from the diner, the one day off I get every week. I should be enjoying the fact that I get to sleep in for once, sinking down into my blankets,

closing my eyes and forgetting my troubles. What I'm actually doing is staring up at the ceiling, trying to reconstruct Ben's face in my mind. I have all the important details down: the sun-kissed tan skin, the taunting brown eyes, the bold, cocky mouth. Last night before I drifted off to sleep, I touched myself and got off thinking about him, and even now, there's residual guilt. It feels like I'm not allowed to want him even in secret. It's as if even fantasizing about him is off limits.

My interactions with him are just so out of the ordinary. Since returning to Pine Hill a few months back, I spend my days with Cook and Christine, with my nan and her caretakers. The only man putting the moves on me lately is Patrick, and that creep doesn't count. I don't want to keep thinking about Ben, but it's futile to fight against it. He's got me wound around his finger already. He barely touched me yesterday, but I swear I should have a mark from it.

The truth is, he could have done whatever he wanted to me, even in front of his friends. He could have trapped me against the car, locked his arms on either side of my hips, bent down, and kissed me. He could have skated his hands wherever he damn well pleased, and I would have let him. Hell, I probably would have begged for more.

With that embarrassing realization, I throw off my blankets and get going for the day. Instead of shimmying into my uniform and heading down to Dale's, I dress in a white t-shirt and jean shorts. I grab my tote bag and fill it with my water bottle, advanced electrical engineering and programming textbooks, and an apple. I don't bother fixing my hair, letting the long strands whip against my face as I head toward the car.

I always spend my days off at the care home. Today, my motives are twofold. For one, I'll get to spend as much quality

time with Nan as I can. For two, I'll be reminded of the harsh realities of my life, beyond Ben and his brief visit in Pine Hill.

# Chapter Eight

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I'm the first one at the diner again, ringing the bell over the door as I walk inside. This time, Raelynn looks up and spots me straight away, one of her dark blonde eyebrows cocking up in question.

I don't say a word as I head toward my seat at the counter.

She grabs a mug and sets it down in front of me, watching me with cunning eyes as she pours my coffee.

"You gonna make this a habit, Castillo?"

I shrug and bring the mug to my mouth, blowing away the steam for a second before I take my first sip. It tastes like crap, but I don't come to Dale's for the coffee.

"I came by yesterday and you weren't here."

"Did you? Can't get enough of Cook's food, huh?" she teases.

My gaze holds hers for a beat too long, my barely-there smile telling her exactly what I can't get enough of.

She clears her throat and gets busy setting up for the day.

I don't think she quite realizes what's happening here, but I can't say I blame her. She knows nothing about me or what's

been happening in my life this past year. She doesn't know how rare it is for me to take an interest in someone, *anyone*. I should be back at Coach Dalton's compound, resting before practice starts. Instead, I woke up at the crack of dawn and drove myself to a crappy roadside diner so I could have the pleasure of being in Raelynn's company while she works. She has a magnetism about her—a lure I can't escape. Maybe it's just been so long since I've been around a woman who's not a part of the professional athlete scene. I could namedrop some of my friends and she'd probably blink up at me, bored.

But there's more to it than that.

Even if she were in Los Angeles, courtside at one of my games, she'd still arrest me. She's a ray of sunshine from her golden blonde hair to her freckled cheeks, pink lips, tan legs...

She looks up and finds me watching her, and she frowns.

"You have that look about you," she says thoughtfully.

I sniff and snap my attention back to her face. "What look?"

She shrugs. "Just...you have this way about you sometimes. I think it's the reason I initially thought you might be shy."

"Yeah?"

"It's...I don't know...a loneliness." She's fiddling with a dishrag, not looking at me anymore as she continues, "Most of the time it's hard to see what with all that confidence. But like right now, for example, it's there." She shakes her head, and I watch her cheeks take on a subtle hint of pink like she's embarrassed by her honesty. Quickly, she concludes, "I guess, just sometimes you have sad eyes."

I have no idea what to say to that.

I could tell her the truth. That I have absolutely everything anyone would ever want—the money, the fame, the championship rings—and deep down, under the thin veneer, I am lonely. Being in this diner with her is a comfort, and she doesn't even know it.

“No one's ever told me that.” I look down. “About my eyes.”

It's the closest I can get to telling the truth.

“Oh...I didn't mean it in a bad way.” She's back to wringing out that towel nervously. “Sorry.”

“No.” I shake my head quickly, warring with the urge to reach across the counter and grab her hand. She doesn't understand what it's like to be surrounded by yes-people. Nearly everyone in my life is there because I'm paying them to be or because they need me in some way: my managers, my teammates, my friends, my father. Everyone's motives are fucked up and convoluted and honestly, I've lost track of who I can even trust beyond Anthony and Trey. I thought I could trust Shelby, and that backfired most of all.

“Don't apologize,” I insist, holding her gaze to let her know how deadly serious I am.

She cracks a tiny smile, props her forearms on the counter, and leans toward me. I catch a whiff of her shampoo, and it's such a subtle form of seduction. She doesn't even understand her sex appeal. Just by her being here, looking like that, I want her.

“Do you wanna be my friend?” she asks, point-blank.

“What?”

The question catches me off guard, namely because I was just thinking some very *unfriendly* thoughts about her.

She barks out a laugh and shakes her head. “Sheesh. You should get a load of your face right now. You don’t have to look so offended.”

“No. I’m...”

“I just thought you looked like you could use a friend, so I was going to volunteer myself.”

“Right.”

“Forget I said anything.”

“So the offer’s off the table?”

“Oh yeah, buddy. Consider it *fully* revoked.” She laughs again, shaking her head as she walks away to get back to work.

I never told her my order, but a few minutes later, the diner’s cook slides a plate of food through the gap between the kitchen and the back counter and calls Raelynn for an order up.

She drops it in front of me with a teasing look.

“There you go. Same breakfast you had that first day. I took the liberty of adding some grits. And yes, they’re probably floating in a whole stick of butter, but that’s the Southern way,” she says with a wink before turning, about to walk away.

“Have you eaten?”

She frowns as she looks back at me.

“You want some of this?” I continue.

Her speculation is evident in the tightly pinched brows. “Why are you trying to feed me?”



*Because I'm worried no one else is, I want to say. Because you look like you need it.*

“You feel bad about turnin’ down my friendship?” she continues lightheartedly as the bell over the door chimes. I turn back to watch a few old men walk in together, slowly ambling toward a booth in the corner.

“I’ll be over with coffee,” Raelynn tells them. “Anything special today?”

“No, no. Just same ol’ same ol’,” one of them says, speaking for the group.

“You doin’ good, Birdie?” the tallest one asks.

I watch her smile light up the whole damn place. “Just peachy. Thanks.”

“And your nan? How’s she gettin’ on?”

Her smile falters for a split second before she recovers as she takes the coffee pot from its warming pad and heads in their direction. I strain my ears to listen to her reply.

“Good. Yeah. She’s okay.”

“Y’know I went down to try to see her a few days ago, and Kay told me you had restricted visitors for her.”

“Yeah. It’s...disorienting for her,” she says sadly. “She’s starting to get real confused with people coming in and out.”

“I’m sorry, Birdie.”

“Don’t be. You know her, John. She wouldn’t want any of us worrying about her. In fact, if she knew we were here gossiping about her, she’d chew my hide. Now hold tight. I’ll go put in y’all’s order with Cook.”

From then on, Raelynn hustles around the diner as more regulars start to pour in. Every one of them greets her with kindness, and she doles it right back out to them. Is that why she works here? Does she like seeing these people every morning? I'd ask, but she doesn't have time to stop and talk to me anymore. I'm so focused on her I don't even catch the reporter until he takes the seat beside mine at the counter.

“Ben Castillo, you eat here often?”

*Jesus Christ.*

I nearly lose my cool.

At this point in my career, the media knows how private I am. I don't indulge them with titillating stories or potential sound bites. I answer their postgame questions as succinctly as possible, bordering on rude. Yet still, they try.

Without a word, I grab cash out of my wallet, slide it under my half-finished plate, and leave, not bothering to say a word to Raelynn on the way out. It's better if that reporter doesn't notice her at all.

# Chapter Nine

---

I'm one of Pavlov's dogs. Every time the bell dings and the diner door swings open, I whip my head around, expecting to see Ben walk in and take his seat at the counter. I'm surprised I haven't sprained my neck in the two days since he's been in for breakfast. It's getting pretty annoying and I'm trying to get myself to stop caring if he visits me again or not, but it's no use. I'm living on a thread of hope that he'll be back.

It's a dangerous game to play, and half the time I convince myself I made our few encounters out to be more important than they were. Case in point, the last time he ate breakfast here, he didn't even say goodbye to me on his way out. He left without a smile or wave.

I've convinced myself it's the last time I'll see him. The Olympic Games are going to start in a few weeks. Practices could have ramped up. Maybe he's too busy to visit Dale's anymore. Maybe he doesn't find me that interesting after all.

It's the late morning and there's the usual lull between the breakfast and lunch rush. I'm rolling silverware and waiting on Christine to arrive when the bell dings, and I spin around so fast I tweak my back a little.

It's not Ben walking in, but for once I'm not disappointed by that fact.

"Oh my god, that smell," Leanna says, stopping just inside the front door and inhaling deeply. "I want one of everything you have."

I laugh and wave her over to the counter. She's adorable in her summer dress and flats. She plops her Chanel bag on the counter without a lick of pretense and then grins at me.

"I've come to try out Dale's for myself. The guys won't shut up about the food here."

"Oh yeah? What do you feel like? Breakfast or lunch?"

Her eyes light up with all the possibilities. "Hmm... breakfast for sure." Then she tilts her head, mulling it over. "Or maybe lunch? God, that burger was so good the other day."

I laugh and turn to talk to Cook back in the kitchen. "Can you get me a classic breakfast with buttermilk pancakes on the side and a BLT with extra bacon and French fries?"

I hear Leanna groan in ecstasy behind me. "Yes. *Yes* to all of that."

I head back to her, getting her some water before I lean my elbows on the counter. "Food will be out in a minute. How've you been?"

She shrugs. "Bored out of my mind to be honest. You?"

I shrug. "Busy."

"You work here every morning?"

"Most."

"And then you clean houses after?"

I nod.

“Do you have to clean this afternoon?”

“Yeah, just a short job over at the town’s dentistry office. They close early every now and then so I can give the place a once-over.”

“Need a second pair of hands?” she asks, hopeful.

I laugh and point to her Chanel. “If you’re in need of money, you could hawk that handbag and make more than I do in a month.”

Her cheeks flush with color. “It’s not...I’m fine. Just...you have to clean, so I thought I could help. Maybe if we finish early we could do something fun after?” I must not look convinced because she goes on. “You know before I married Trey, I was a nursing assistant. Which might sound kind of nice, but really, I was a glorified ass-wiper. If you think I haven’t seen it all, *cleaned* it all, you’re sorely mistaken. I’m not some snob.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Alright, fine. But I can’t split the money with you or anything—”

“Of course. That’s fine. I could just use the company. Now...what should we do once we finish up. Does this town have a spa?”

---

Mable’s place reminds me of Truvy Jones’ salon in *Steel Magnolias*. She operates it out of the front end of her ranch-style house, and when we first walk in, it’s a real feast for the senses. Hot rollers everywhere, messy containers of hot wax,

outdated 1980s wallpaper, vinyl beauty chairs, and big hairdos.

There's a handful of women inside at various stages of pampering. One sits underneath the heater, soaking in a worn Nora Roberts paperback. Another is getting her hair shampooed in a mint green sink by Mable's assistant, Belle. She smacks the gum in her mouth and tells us to have a seat by the window until they can take us.

"You both in for a cut?"

She's eyeing our hair like she's trying to decide where to start whacking.

Leanna's eyes are wide when she looks at me. She's terrified of what these people will do to her lush black hair, and I can't say I blame her. Mable and Belle know how to do one hairstyle: bouffant.

"How about just two manicures?" I tell Belle before throwing a little wink at Leanna.

We end up having to wait a while, but we don't mind. It's fun being in Mable's and listening to the gossip. There's no shortage of it.

*"Another baby—you're kidding me! Hardly takes care of the first two they got—"*

*"He was supposed to retire last year, but he has his eye on that widow, Mrs. Patricia, and she's got a real nasty spending habit. She'll drive him straight into the poorhouse if he's not careful."*

*"She wants to cancel the chili cookoff at the church and replace it with something healthier. I 'bout slapped her 'cross the face. Who does she think she is messing with traditions like*

*that? The chili cookoff! What's next?! No more wine with communion?"*

Leanna delights in the conversation, and when Mable and Belle call us up to take a seat, they ask us what color we want on our nails then immediately disagree with both of us.

"That pink isn't for you, dear," Mable tells me with a shake of her head. "No. You try this red instead." She looks at the bottom of the polish bottle. "Candy Apple's the name. It'll drive your man wild. You got a man?"

I barely resist the urge to roll my eyes. "What man would I have, Mable?"

She shrugs innocently. "Pretty young thing like you should always have a man. Want me to set you up with someone?"

Leanna laughs beside me, but it's not long until they turn their attention on her and start digging for details.

"You're married to one of them basketball players?" Belle asks, her eyes round with appreciation. "Had I known, I would have said something earlier. It's like we've got a real celebrity in our midst."

Leanna blushes and shakes her head. "It's not like that. My husband might be famous in the sports world, but I'm not."

"You could be," Mable says. "With that face, you could do movies or somethin'."

Leanna smiles. "Thanks."

Then suddenly, she grimaces and jerks back as if in pain, glancing down at her belly.

"You okay?" I ask, leaning in while Belle and Mable are occupied.



“Yeah. Just some cramping. It’s never happened before.”

She looks up and our gazes catch, and I see the worry she’s keeping in.

“You expectin’, dear?” Mable asks, because of course she was eavesdropping on our conversation.

We all glance down at Leanna’s minuscule bump not quite visible underneath her dress.

“Just barely. Still in my first trimester.”

This elicits excited squeals from both women, who aren’t exactly good at reading the room, but maybe that’s okay. They start talking a mile a minute about all the things Leanna needs to do about the baby—“*little whiskey on the gums really helps with teething*”—which leaves Leanna in relative peace to worry about what’s going on. She nibbles on her bottom lip, mulling something over. Then her face contorts in pain again, as if she’s having more cramps.

“We should leave,” I say as a horrible feeling sinks into my gut.

What if something is happening to the baby? We can’t just sit here.

“It’s really not that bad, just weird. I’m probably reading too much into it.”

But then she jerks again and I’m up out of the salon chair.

“Leanna, let’s go. I’ll take you to see a doctor.”

“No, no. There’s no sense in worrying over nothing.”

But even as she argues, her eyes lock with mine, and it’s impossible to misread the worry there.

“I’m sorry to run out on you, Mable,” I say as I gather my stuff. “My nails were going to look really pretty.”

At the moment, I have one hand sporting Candy Apple and one hand that’s totally bare, but I’ll worry about that later.

“Nonsense. You go get that girl checked out, and y’all come back here another day for manicures on the house.”

“Come on, Leanna. I’ll drive you over to the doctor.”

“I think I’m making this out to be a bigger deal than it is,” she says as we head out the door toward my nan’s car. I’ve been driving us around this afternoon just to make it easier. Her car’s still back at the diner, and I don’t feel comfortable taking her back to get it just yet.

“I’d like to stay with you if that’s okay. I wouldn’t want to be by myself.”

She gives me an appreciative smile as we climb in and then I peel out of the parking lot, heading toward Pine Hill’s sole family practice doctor. There’s not an obstetrician nearby. We’d have to go one town over to Maken for that, and it’s already getting late. There’s a chance the doctor’s office is already closed for the day, so I tell Leanna to call Dr. Sanders on the way and hand me the phone. As expected, the front desk girl tries to tell me they can’t fit Leanna in today as Dr. Sanders is done seeing patients, but I ask her twice to put Dr. Sanders on the phone. Every summer while I was growing up, Nan would deliver bushels full of her prized tomatoes to Dr. Sanders so he could use them to can his signature salsa. The second he gets on the phone and I explain the situation, he tells me to come right in.

Once we arrive, it’s obvious Dr. Sanders was closing up shop. His front desk area is already deserted, and there’s only a

medical assistant there to unlock the door for us. She smiles kindly and starts to show us back to one of the rooms.

“I could sit in the waiting room—”

“*No.*”

That one word is uttered so quickly and firmly I know Leanna means it.

I’m grateful for Dr. Sanders and his practice, grateful for this little town of mine that tries its best to take care of its own. He stayed an hour after he needed to so he could run a few tests on Leanna and even did an ultrasound. When we all heard Leanna’s baby’s heartbeat, we sighed in relief.

Dr. Sanders walked her through the possible causes for why she was experiencing some cramping that ranged from the hilariously innocuous (she might have just had some bad gas) to slightly more concerning. For that reason, he suggested she see her obstetrician as soon as possible, but for the time being, he could confirm the most pressing matter: she wasn’t losing the baby. The little nugget was safe inside her with a perfect heartbeat and no signs of distress.

“I feel so silly now,” Leanna tells me once we’re back outside of Dr. Sanders’ office, sitting on the curb, waiting on Trey.

“No! Come on,” I reassure her. “We’ve all been there. You get into your head about something and start to think the worst. I can’t imagine what it’s like having to worry about another human inside of you! You did the right thing. Even Dr. Sanders said so.”

She gives me an appreciative smile and knocks her shoulder against mine as a silent thank you. We only sit for a minute longer before Trey’s SUV cuts off the highway. Now

that the sun's gone down, it's impossible to not get blinded by his headlights as he pulls into the parking lot and parks right in front of us. Leanna only reached out to him after she'd been seen by the doctor, and once he knew we were here, he insisted on coming to get her.

He cuts the engine and the lights fade. A second later, he's out of the car—unexpectedly coming from the passenger side—and already talking.

“I could have come with you to the doctor,” he says as soon as he gets out. “I could have been in the appointment with you.”

“I didn't want to pull you out of practice,” Leanna says, standing just in time to receive the full force of his hug.

“Are you kidding? Fuck practice. You think I care about —”

He starts showering kisses on her hair and face.

She laughs and tries to push him away, but he doesn't let her.

“How is she?” he asks.

“The doctor says she's okay. I was probably worrying for nothing, but I'll confirm everything at the OB tomorrow. Dr. Sanders recommended one nearby and called ahead so they could squeeze me in. I didn't want to fly all the way back to Los Angeles.”

“Good. I'll go with you.”

Another car door slams, and I look away from them then freeze when I see Ben. A moment ago, it didn't register for me that since Trey got out of the passenger side door, that meant there was another person driving the car.

Ben's here.

My stomach somersaults around and around as I get a look at him, trying to seem casual about it. He hovers near the car, giving the couple some relative privacy. His attention shifts to me and I realize I'm still sitting down on the curb. I smile gently and push to stand, annoyed to find that my legs have gone a little wobbly. I slide a hand over the clothes I changed into after I left the diner—the junky t-shirt I throw on when I'm on my way to clean houses and some athletic shorts.

Why can't we ever meet on an even playing field?

*Oh right, because there is no even playing field.*

I could be standing here in a ballgown and he'd still be out of my league.

He's wearing jeans and a pale blue U.S. men's basketball t-shirt like they were both specifically designed to grace his body. The t-shirt is a little snug across his broad chest and arms. The blue color looks great on him, just the right shade to bring out his olive skin and dark hair.

I'd tell him that if I had a tongue that worked.

He nods in my direction, and I smile again before looking back at Trey and Leanna. They're still talking, having forgotten all about us until Ben clears his throat.

Trey looks back at his friend.

“Right, okay. C'mon, let's go home. Ben's going to drive us to get your car. It's still at the diner, right?”

Ben steps forward. “Actually, I was going to suggest that you two just take the SUV back. Leanna, you've had a long day.” He looks toward me and my stomach squeezes tight.

“Maybe Raelynn wouldn’t mind driving me back to get your car?”

“No, yeah. Of course,” I say quickly, wanting to be helpful.

Leanna shakes her head. “No. I feel bad. It’s late and you’ve already been with me all day. You probably want to go home and unwind—”

I laugh and shake my head. “It’s fine. I swear. Go home, and I’ll help Ben get your car back.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip as she tries to smile, and I think she’s trying to hold back tears. I’m not surprised. Today’s been so stressful for her. She steps away from Trey and swoops me up into a big hug. Her arms are so tight around my waist I couldn’t escape even if I wanted to. It’s been so long since I’ve had a hug like this, and I’m momentarily frozen, unsure of what to do. Oh right...hug her back.

“Thank you for being so nice to me,” she says quietly. “You really are the sweetest.”

I’m so embarrassed by the lump in my throat that I just smile and shake my head, trying to shirk off her compliment.

When she releases me, I step back to see Ben watching us curiously.

“Thanks again, Raelynn,” Trey says, throwing me a friendly wave.

I dip my head and start to head toward my car, already worrying over what a mess it is inside. The cleaning supplies that don’t fit in the trunk overflow into the back seat. My dress and apron from the diner are back there too. The passenger side is clear since Leanna was sitting up there all day, but when Ben opens the door and looks in, I can’t help but laugh.

“Will you fit?”

It’s a legitimate concern. The guy is somewhere north of six feet tall with shoulders that are probably twice the width of mine. This vehicle is minuscule compared to his SUV.

“Guess there’s only one way to find out.”

# Chapter Ten

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I watch as he attempts to shrink himself down to fit inside the vehicle, hunching his shoulders and curving his spine. When he tries to sit up straight in the seat, his head skims the roof. His knees are bent up, hitting the dashboard, and then he looks over at me as if to say, *Well? Are you going to drive or what?*

I can't help but burst out laughing.

"You should see yourself. It's like you're inside of a clown car."

His dark brow arches. "Are you going to start driving any time soon?"

"I can't," I say, unable to curb the laughter. Soon, there will be tears rolling down my cheeks. "If I drive now, I'll... I'll..."

I can't even get the words out.

He stares at me with furrowed brows and fake annoyance. I know it's fake because he's fighting back a smile.

I inhale a deep breath and force it out slowly. "Okay. Phew, I'm good. I just won't look at you while I drive, and I should get us there in one piece."

Sadly, the diner's not far from Dr. Sanders' office. Before I even work up the courage to talk to Ben beyond asking him how his day was, I'm pulling up beside Leanna's sleek sports car and putting mine in park.

"Thank god," Ben says with a sigh of relief as he opens the door and tumbles out of the car. He stands to his full height and twists around, stretching out his back. His t-shirt rides up a little, just enough to afford me a quick peek at the side of his rock-hard abs. My cheeks blaze with heat and I whip my attention back out the front windshield before he catches me gawking. I feel like my eyes are the size of quarters when he rests his forearm on the roof of Nan's car and leans down to poke his head back in.

"C'mon, I'll drive you home in Leanna's car."

His demand catches me off guard, and I forget I'm trying hard not to look at him.

My gaze whips to his. "What? Why?"

"I don't want you driving around by yourself this late. That highway is dangerous with the truckers barreling down it. This car's so tiny they won't even see you coming."

I want to tell him I drive at this hour all the time, but I don't think that'll convince him of anything.

"I appreciate the concern, but there's no need. I'm fine. Besides, if I go with you, I'll be stranded back at my place, and I need to be able to get back to work in the morning."

"I can have someone come get you."

He has an answer to everything, doesn't he?

"I'm fine, Ben."

His head cocks to the side as he studies me. “Just curious, do you ever just do what you’re told?”

I smirk, making sure he hears me loud and clear when I reply. “On principle, I try not to let men like you browbeat me into falling in line.”

He grins. “Good. I like that.” He taps twice on the roof. “Now, let’s go.”

*Is he serious?*

I don’t even bother trying to hide my scowl. “Do you have faulty hearing or something?”

That grin doesn’t waver. “Nope. I’m letting you drive your car, just like you asked, Little Bird. But I’ll follow behind you, make sure you get back safe. It’s a win-win.”

We’re going around and around in circles. We’ll be here all night, warring over who’s the most stubborn, and I don’t have time for that. I lean across the console and prop my arm on the passenger side seat so I’m nice and close to him. “You know what? Go right ahead. Enjoy the view of my rusty fender for as long as you damn well please.”

Then I grab the door handle and yank on it. He moves just in time for me to slam it shut without hurting him in the process.

As I pull out of Dale’s parking lot, I’m high on how wonderful it felt to slam the door in his face. What kind of jerk insists on escorting a woman home? Hasn’t he heard of consent? Women’s rights? *Hello, it’s the twenty-first century!* If I want to drive in the dark on some shitty two-lane highway, that’s my right!

My fuming anger burns out quickly though. I’m not even five minutes from Dale’s before I start to regret not arguing

with him more. The truth is, I don't really care all that much if Ben wants to make sure I get home safe. It's kind of sweet, and honestly, I can't remember the last time anyone cared that much about me or my life.

My real worry is that taking Ben back to my trailer is crossing some kind of invisible line. I don't really want him to know where I live or, more importantly, *how* I live.

Until now, he's only seen me at the diner. There's a nice padding between him and my real life. We talk and taunt each other, and occasionally, yes, we flirt, but bringing him back to my trailer, showing him this part of my life...it'll ruin everything.

I can already imagine the pity on his face, and I don't want to see it.

I rub my palms on the steering wheel, glancing back at Ben's headlights in my rearview mirror.

Just leave.

*Please.*

But he doesn't, and soon enough, we're pulling off the highway and passing Sheriff Corbin's farmhouse. I know what Ben's thinking: *This is where she lives? It's not bad. In fact, it's a pretty little house nestled on a nice piece of land.*

Then I keep driving past it, around the bend. The compact dirt road starts to give way to one a little more cobbled together. Weeds sprout up in the divide between the tire tracks as we keep driving through a grove of trees toward the back of the property.

My headlights illuminate the beat-up trailer and I wince, taking it in with fresh eyes. I hate that I'm near tears right now. I hate that I have to feel shitty about where I'm at in life. I'm

not a deadbeat. I didn't screw up and get myself into a bad situation. Life's just dealt me a bad hand time and time again.

I park and turn off the car, staying where I am for a beat and waiting to see if Ben will leave now that I'm home. What a blessing that would be.

He cuts the engine in Leanna's car, and we're plummeted into darkness. Out here in the country, there's nothing but the moon and stars to lead me to my trailer door.

With a resigned huff, I grab my purse and my clothes from the back seat then head out into the night. Rocks and grass crunch under my shoes, and I listen carefully as Ben opens his door and joins me.

I don't bother telling him he can come in, and he doesn't bother asking.

What must it feel like to own the world? To slide through life with that much confidence?

I don't keep the trailer door locked, so I whip it open and flip the switch inside so warm light floods out.

"Come in quick if you're coming. The light draws in all the bugs."

Ben climbs the stairs after me and lets the trailer door slam shut behind him.

I keep moving down the narrow galley walkway, past the bench and table on the right and the kitchen on the left without looking back at him.

There's a deafening silence in here that even the hum of the cicadas outside can't drown out.

My hands shake with nerves as I drop my purse and my work clothes on my bed, shutting the door of the small

bedroom behind me as I re-enter the common space.

Ben's still standing right beside the door, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans as he inspects every inch of my trailer. His gaze slides over my blown-up image of the *Hubble Ultra-Deep Field* I keep above the table. It's a shitty poster I grabbed inside of Caltech's campus bookstore. I used to keep it in my dorm room. Here, in the trailer, with the shallow light, you can barely tell what it's supposed to be. It almost looks like assorted-sized white and yellow confetti on a solid black background.

"That's one of the deepest views of space ever captured in visible wavelengths," I explain, and his brows furrow as he continues to study it. His interest spurs me on. "The million-second exposure was taken over the course of 400 orbits of the Hubble Space Telescope, and that image contains more than 10,000 galaxies."

His gaze slides slowly to me and still, he stays quiet, goading me on.

I have to fight my smile as my enthusiasm starts to bleed out of me. "You want to know something else? You probably know light takes time to travel, so when we look at an object or star that's 13 billion light years away, we know the light emitted from that star has been traveling toward us for 13 billion years. So, basically, we're seeing that star as it appeared 13 billion years ago." I point to the *Hubble Ultra-Deep Field*. "Like those stars right on that little poster in this crappy trailer."

He nods, obviously intrigued by my rambling. I pray he can't see my blush as I turn and busy myself with checking the cupboard for something to eat for dinner.

“You like space?” he asks, turning in a slow circle, eyeing my other posters and pictures: Eileen Collins as the first female commander of a space shuttle mission, the first untethered spacewalk, the first image of a black hole.

I shrug. “Yeah. Couldn’t really help it. My nan raised me on *Star Trek*.”

He looks back toward me. “Nan is your grandmother?”

I nod.

“She raised you?”

“That’s...not what I meant.” I rummage around in the cupboard like I’m looking for something I can’t see. There are only a few things in here. *What’ll it be, Raelynn? Soup or soup?* “I was just saying I watched a lot of *Star Trek*. But yes, she raised me.”

I close the cupboard and decide to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich instead. I grab two plates, knowing Ben could probably wolf down food at any time of day, before opening the bread. He takes a seat at the table and watches me for a long tense bout of silence before he finally speaks again.

“And now she’s not doing well?” When I look shocked that he would know that, he explains, “I heard you talking about it at the diner the other morning.”

I hum. “Yeah. Well then you’re caught up.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Here?”

“In Pine Hill. You said you lived in Los Angeles at one point, so why’d you come back?”

I shoot him a teasing smile. “Not just anyone can serve up bacon and eggs at Dale’s, Ben. I mean, do you know how finicky that coffee machine can be?”

“Right. So...”

My joke doesn’t deter him, so I try a different tactic.

“If I told you then I’d have to...” I mime slicing my throat.

He’s not amused. He just sits and looks at me, waiting. His brown eyes are filled with curiosity like he’s trying to probe the depths of my mind.

“Sheesh. Relax. It’s really not all that serious. And you already guessed it, pretty much. I’m here for my grandma.”

I finish making the sandwiches and carry them to the table, taking the seat across from him. It’s cramped quarters, and if I kept my legs dangling, we’d be all tangled together soon enough, our knees banging together, so I tuck my legs up crisscross style and pick up my sandwich, about to take a bite when I realize Ben’s still just looking at me, not touching his food.

“Would you cut it out?”

He leans back and throws one arm over the back of the low bench seat. “I’m just annoyed that you can’t seem to carry on a conversation with me.”

“Maybe I’m a private person. Maybe you should stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

After a long moment, he looks down and picks up his sandwich, seemingly content to let me have a moment of peace.

Like a well-planned dose of reverse psychology, his resignation finally convinces me to open up a smidge.



With a frustrated groan, I plop my sandwich back down on my plate and drum my pointer finger on the table nervously. “Even before I left for college, I knew something was wrong with Nan. She’d started forgetting things, repeating the same things every now and then, but I chalked it up to her age. If she knew her diagnosis then, she didn’t let on.

“I think now, there were more signs that I just didn’t want to see. Y’know? I was a senior in high school and I wanted out.”

“Anybody would.”

His words aren’t the balm I wish they were.

I study my sandwich as I keep talking.

“I was about to finish the fall semester of my senior year in college a couple months back when I got a call from Sheriff Corbin telling me my nan had taken a turn for the worse. I mean...it could have been a lot worse. She’d accidentally set fire to her house.” I shake my head at the bad memory. “Left a towel on the stove. Anyway, she’s fine. Sheriff Corbin and the guys were able to get her out before...”

He leans forward, and I think he’s about to drop his hand on top of mine, to give me comfort, but I pull it away before he can, fisting my hands on my lap.

“The house”—*my childhood home*—“was ruined, and it’s fine because she needed to be in a facility anyway.” My words are tumbling out of me quick as lightning now. “I left college to help take care of her, so there you have it. That’s why I’m here in Pine Hill.”

There’s a beat of silence before he utters a quiet apology.

*“I’m sorry.”*

God, why do comforting words from a near stranger have the ability to unravel my steady facade? I've had all this anger burning inside me for the last few years, and there's no one to take it out on, no one to hold accountable. I can't sit down at this table with fate and demand answers, but Ben's here, and his comforting words draw tears to the corners of my eyes. I try my damndest to keep them right there though.

I sniff and look away.

Ben gives me relative privacy to gather myself by picking up his sandwich and taking a huge bite. He groans like it's remarkably delicious.

"Now *this* is a world-class peanut butter and jelly. Wow, where'd you learn to cook like this?"

A relieved laugh bursts out of me, and I shake my head to let him know he's being absolutely ridiculous. But he's helping. I turn back, pick up my own sandwich, and take a bite, feeling the tension start to ease from my stomach.

He takes another bite and feigns utter ecstasy as his eyes roll back in his head.

"Where'd this bread come from? Some French bakery?"

I grin. "It's just your standard white bread from Piggly Wiggly."

He chokes on his bite. "That cannot be the name of a real place."

"Piggly Wiggly? It sure is. No Trader Joe's in Pine Hill."

"What kind of food can you get there?"

While we eat the rest of our sandwiches, I regale him with stories about all Piggly Wiggly has to offer: live crawfish by

the pound in late spring, cans of soda for less than a dollar, the best local jams and pickles and honey you can find.

He eats every lick of the PB&J I made him and cleans his own plate in the tiny sink, looking back at me after he dries it so I can tell him where it goes.

“Just up there on that shelf,” I say, pointing to the right of his head.

He lays it down carefully and then turns.

Standing in the middle of the trailer like that—tall and formidable—it’s funny to see how much space he takes up. I think he could easily stretch his arms out and touch both walls if he wanted to. I’d forgotten, momentarily, what a strange thing it is to have him in here with me. I’m always alone here at night.

The song of the cicadas and crickets pours in to fill the quiet as I finish my sandwich and stand to clean my plate. Ben’s still hovering by the sink, and he doesn’t budge when I come over.

He turns and props his hip against the counter, and I stare up at him with a quizzical brow.

When he doesn’t look away, I scrunch my nose. “What?”

“You’ve got peanut butter on your cheek.”

I swipe at it with my hand, and his devilish grin spreads wider.

Clearly, I didn’t get it.

The paper towel roll is mounted under the cabinet behind him, so I lean forward and yank off a sheet. My shoulder brushes his arm in the process, and that little bit of contact is too much. Alarm bells ring in my head. Every hair on my body

seems to stand on end in warning. *Tread lightly*. This is not a man to trifle with. Ben is...a black hole. And I'd do well to remember that.

I wipe my cheek, and then wipe it again for good measure. Ben nods, takes the paper towel from my hand, bunches it up, and shoots it through the air like a basketball. As expected, it sails straight into the itty-bitty trash can sitting at the end of the counter.

“Showoff,” I tease, trying to play off the moment as I take a step back and cross my arms over my chest. It's a defensive pose and I know that, but we're in uncharted territory and I'm uncomfortable with all the possibilities that lie before us.

He said he wanted to see me home safely, and he has.

I made him a sandwich and he ate it up.

It's time for him to leave.

Leave or...

He takes a step toward me. I step back. His dark lashes cluster together as he narrows his eyes, looking down at me with a question in his gaze.

Another step forward and another step back.

There's no way around it. Evolution has programmed my brain to be wary of predators his size. He's more bear than man. What do they feed these NBA players, anyway? Straight protein with an extra dose of steroids?

Unfortunately, my retreat has only piqued his interest. I would have been better off playing dead.

There's a spark in his brown eyes that should make me leery of what's about to happen, but instead of cowering, I step forward and meet him head on.

“You’re not going to kiss me, are you?” I blurt out suddenly, holding my hands up to his chest to block him.

His smile unfurls in slow motion, stopping my heart in its tracks.

“I was thinking about it.”

# Chapter Eleven

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BEN

**R**aelynn's small hand sits square in the center of my chest in an effort to fend me off, and I comply. I stay right where I am as my heart drums against her hand, a dead giveaway for how I feel about her, but I don't think she notices.

Her full lips tilt down in a fragile frown. Her blue eyes are wide, fringed with dark blonde lashes that catch the shallow light inside the trailer. I can count her freckles from this angle. Touch every single one.

“Ben—”

She's breathless.

I'm in a trance as I look down at her. Two more steps and I'd have her pinned against the edge of her table. My hands could wrap around her waist and I'd lift her so damn easily. The only thing that stops me, the thing that pulls me out of my own head, is that helpless expression she's wearing, a combination of fear and anxiety.

I suck in a breath and shutter my want, trying to tease her and lighten the mood.

“So kissing is off the table?”

My joke doesn't calm her worries. She looks deathly serious when she replies, "Absolutely."

"Then stop looking at my mouth."

Her eyes jerk up to meet mine. "I wasn't!"

I laugh and attempt to move past her, but her flimsy hand keeps me pinned right where I am. She levels me with a shrewd stare I'm sure she hopes will make me quiver; it doesn't.

"What's your game, anyway?" she asks with an interrogative tone. Her hand starts pushing against me, but I don't move. I take that pressure and feed off it. "What are you playing at? You and your teammates make some kind of bet to see who can bag a townie?"

I hold her gaze and reply honestly. "No."

"Is this a diversion for you then? Some kind of midlife crisis?"

I scratch the back of my neck, fighting against an amused smile. "How old do you think I *am*?"

Her fingers fist my shirt in desperation. "Spit it out then! What are you doing with me?!"

Her question stops me dead in my tracks.

What am I doing with her? What the hell am I doing here? In her trailer?

Truthfully, I haven't thought that far ahead with Raelynn. For so long, everything in my life has been so damn complicated. Except for her. When I'm with her I feel like a teenager again—back before the scouts started noticing me, back when basketball wasn't my whole damn life. I chased



girls. I fell for them and they wanted me right back. It was easy, fun, nothing like the last few years.

How do I say that though?

How do I look at this woman I still barely know and say, *I like the way you make me feel. I like your presence in a room. You draw me in and I don't have a fighting chance of staying away from you.*

She narrows her eyes, and I know if I stay in this trailer with her for one second longer, I'm going to lose the battle against the devil on my shoulder. It's time for me to leave. I shouldn't drag her into my mess.

I step away and her hand drops from my chest, hanging limp at her side.

"Thank you for the sandwich," I say, ducking my head.

We touch, shoulders and hips grazing as I dip past her to get to the door of the trailer, and my body lights up like I've been plugged into a socket.

*Fuck.*

I slam her trailer door open, and when I make it outside, it feels like I'm resurfacing from a suffocating depth. I can't get enough air. I look back and Raelynn's standing in the door of the trailer, her eyebrows furrowed, her blue eyes carrying all her secrets. She just told me kissing was off the table, and now she looks pissed at me for listening to her. *I get it, Little Bird. I want to kiss you as badly as you want to be kissed.*

I keep my focus straight ahead as I get into Leanna's car and start to drive away. It's dark and quiet out on the road. I don't fiddle with the radio. I keep my hands at ten and two as I debate whether I did the right thing. I hate that I left her. A bigger part of me hates that I went to her home in the first

place, but it's too late to backtrack. The writing's on the wall: Raelynn and I will collide. There's no way around it.

Once, midway back to Coach Dalton's property, I flip on my blinker, turn off on the side of the road, and prepare to U-turn back to Raelynn's trailer before I curse myself and continue on my way.

I have no choice but to not visit her at the diner in the morning. I'd forgotten—what with everything else going on—but I have to fly out to New York for my meeting with Nike and my Olympic promo shoot.

There's a helicopter waiting for me at the compound at 5:15 AM. It takes me to a small private airport in Austin, and from there, I take a plane to New York City alongside my manager, assistant, and PR rep.

"You look tired. Have you been training too much?" my manager asks once we're in the clouds.

I shake my head, trying to fend off his concern. "I'm fine. Training's fine."

"Right, well we need your million-dollar smile today. You'll need to turn it on for the cameras."

I level him with a stare that's dripping with so much disdain I'm surprised he doesn't piss his pants. He's talking to me as if I don't already know that. As if I haven't shot a thousand of these commercials before.

He gets the hint and backs off, returning to his laptop and leaving me in peace.

I stare out the window of the small jet, wondering how early Raelynn has to get to Dale's to get ready for the breakfast rush. She's always going a mile a minute by the time

I arrive. She needs more help. Another coworker to help her out.

“You look like something’s troubling you.”

I turn to see my assistant wearing a tentative smile.

I shake my head. “It’s nothing.”

“I know it’s a pain, but would you mind—”

She holds out her laptop for me to take, and I don’t hesitate. I can’t keep biting heads off just because I’m in a foul mood. My assistant walks me through the deck of slides Nike sent over for us to review before the meeting later. I spend the rest of the flight familiarizing myself with the final designs of the sneakers as well as the campaign options they’ve suggested, and I’m glad for the distraction.

Once we touch down in New York, a driver whisks me straight to the studio for the Olympic promo shoot. The two other athletes, the gymnast and the soccer player, have already arrived and are sitting side by side getting their hair done when I walk in. I wave and make a point to stop and chat with them for a few minutes so we’re all comfortable enough with each other to ham it up in front of the cameras. I’m grateful that their personalities will carry the team considering this kind of stuff makes my skin crawl.

Brie’s a tiny gymnast, and the representatives for the Olympic committee obviously get a kick out of setting us side by side for candid shots. For an hour straight, we pose and joke around. I spin a basketball over her head and whisk it away before she can get it. I stand aside and watch—genuinely awestruck—when she pulls off some kind of standing flip while the cameras roll. The shoot team eats it all up.

The next hour, they do close-ups of the three of us grouped together while we wear our Olympic gear and hold up the gold medals we won back in the Rio games. They tell us they plan on putting the images on billboards across America, and Andie and Brie seem genuinely excited about it. I just want to get back to Pine Hill.

On the way home on the plane, I scroll through my private Instagram feed and pause when I find a photo Leanna posted a few days ago. She and Raelynn are sitting side by side on the couch in Leanna and Trey's cabin, and Raelynn is holding up a bottle of nail polish and giving the camera a cheesy smile. Without thinking, I screenshot the photo and crop it down so only Raelynn is in it. I save it to my camera roll on my phone then check to make sure it's there. Bright-eyed and carefree—she's the embodiment of sunshine.

The photo isn't enough.

I open my phone's browser and type her name into Google. The first results don't come back fruitful. It's a unique name, but I still need to narrow it down. I type in "Raelynn Birdie Texas" and still, nothing comes up that seems related. Then I switch to "Raelynn Birdie California" and an article pops up at the very top of the search results.

### *Caltech Students Named Goldwater Scholars*

I skim the body of the article that mentions the three Caltech undergraduates who were named Goldwater Scholars last year for excellence in STEM fields. On the right of the short article, there are photos of the three recipients, Raelynn beaming among them.

Beside her photo, there's a short paragraph describing her accomplishments at Caltech.

*Raelynn Birdie, a junior studying engineering and computer science, just completed her first year working in the lab of Melissa Olmsted, Caltech professor of computer science. Birdie is interested in designing systems that integrate algorithm and sensor design to better observe phenomena previously impossible to measure with traditional methods. Birdie plans to maintain her position in Professor Olmsted's lab through the remainder of her time at Caltech as they work in collaboration with the Event Horizon Telescope to capture images of black holes and analyze them to learn more about general relativity in the strong-field regime.*

My eyebrows are in my hair.

What the hell did I just read?

General relativity? Black holes?

What in the world is Raelynn doing at Dale's Diner?

# Chapter Twelve

---

I'm chugging along on a conveyor belt I can't escape from. What little money does come in goes right back out. I wake up early on my day off from Dale's and count the cash in tips I received the day before, playing the game where I triage pressing life matters: do I want to fill Nan's car with gas or take it in for the oil change that was due six months ago, do I want to buy more prepaid minutes for my cell phone or get some groceries. I settle on putting half the cash toward gas (that'll last me a few measly days) and spend the rest on the oil change. The guys at the mechanic shop try to sell me other services, crap I'm sure the car truly needs, but until it actually sputters and dies on me mid-drive, I'll take my chances.

From there, I head over to visit Nan. When I walk into her room, an orderly is tidying up around her bed and aims a kind smile my way when she sees me at the door.

"Hey, sugar. She's been sleepin' most of the morning," she warns me.

"Really?"

"Yeah. They gave her somethin' to calm her down. She was real nasty when she first woke up this mornin'. Wouldn't listen to nobody."

I nod in understanding. “Thanks for letting me know.”

She leaves, dropping her hand to my shoulder in quiet support, and then I pull up a chair beside Nan’s bed, reaching out to take her fragile hand in mine. Her skin is papery thin as I run my thumb back and forth across her knuckles. I sit like that for a while, just studying her as she sleeps peacefully.

“Sorry you had a bad morning, Nan. Want me to read to you for a bit?”

I pull out a heavy textbook from my bag and plop it on the edge of her bed so I can flip open to the chapter I started reading last night. If Nan were awake, she’d be happy to listen to me read. She was the one who first encouraged me to study hard and focus on my education. She fostered my love of learning, and even though my courses at Caltech were a bit over her head, she was so proud to hear about what I was up to in California.

When I was little, she’d tell me all the time, “You’re gonna go to the moon one day, Birdie.”

Turns out, I’m going nowhere but here.

In Piggly Wiggly later, I grab what items I need and add them to my basket, tallying up the price in my head as I go. I can’t spend more than twenty dollars and I’d like to get Nan some of her favorite caramel candies, so I put back the grapes I was eyeing and grab some bananas instead. As I stand in line at checkout, everyone’s chatting on about Ben and the rest of the basketball players. It’s all anyone wants to talk about these days.

“I hear they’re only in town two more weeks before they head to Tokyo,” Debra says to the customer she’s ringing up.



“We’ll miss them when they go. That fancy chef of theirs has been putting in huge grocery orders to feed ’em all.”

The world seems to shrink around me as I process that news.

Two weeks.

A blink.

Somehow I’d forgotten Ben wouldn’t be staying long.

“What about you, Birdie?”

I look up and realize Debra’s staring at me expectantly.

“Sorry. What?”

She laughs. “You guys over at Dale’s gonna miss them when they go? I’ve heard they come in and eat there sometimes. I’m sure they leave good tips and such.”

My stomach hurts too much to give her a decent reply, so I just nod.

Yeah, we’ll miss them.

I pull up to the trailer just as the sun’s going down and unload the groceries from the passenger seat. After I put them away, I check my phone and see another missed call from Professor Olmsted. I know I’ll have to give her a call back one of these days. I can’t keep putting off the inevitable. For now though, I turn off the phone and shower before fixing myself some dinner. I’m sitting at the table a while later when there’s a knock on the door of the trailer.

I leap out of my skin.

*Holy—*

No one ever comes knocking, and definitely not at this time of night.

Once my shock subsides, I realize it's probably Sheriff Corbin wanting to pass along some of his wife's cooking. He does that from time to time, and I'm always appreciative.

"Hold on!" I holler. "I'm coming."

I stand up and edge around the side of the table so I can grab a sweatshirt to throw over my tank top since I'm not wearing a bra.

"Birdie?"

Ben's voice stops me in my tracks and I spin on my heels, making my way for the door before I think better of it.

I fling it open, half surprised, half relieved to see him leaning against my doorjamb wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, his hair still damp from a shower.

He looks up and his brown eyes pierce me.

There's no joy there. No relief in the fact that I opened my door to him.

There's accusation in his narrowed gaze and furrowed scowl.

"You're a Goldwater Scholar," he blurts accusingly.

I rear back in surprise.

"*What?*"

"Yeah. Not just that," he says, pushing off the doorjamb and making his way inside my trailer without my permission. "A National Merit Scholar too, *and* a Fulbright Fellow."

He brushes right by me, jostling me to the side.

There's no time to assess the fact that I'm very inappropriately dressed. Shorty shorts and a flimsy tank top

don't hide a damn thing. Worse, my hair's still air drying from my shower, starting to curl and riot.

I cross my arms over my chest as if that'll help—*not*—and listen as he keeps on ranting.

“You had a full ride to Caltech. There're a dozen articles about you online. A lot of them are about Professor Olmsted, but your work is mentioned too.”

“Are you done yet?” I say, my voice dripping with sass.

“No,” he steps forward, his finger pointing at me and everything. “They were throwing grant money your way trying to keep you there. Jesus, it sounds like they would have changed the name of the damn school for you if you'd asked them to.”

I roll my eyes and look away. “So you know how to use Google, good for you.”

“Birdie, what the hell are you doing here?” he asks, stepping forward until his shoes brush my toes. Still, I don't look at him.

“I already told you that,” I say through clenched teeth, keeping my face to the side.

“Yeah? Taking care of your grandmother? No one else can help you with that?”

I hate that my lip quivers as he needles the most sensitive part of my humanity. *No, Ben. There's no one else to help me. There is no one but my nan and me.* Is that what he wants to hear? Is that what he wants me to admit?

'Cause if so, I'll tell him.

I'll give him this part of me and make him feel the weight of being Raelynn Birdie, if only for a second. I turn to him, my

gaze hot and angry, and I let him have it.

“You go snoopin’ around online, figure you know shit about me, and then show up here like this? Pissy as all get-out? I already told you why I’m here, Ben. You know the answer to all these questions you’re asking. I’m a girl with the oldest story in the book. Teenage parents who loved drugs and drinkin’ more than dealing with a newborn. They left me with my nan and never came back. Last I heard, my mom was shacked up with some meth head near Jersey and my dad was locked up.”

The shift is so subtle on his features, someone else might miss it. The pain there, the pity he feels for me. It’s not obvious, and he’s trying so hard to keep it tamped down. I get some sick, twisted satisfaction out of doing this to him, dumping my life right over his head and making him wallow in the waste like I’ve been doing for as long as I can remember.

“I have fifty dollars to my name, no family, no one to lean on except for my grandma. I’m doing everything I can to take care of her the way she took care of me. You think I—”

“I can help you, Birdie.”

That...

That is not what I was expecting.

I sneer, taking full offense at his gallantry. It only pisses me off more. I’m not a damsel.

“I don’t want your help.”

“You just said you have no one.”

“I have Nan,” I spit out bitterly.

His face falls like his heart is breaking for me. When he speaks again, his tone is gentle and goading.

“She can’t help you anymore, Birdie.”

I’m not ready to hear that, even if deep down I know he might be right. I’m not in a place to accept that fact.

My eyes cut to the trailer door behind him, and I start pushing him back toward it. “Get out, Ben.”

“Raelynn. You can’t do this to yourself. You’re a fucking genius, and you’re rotting away in this town.”

His hands circle my wrists so easily as he tries to get me to stop pushing him, but I don’t let up. I push with all my might and relish the feel of physically hurting him. I *want* to be hurting him, hurting *someone*, but it’s useless. I might as well be an ant trying to move a boulder.

His grip on my wrists tightens and he tugs me forward so I tumble against him. I crane my head back to look up as our chests press together. I’m fuming mad at the world, and if he keeps pushing me, he’s going to end up getting the brunt of that anger.

“Let me help you,” he implores, his voice low and tempting.

His attention leaves my eyes for a moment to skate across my lips, and then our gazes lock again and his brown eyes seem to dig into my soul. My breaths come quick and shallow, and my anger is starting to morph into something scarier. Desire. *Heat*. Our two bodies touch without a lick of space in between. He’s as hard as I imagined, and his muscles and size have a way of hijacking my senses. My anger trickles away with every second we stand chest to chest.

He dips his head and I stiffen, anticipating a kiss that doesn't come.

His chin rests on my hair, and I listen to him inhale as his heart thumps against my hand.

*"Little Bird."*

I squeeze my eyes closed as a shudder racks through me.

We don't speak for a long while, but his offer still hangs in the air between us. *Let me help you.* We're embracing, but not in a conventional hug. He still has a grip on my wrists. I'm still fisting his shirt as if at any moment I'll gather up my residual outrage and kick him out of my trailer for good. I can't remember the last time someone held me like this outside of Leanna the other day, but it was likely Nan. She gave the best hugs. *She gives the best hugs,* I remind myself angrily.

Thoughts of her bring me back to this trailer, and I step away from Ben and open the door.

"I leave for the Games in two weeks," he says, confirming what I overheard at the grocery store earlier.

I nod to let him know I heard him.

"If you change your mind..."

He slips out and I slam the door, turn my back to it, and start to cry.

# Chapter Thirteen

---

I'm on edge the next morning, expecting Ben to walk into Dale's at any moment. I took the time to put some makeup on before my shift, made sure my dress wasn't too wrinkly either. It's not that I want him to walk in, per se. I'm not sure what I want. I slept like crap last night, tossing and turning and trying to get him out of my thoughts. I hate him for looking me up like that, for digging up dirt that should have stayed buried. Why's it any of his business if I'm wasting away in Pine Hill or not? Up until a few weeks ago, we didn't even know each other.

The bell over the door rings again, and it's still not Ben.

*Good*, I tell myself. I don't need to worry myself with him anyway.

I'm not taking him up on his offer. There's no way I'd accept his help, whatever that might mean. I've been managing just fine on my own until now, and I'll manage just fine in two weeks when he leaves. My stomach twists in protest, but I choose to blame the sharp pang on the fact that I didn't eat much breakfast this morning.

"Are these two free?" a man asks, pointing between two empty stools at the counter.



I nod, reaching out to clear the empty plates. It's been a busy morning and I'm dragging. I'm tempted to force down another cup of coffee, but I know it'd only make me a jittery mess.

"I'll be back to grab y'all's drink order in just a second."

He and his friend take their seats and start chatting. I eye them as I get them some water, assessing their sport coats and button-downs. Their pressed khakis and the weight they carry around their middle. They look like grown-up frat boys.

I slide the waters in front of them and put on a cheerful smile.

"What can I get you two?"

They glance between each other for a brief moment, and then the blond one leans forward with a conspiratorial smile. "How about some pancakes and whatever information you can give us about Ben Castillo."

My gut seizes.

How do they know I know Ben?

Have they been watching him?

Watching me?

"I hear he sometimes comes here," the man continues, pulling out his phone like he wants to get my reply on record. "Have you ever served him?"

My moment of hesitation seems to last forever, but it's only a second before I shake my head.

"Who?" I ask with a confused frown.

"Ben Castillo. He's one of the basketball guys. The Olympian."

“I have no earthly idea who that is,” I say with a shrug. “Now can I get you a coffee or a stack of pancakes? They’re our specialty. The pancakes, not the coffee. The coffee’s barely potable.”

The men share a hardy laugh at my expense, looking at one another like, *Get a load of this girl.*

I hold my breath. This is when they’ll reveal their cards if they have any up their sleeves. This is when the first guy will turn to me, level me with a stare, and tell me to cut the shit.

Instead, he pockets his phone and picks up one of the diner menus.

“Oh well. Pancakes, you said? Give me a short stack, please. And a cup of that coffee.”

---

A second day passes without Ben coming into the diner, and I convince myself I’m glad for it. I reexamine everything he said to me when he showed up unannounced at my trailer, and I double down in my feelings that he was out of line and intrusive and arrogant. I wonder how he would have reacted if I had dug into his past like that.

Angry with him or not, I still notice his absence, which only annoys me more.

I’m wiping down the counter toward the end of my shift at Dale’s when a heavy Louis Vuitton duffle bag gets slung right onto the spot I was about to clean. I freeze and glance up to find a beaming Leanna staring back at me. Her black hair is long and straight. Her dark skin is so flawless it looks airbrushed.

“Hey, Birdie.”

I roll my eyes at the familiar name.

“What? It’s a cute name. I heard Ben use it when he was talking to Trey about you.”

I narrow my gaze on her. “Why was Ben talking to Trey about me?”

Her smile widens. “I think you know why.”

A shiver of pleasure rolls down my spine before I can help it.

God, why does he affect me like this? Why do I care whether or not he brings me up to his friends?

She slides onto the stool and pushes her bag to the side so it doesn’t sit between us.

“You look really pretty,” she tells me with a smile.

I arch a brow to make it clear I don’t believe her.

“*What?* You do!”

I don’t buy it.

“Are you trying to butter me up for some reason?”

She gives me a wicked smile. “Maybe. But I honestly do think you look pretty. I like when you wear your hair like that.”

“In a high ponytail?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes! It shows off your bone structure.”

Oh good grief.

I go back to wiping off the counter around where she’s sitting.

“Ben heard some reporters came in here asking about him,” she volunteers out of the blue.

*How?*

“You didn’t tell them anything did you?”

My eyes go wide. “No. Of course not. Not a word.”

She nods as if she already knew that. “Good. I figured. It’s just some people...” She shakes her head. “They see these guys as their meal ticket.”

“Well I’m not one of those people,” I say with a stubborn tone.

She smiles apologetically. “I know. Forget I asked. Anyway, do you have a house to clean this afternoon?”

I nod. “A big one about fifteen minutes from here.”

“Is it toward Maken?”

“Yeah.”

She beams. “That’s perfect. I have a plan for us.”

“Does it involve you helping me again? Because last time I ended up having to take you to the doctor afterward.”

She laughs. “It wasn’t from helping you clean! Besides, I’m in the clear now. Baby’s doing just fine in there, and tonight we’re going to celebrate.” Then she unzips her large duffle and pulls out some sky-high heels. “Tell me you can pull off a size eight.”

Unfortunately, I can.

---

As we drive, I ask Leanna where we're going a hundred times, but she just says "dinner". As if dinner requires me to wear a dress like this—one that bares too much cleavage and flares out around my hips, cutting off to expose damn near every inch of my legs. She went crazy for it once I put it on. I changed in the back of her car and then she made me sit up front in her passenger seat, face her, and let her apply makeup.

"This isn't like a 'you could be pretty if only you tried' scenario, you realize that, right? You're one of those girls who might look better without makeup on, even. I just love doing this, so humor me."

I did humor her, sitting patiently while she flipped through eye shadow palettes and contour kits.

Then I flipped the visor down and inspected my reflection. I ticked all the boxes: healthy glow, sultry eyes, seductive lips. But overall, I still looked like myself, which was a nice surprise. I was scared she'd go a little too overboard.

"You're good at this," I told her with an appreciative smile.

"Thanks. I get really bored when I travel with Trey, so I end up going down the beauty influencer rabbit hole."

"Are the other wives really that bad? You can't hang out with them?"

"Some of them are nice, but like I said, not all of them travel. They have families and stuff. It just so happens that the women who are usually around are the ones I really can't stand."

Dinner (or wherever we're going) is over in Maken, and it takes us forty minutes to drive there.

Since returning from California, I haven't made it to Maken at all, so I'm not expecting to find a chic French bistro

nestled in the heart of town square. It must be new and, judging by the line of people wrapped around the block, very popular.

“Looks like it’ll be a while before we can snag a table.”

“Oh...uh”—she clears her throat—“we’ll be alright. C’mon.”

I don’t pay enough attention to her strange response, and I should have because when we walk into the restaurant, past the two bodyguards stationed at the door, I realize the entire back half of the place has been cordoned off. We can’t even get to the private dining room entrance until we pass through another blockade of bodyguards who recognize Leanna right away, ask to see my ID, jot down whatever information they find pertinent, and then let us both through.

“Sorry, they can be weird like that sometimes,” Leanna tells me, hooking her elbow around mine.

“It’s okay. Just doing their job.”

She smiles and tugs me through the door held open for us by one of the guards, and an intimidating scene unfurls before me: a long table filled with all the Olympic basketball players, along with their girlfriends and wives.

I feel all eyes on us as we step into the room. One gaze in particular carries so much weight it’s hard to keep one foot moving in front of the other. I saw Ben the moment I walked in. My eyes hunted for him, praying and pleading that he would be here among these people. I’m not sure if I’m relieved or worried to find that he is. My gaze barely lingered on him, but it was enough to sear his image into my memory, every detail rendered perfectly: clean-shaven jaw, prominent brow, that ridiculously sexy hair with a hint of wave to it.

He sits in the center of the table, surrounded by people—a fact that makes me inexplicably sad.

“Lele!” Anthony calls out in greeting, shooting to his feet alongside Trey. Trey catches Anthony’s shoulder and pushes him back down in his chair.

“Don’t,” Trey warns.

“I wasn’t going to do anything! Damn, you need to chill!”

It’s very obvious from the mischievous grin on Anthony’s face that he was about to come over and cause trouble just to get a rise out of Trey. Fortunately for the room, Trey reaches us first, bending to kiss Leanna and then shooting me a friendly smile.

“Hey, Raelynn. You guys got here just in time. We were about to order. Come sit.” He ushers us farther into the room and makes a sweeping introduction on my behalf. “Everyone, this is Raelynn. Raelynn, this is the team—”

“Yeah, we met her already, Trey,” someone calls out. I think his name is LaMarcus. He was one of the guys at the diner a few weeks ago. “Same time you did.”

“Yeah, well, not everyone was there that day, so shut up.”

There’s laughter and snickers all around the room as we get led back toward the end of the table where Trey was sitting. There’s a vacant seat beside him, but everyone realizes a beat too late that there’s not another seat right beside that one for me. In fact, there’s not another open seat at the table at all. My cheeks turn into two hot flames. If I weren’t already seen as an outsider, it’s painfully obvious that I am one now.

“She could go get a chair from out there,” a girl says with a noticeably bitter tone. She might as well add, *And she can just eat out there too while she’s at it.*

Ben stands, his chair screeching, and every eye in the room turns to him.

He doesn't say a word as he turns and leaves the room, likely to ask someone on staff to bring me a chair, but then a moment later he reappears with one in hand.

I watch in shock as he curves around the table, back to his seat.

I frown, expecting him to continue carrying the chair over to where Leanna and I are standing, but instead he drops it right beside his.

“Move down,” he tells the guy beside him.

The guy looks confused and points over toward us. “There's plenty of room—”

His words cut off once he gets a good look at Ben's face.

“Alright, jeez! I'm moving. *I'm moving*, but all these fools have to shove down too. You know if you wanted to sit by her that badly, you could have just told us.”

Leanna laughs under her breath but has enough sense to stay quiet.

I hear a few whispers, but nothing is said loud enough for me to get a grasp on what these people think of Ben's behavior.

I would welcome a nice huge crack in the floor, or maybe a small earthquake or tornado—any distraction from the eyes shooting back and forth between Ben and me.

I don't really have a choice but to follow his lead. It would be so awkward to insist that he move the chair down by Leanna, and the last thing I want to do is make this moment last even longer. I'll go to him and I'll take the seat he's



offering me so dinner can resume and everyone can forget I exist.

I avoid eye contact with everyone like my life depends on it as I force myself to start walking in his direction. I'm intensely relieved that I don't teeter on the high heels I borrowed from Leanna. I'd never recover from the mortification if I did.

Once I'm in front of him, I sneak a quick glance up at him from beneath my lashes, and his face is impossible to read. He looks calm, but deadly. Quiet, but I'm sure there are a million thoughts hidden behind those brown eyes.

I take the seat he got for me, and he pushes it in nice and snug against his chair before he reclaims it.

I'm in his space, closer to him than I am to the guy on my right. He's done it on purpose, I think, because he doesn't seem to mind one bit. He waves down a waiter.

“She just arrived and needs a drink. Raelynn?”

“Water is fine, please,” I squeak.

It's annoying that I'm still the most interesting thing at the table at the moment. Normal conversation hasn't fully resumed and I still feel people's eyes on me, no doubt dying for information.

I stare down at the tablecloth.

“Want me to put your purse on the back of your chair?”

Oh.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts and slide off the thin strap of the borrowed purse to hang it on the back of my chair myself. Nothing I'm wearing tonight is mine, and I wonder what Ben thinks about that. I wonder if he finds me more

beautiful than ever. If he likes the luster and shine on my short dress and heels.

Another stolen glance reveals his attention is still on me. His dark brows are tugged together. His eyes are on my dress, my neck, my mouth. I shiver and lean in.

“*What?*” I whisper quietly.

His eyes widen for an instant, as if he didn’t realize he was being watched.

He shakes his head and looks away.

I hate the tension and awkwardness surrounding us. The last time he and I were together, I was shouting at him and kicking him out of my trailer. Now we’re at a table with two dozen people, forced into this civilized setting even though I’m not quite ready for it. I’ve been aware of his absence from the diner, aware of the fact that I missed him, but now that he’s right beside me, I’m at a loss for how I’m supposed to act.

Clearly, Ben’s also aware of the issue.

With a sigh, he loops his arm around the back of my chair, leans in, and tilts his face so his mouth is close to my ear.

“Relax, will you? We’re fine.”

His breath skates over my neck.

“We’re *not* fine,” I hiss quietly.

Not quietly *enough*, though, because the guy beside me chuckles.

“You’re still mad at me?” Ben presses.

“*Yes.*”

“For what exactly?”

He might as well be whispering sweet nothings into my ear with the way my body is reacting. My back arches ever so slightly, trying to bring me closer to him. With his arm on the back of my chair, it's like he's enveloping me on all sides. His hand touches my shoulder and his thumb brushes back and forth, a little nothing gesture that sends my heart careening over the side of a cliff. He can't just touch me like this in public. He can't touch me *at all*.

This image we're presenting to the group is not at all an accurate depiction of what we are. We don't have intimate conversations like this. We don't whisper to each other and press our bodies close.

"Imagine if I had done that to you, looked into your life like that."

"It's not the same."

"Oh, it isn't? Why is that? Because I'm not as important as you? My secrets aren't as valuable?"

"Birdie—"

"Don't call me that."

I think he's about to really let me have it. I'm poking him in public. This is close to all-out war, but then I catch him fight a smile out of the corner of my eye. The bastard has to take the edge of his bottom lip between his teeth to keep it from spreading.

"Stop."

"Your secrets are just as important as mine," he says, shifting his head so our eyes lock. My stomach squeezes tight. "But, it's just not the same. Everything online about me, it's *personal*. They want the skeletons in my closet."

For the first time since I met Ben, I regret not looking into him. I know nothing about him beyond what he's told me himself and what I've heard in passing around town and from Leanna.

If we weren't currently at dinner, surrounded by people on all sides, I'd press him for more information. *What skeletons could they possibly uncover?* But the waiter is already back with my water, and I have to lean away from Ben so I can pick up my menu and decide what I want to order.

My eyes practically bug out of my head once I get a look at the prices. There's not a thing on the menu I could afford save for maybe a side salad. I decide to just do that and then I'll eat something else when I get home. Whenever that may be.

The waiter comes back around the table and I listen to everyone ordering before me: grilled ribeye, chicken fricassée with creamy morel mushroom sauce, braised leg of lamb stew. My mouth is watering.

“Miss?”

I smile up at him. “Oh I'll have a side salad with the house dressing, please.”

I pray everyone around me thinks I'm watching my weight rather than just flat-out poor, but considering I don't have much meat on my bones to begin with...

“We're sharing,” Ben tells the waiter. “We'll each have a side salad, and then we'd like the ribeye”—he looks back down at me—“and did you want the red snapper or the chicken?”

For a moment, I hesitate, almost tempted to argue, but then my growling stomach wins out.

“Chicken please,” I say, smiling gently at the waiter.

Ben passes off our menus and settles right back into place with his arm thrown over the back of my chair. He doesn't look at me as he picks up his glass of wine and takes a sip. He knows I'm watching him, though, because he tips the glass in my direction.

I hold my hand out to take it, but then suddenly, he hesitates and smiles.

“Wait...how old are you?”

His brows are furrowed. It's like he can't believe he doesn't know the answer.

I steal the wine glass out of his hand. “Old enough.”

*Barely.*

I take a small sip, and Ben watches me with rapt attention as my lips touch the rim.

The red wine passes over my tongue, slightly bitter as I swallow.

“It's good.”

“Keep it,” he says, eyeing the last half of the glass. “They're bringing more. I can get another glass.”

It's intimate, of course, to have Ben's wine glass, to put my mouth where his was. I don't think that fact escapes him either. I take another small sip and have to look away from him for a moment, just to catch hold of reality once again.

The chatter going on around us makes it feel like we're alone at the crowded table. Everyone has gone back to their own conversations, forgetting about us mostly. The man to my right is having a heated discussion with his other seatmate, so I

don't worry about turning my body ever so slightly toward Ben or brushing my bare shoulder against his arm in an attempt to get closer to him, though I'd never admit that out loud.

"You're old enough to drink," Ben notes while he surveys me. "But something tells me you don't drink much."

"Wine's not a necessity. So no, I don't drink much."

He responds with a soft grumble as if he's annoyed to be reminded of the way I live, pinching pennies.

"It's not a big deal."

"Isn't it?"

I can hear the barely restrained emotion in his tone. I know we've only put a pin in our discussion from the other night, and something tells me Ben would love nothing more than to pick up right where we left off. I haven't forgiven him, but I'm here in this glitzy dress, practically *in* his arms.

"Are you going to tell me about your skeletons?" I say suddenly, turning my body toward him even more, dropping my hand to the edge of his chair, right beside his thigh.

He stiffens and his eyes narrow with thought as he assesses me.

"Or will I have to read about them online like everyone else?"

He arches a brow. "You haven't already?"

"I'm sure you won't believe me, but no, I haven't looked you up. I don't get internet on my phone, and my laptop was property of Caltech so I couldn't take it with me when I left."

"Still...if you were curious..." he says, pressing me.

I shrug and take another small sip of wine. “Maybe I wasn’t that curious.”

He looks at me as if I just admitted I’m not that into him, like he’s never beheld a person *not* trying to get close to him by any means necessary.

The bold expression, the utter lack of self-awareness. This man has the world and he still wants more. He wants *me*.

I lean in so my lips aren’t far from his, then I glance up to his eyes and make sure he’s listening carefully. “Maybe I should remind you that *you’ve* been the one pursuing me.”

“Pursuing?”

I smile then, suddenly sick of the games. “Yes, Ben. I see how you watch me. I see that hungry look in your eyes like you’d love nothing more than to drop me right onto this table and *eat*.”

His brown eyes are enflamed as he takes his wine glass back from me and downs the contents in one go. My smug smile can barely be contained.

“Watch yourself, Little Bird.”

“Or what?”

“Or I just might do it.” Goose bumps bloom across my body, and I know he feels them. I must look so utterly dumbstruck, because he continues as if I don’t know what he’s referring to. “Drop you right on this table...”

My jaw drops ever so slightly.

We’ve never done this. Over the last few weeks, we’ve had polite conversation with our mouths while eating each other up with our eyes, but tonight, we’ve crossed a line. We’ve named our desire, and it feels dangerous to have it out in the open

between us. Now, it feels like there're vapors in the air that might go up in flames at any moment.

Ben's eyes shift to something behind me and he lifts his hand.

"She'll have another glass of the cabernet, please."

"And for you, sir?"

"Nothing. Thank you."

The waiter walks away and I tilt my head. "Not drinking much tonight?"

"I've had that glass and I don't need anything else. I'm driving you home."

"I left my car at the diner."

"Then I'm driving you to the diner."

I arch a brow. "Oh, are you?"

"Yes. Should I tell Lele right now? Announce it to the whole table?"

My cheeks burn hot and I reach out to grip his forearm, to keep him from making a scene.

His mouth splits into a gut-punching smile. "Not an attention seeker then?"

My eyes narrow into slits. "Do I look like one to you?" His gaze flits over my dress, and I know what he's thinking. I speak before he can. "This isn't mine. Leanna dressed me tonight."

He chuckles under his breath. "It's not about the dress."

I roll my eyes and try to shift away from him. "Oh please."



His hand on my shoulder keeps me in place. “You don’t see yourself clearly, Birdie.”

I huff out an annoyed breath. “Don’t I? Maybe I’m confused then. I thought I was the girl in the trailer. Guess I’m wrong. Have I been livin’ in a big ol’ mansion this whole time?”

“You think any of that matters?”

“No. I know it doesn’t matter. I know I have a good heart and a good head on my shoulders. Still, I don’t need you coming to town and filling me up with ideas, Ben. You’re leaving.”

“Not yet.”

“Soon enough.”

He’s quiet for a moment, watching me as I keep my attention straight ahead. I don’t realize how deeply I’m scowling, how intensely annoyed and sad I am until he leans in and presses a kiss to my shoulder, just beside the strap of my dress. It’s the first time his lips have touched my skin, and I can’t keep my eyes from squeezing shut to try to hold on to the sensation.

“Thirteen days is longer than you think.”

# Chapter Fourteen

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**R**aelynn is pure sunshine in her shimmery dress. There's nothing all that fancy about it, or her. Sure, Lele has clearly dolled her up a bit, but her blonde hair still hangs in loose wild waves. Her skin is still tan and freckled, not hidden under thick layers of makeup. I can smell her shampoo. I can read every emotion in her pale blue eyes.

When she walked into the private dining room of the restaurant, I wasn't expecting her. Lele didn't tell me she was bringing Raelynn. It's why I didn't act right away. It's why it took me a moment to shoot to my feet and get Raelynn a chair. I was as awestruck as the rest of the guys in this room.

I have to fight the urge to tell her over and over again just how sexy I find her, just how insanely beautiful she looks tonight. I can picture her reaction, her rolling her eyes, shifting away from me, shutting down.

I bet she's gone too long not hearing those words said out loud by anyone other than fucking Patrick. It's like she's forgotten she exists outside of Dale's Diner and her grandmother's nursing home. She's forgotten she's a real human with real needs.

I want to bring her even closer to me, drag her onto my lap in the middle of dinner. Fortunately for her, our food arrives.

I make sure Raelynn gets plenty to eat.

She shoots me a timid smile when I ask her if she wants seconds and then shakes her head.

“I’m really full, actually.”

“You can take it home then.”

It hits me all of a sudden how much I wish I could take care of her. How easy it would be for me to swoop into her life and solve so many of her problems. I tried to do it the other night. I asked her to let me help, and it didn’t end well. I doubt she would have even let me buy her dinner except for the fact that we’re technically sharing.

“Sure you don’t want the leftovers?” she asks me.

It annoys me that she’s not more concerned with herself. She shouldn’t be so willing to give her food away.

“No. I’ll have them package it up for you along with more of that bread.”

Her cheeks flush.

“I just loved the dipping sauce,” she says, as if she needs to explain why she went back for so many slices.

I excuse myself to use the bathroom and intercept our waiter on the way so I can ask him to package up two new meals for her to take home since there wasn’t much leftovers. It kills me that this is the extent of my power. Short of breaking laws or outright slipping cash into her purse, there’s not much I can do to offer Raelynn a helping hand without her cooperation. I had my assistant look into nursing homes in the area. There are a few, but it wasn’t hard to pin down where

Raelynn's grandmother stays. My assistant gave me the number two days ago, and I called and asked to be connected to billing. I acted like I was just an inquiring relative, wondering about facility costs. They said there are bills overdue on Raelynn's grandmother's account.

I haven't decided what I'll do about that now that I know.

I can't imagine how angry Raelynn would be if she knew I was snooping around, especially after the other night.

I return from the bathroom to find Anthony in my seat, chatting with Raelynn. She's smiling from ear to ear, happy and at ease with him in a way she's never fully been around me. I wish I could fix that, but it's not something I can turn off—the tension between us. The heat. It's there and we've tried to ignore it, but tonight I couldn't help myself. I wanted her near me, touching me. She kept her hands to herself save for the few moments she had one on my chair. I wanted her to take it a step further, to skate her hand up my thigh and squeeze, lay claim in a way I'd have to act on. She didn't though. She's kept herself in check, and I'm envious she still can. I'm long past the point of pretending.

I walk over to reclaim my seat, and Raelynn's gaze finds mine. Her smile stays in place, but her eyes turn thoughtful, assessing, *wary* with every step I take toward her. She's on high alert as I round the back of her chair. It's not as if I can take my seat; Anthony's still there. He's talking to her, telling her the story of when a fan threw a bra at him mid-game as I stand behind her with my hands on the back of her chair. She leans back and her shoulder blades brush my knuckles. I stay frozen for just long enough to let her settle, and then I curve my hand up around the base of her neck so my thumb runs along her upper spine and my palm rests against her pulse. It's

nothing. Barely enough to warrant a second glance from anyone at the table. The only reason it draws any curiosity at all is the fact that none of my teammates have seen me with a woman since Shelby. I'm sure they're wondering what I'm doing with Raelynn, how far I'll take this considering the shitstorm I've been dealing with for the last few months.

I don't care about any of that.

I'm focused on Raelynn's reaction, waiting for her to ease away from me and withdraw.

She earns her nickname, Little Bird. She feels so fragile in my hand, tiny.

She stays perfectly still as I touch her, her attention still on Anthony as he laughs. She laughs along with him, though I think she's just following his lead. I doubt she's following along with his story very well, not with me touching her.

"Want your seat back?" Anthony asks, pulling my attention away from her hair. I was watching the lights dance across the blonde strands.

"Raelynn can share with me."

I can't help myself. She's given me an inch, and I want a mile.

I'm expecting her to laugh it off and tell me to find my own seat, but she just shrugs and stands. "It's fine. You can just have it."

I chuckle and steal the seat. She makes a move to sidle past me, but I loop my arm around her waist before she can and keep her there, right beside me. I won't force her to sit down, but I want to test her, goad her into stepping out of her comfort zone. If she wants to.

She turns stiff as a board for a second, warring with herself. She looks back at me, and we're nearly eye to eye even with me sitting down. I raise a brow in a subtle challenge and she eases up, leaning her weight back into me as I shift her down onto my thigh. She's not fully on my lap, tilted toward Anthony with her feet on the ground. It looks casual, but it's definitely not.

Inside, my body is raging like I'm a preteen with a girl on my lap for the first time. My heart hammers in my chest.

"Have you seen the design for our jerseys for the Games?" Anthony asks.

"No."

"They're retro-inspired. Pretty cool. Let me get my phone, I'll show you."

He stands to go retrieve his phone and Raelynn wiggles on my thigh, trying to get more comfortable, and I swear to god all the blood leaves my head.

This probably wasn't a good idea.

"Will you stop moving around?"

"I feel like I'm going to fall off your lap," she protests.

I tug her back even farther so her butt nestles in the groove between my thighs.

There's no way she doesn't feel the fact that I'm turned on right now. From *this*.

*Jesus*. I'd wipe a hand down my face if it wasn't so obvious.

"Don't you think this is a little inappropriate?" she says, angling her face toward me.

“No one is paying attention to us.”

“*Everyone* is paying attention to us.”

“Don’t worry about them.”

“Well it’s either worry about them or worry about...”

She adjusts her position on my legs again, and I’m fucking dying here.

“Are you purposely trying to kill me?” I ask, tightening my arm around her waist, trying to get her to hold still.

“*That* is not my fault.”

“It feels like you’re giving me a lap dance.”

She laughs. “Maybe you haven’t had a lap dance in a while, because this is definitely not one. I’m barely moving.”

I narrow my eyes, and she laughs harder.

“You’re the one who put me here. I was going to walk over and talk to Leanna.”

“Just stop moving.”

“Or what?”

“Little Bird, you don’t want to go down this road.”

She turns and leans into me, pressing her hands to my chest as her weight leans farther onto my hard length. “Don’t I? I’m here, aren’t I? On your lap...drinking your wine... sharing your food...”

As she talks, her eyes drift across the expanse of my chest, but when I speak again, they flit back to my face.

“I thought you were mad at me for the other night.”

“I *am* mad at you.”



“Then stop gripping my shirt like that.”

Her sharp blue eyes narrow. Her anger is showing, and I like it.

She doesn't release my shirt. In fact, one of her hands skates down my chest, over my abs, and lower, until she's teasing the hem of my shirt and drawing it up a smidge, just enough to touch the bottom of my abs. I wonder if she's had a little too much wine. I wonder if I should stop her. Then she leans in and her mouth is against the shell of my ear, and all of my willpower goes out the window.

“Maybe I can be mad at you and want you at the same time.”

“Little Bird...”

She rears back, angrier than ever. “Stop calling me that.”

“Why?”

“Because you're leaving in thirteen days. You don't get to call me pet names.”

I smirk, and her hand on my stomach curls in until her nails scrape against my skin.

“Here's the jersey design,” Anthony says, coming back around with his phone.

Raelynn slides off my lap and stands, straightening her short dress. “I'm going to tell Leanna you're driving me to my car.”

She walks away without waiting for my response, and I watch her go like my life depends on it. I memorize the subtle sway of her hips, the tantalizing length of her legs.

Then Anthony snaps his fingers in front of my face, and I yank his phone out of his hand to look at these damn jerseys I don't care about.

“Jesus, you're in trouble.” He laughs.

Raelynn stays over chatting with Leanna and Trey until our waiter arrives with the to-go bag for me. Not everyone is ready to leave, so I slip him some cash to cover my portion, including a hefty tip, and then I curve around the table toward Raelynn.

She sees me coming and crosses her arms over her chest. I try to read her expression, but it's hopeless. I never know what she's thinking from one second to the next. There's no sense in trying.

“You ready?”

She nods and turns to give Leanna a quick hug.

“I'll bring your clothes with me to work in the morning. You're coming in for pancakes, right?”

Leanna grins. “Yes. But no promises on how early I'll get there.”

Raelynn smiles and then says bye to Trey on her way toward the door. I nod to my friends as I head after her, grateful that my stride makes it easy to catch up to her.

“That looks like a ton of food in there,” she notes once I'm walking beside her with the to-go bag at my side. “I didn't think we had that much left over.”

“I just ordered two more entrees and had them package them up.”

She shakes her head. “Of course you did.”

I smirk. “Don’t worry, there’ll be plenty of time for you to take your anger out on me on the drive.”

“You act like I’m a pain in the ass.”

“Maybe you are.”

A laugh bursts out of her like she can’t believe what she just heard.

“*I’m* the pain in the ass? *Me?*”

“Keep walking, Birdie.”

She stops just outside the restaurant. The bodyguards who were stationed by the door are waiting to walk us to my car. She notices them and immediately falls into line beside me as I curve around the parking lot and unlock my SUV.

I open her door for her and help her climb in. Then I hand her the food and walk around to my side to get in, nodding at the guard stationed there. I’m habituated to them at this point, but it’s obvious Raelynn’s not.

“Are they always around when you guys go out?”

“More or less. I have my own security team for when we travel and when I’m back in Los Angeles. There are guys posted back at Coach Dalton’s as well. You’ve probably seen them.”

We’re quiet for a bit as I head out on the highway, driving back toward Pine Hill.

“I’m surprised there wasn’t any press there tonight. Leanna said you heard about some guys coming into Dale’s the other day asking about you?”

“Yeah. You did the right thing by not engaging them. Tonight was a last-minute thing, and most of the reporters that

are here in Texas cover sports, not pop culture. They want to get the scoop on our practices, playing strategy, final team lineup, that sort of thing, not follow us to dinner.”

“Oh...right.” She’s quiet for a beat before she asks, “Back home, if you were at dinner, would there be paparazzi?”

I hesitate before I answer, hating the truth. “Yes.”

She nods solemnly. “Right.”

Then she sets the bag of food on the ground and undoes the buckle of her high heels, letting out a quiet moan when she peels them off her feet.

I watch with rapt attention as she draws her legs up and sits crisscross on the front seat, her dress sliding higher up her thighs.

I turn the radio on and it plays quietly in the background as I continue driving down the dark highway. Raelynn’s looking out the window, so lost in her own world that I’d feel bad interrupting whatever she’s thinking about.

I see her hands clutched in her lap, the way she draws the pad of her pointer finger over her thumbnail over and over again as if something is worrying her. I can see the edge of her profile, the worry lines between her brows.

Even though I’m tempted to, I don’t pressure her to talk.

I lean over, dropping my forearm on the middle console, warring with myself over whether or not I want to take her hand in mine. This is ludicrous. Whatever she’s worrying about, I can help her with. I can make all her problems go away if only she’d let me.

“Raelynn—”

She cuts me off. “There’s a turn up here, out onto an abandoned road. It used to dead-end at a limestone quarry, but it’s been deserted for years. Turn off when you see it.”

She doesn’t look over at me when she issues these instructions, but when my headlights catch on an old road sign hanging on one hinge, I turn off without a word, curious.

“Keep going,” Raelynn says quietly, pointing forward.

I inch along slowly, wondering why she’s having us go out here in the dead of night. The road is definitely deserted. Even a few yards off the highway, the concrete starts to show its age. The forest encroaches on either side, trees spitting their limbs out over the road, shrubs overgrown in every direction.

“Slow down!” Raelynn shouts suddenly, reaching her hand out to squeeze my forearm.

I slam my foot on the brakes and my tires squeal. The car comes to a sudden stop feet away from a fawn stopped in the center of the road, its eyes gleaming bright in my headlights. A second later, a doe emerges from the forest behind it, darts in front of the fawn, and the two of them scurry across the road and disappear again into the dense foliage.

My heart’s racing. Raelynn’s hand is still gripping my arm, threatening to cut off blood flow to my hand.

I hear her sharp intake of breaths even over the quiet radio.

“Maybe you should just stop here,” she says, not looking at me as she eases her grip and slides her hand off my arm.

I pull forward a little bit, slowly driving us onto the side of the road enough that we won’t block someone if they try to pass, though there’s no way anyone will be coming down this way after us.

I cut the engine and the radio dies. We're left with the cicadas and the frogs and the crickets, and even those eventually fade into dull background noise as I focus on Raelynn unbuckling her seat belt and nervously tugging her hair behind her ears before she sneaks a glance over at me.

I don't say a word, confused and enthralled to be here alone with her.

Is she about to tell me to get out so we can walk the rest of the way to the quarry? Are we here to talk?

Somehow I doubt it. She's not saying a word as she looks back down at her hands and keeps on rubbing that damn nail.

I open my mouth, about to say her name and ask her what she's thinking, but her left hand comes out and grabs hold of mine, and then she lifts it to place it gently on her leg, just above her knee. There's no explanation to accompany it, no desires spoken aloud. Just her, pressing my hand down under hers so I can't take it away.

I feel her thigh shaking. The subtle way her lips part when I tighten my grasp to let her know I won't pull back even if she lets go.

She leans back and her head hits the seat. She tilts to look in my direction, meeting my gaze for only a fleeting moment before she loses the nerve and looks back down at my hand on her leg. She's worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, and I'm enamored by the sight until other parts of her win out. I skate my gaze down her smooth neck and collarbones, the small curves of her breasts visible in the slinky dress. They rise and fall with every heavy breath she takes, straining against the fabric.

She shifts her legs on the seat, and it's subtle; they're only an inch wider than they were before, but then she takes my hand and drags it up a little higher, just to the soft hem of her dress. It bunches up at the top of her thighs, and there's no possible way to mistake what she's doing. This silent plea might as well be encased in flashing neon lights.

“Birdie?” I whisper, scared to startle her.

Her blue eyes flash in the darkness when she looks up at me.

“Do you want me to keep going?”

I don't breathe, don't move, don't blink—so scared to spook her and ruin this.

She shifts her head—up and down—a slow nod, and then another one, faster, more obvious.

I don't hesitate. I lean across the center console and kiss her, give her back the vulnerability she's just given me. Dragging me out here, putting my hand on her. God, she's scared. She emits a little shocked whimper when my lips touch hers, and I pull back for a moment, worried I hurt her.

Her breath skates across my lips before she arches up off the seat and reaches for me again, pressing her lips tentatively back to mine. It's the sweetest kiss, barely there at all, but I force myself to sit still and take it—this slow torture of Raelynn building her confidence. She turns her body toward me more and my hand curves around her thigh, tightening as she leans in and kisses me harder. It burns through my body, turning me on, making it so damn difficult to keep to my side of the car. Her tongue dips into my mouth, slow and seductive.

She leans into me and my other hand comes up to circle the back of her neck, tugging her closer. We kiss and we kiss,

coming up for shallow breaths, crashing back together, my tongue touching hers. I feed off her little noises: whimpers and sighs and quiet groans.

Just like with everything so far, she's the one to take it further. She twists her body up until she's sitting on her knees on the passenger seat, then she leans over the center console as I kiss her, wrapping my arm around her waist and bunching her dress up as I tug her closer. We work together to pull her over onto my lap, and it's clumsy work. Her long legs and my size don't make it easy for us to fit on the seat together. She can barely settle her knees on either side of my hips as I keep kissing her. She's pressing her chest to mine, raking her fingers through my hair as I take her bottom lip between my teeth and gently bite down. I release it and recapture her mouth as she tugs on my hair and kisses me back in a frenzy. Then she slowly lowers herself down onto my lap, covering me and rocking her hips so I have to reach down and grip her waist, slow her down, gather some strength. It all feels too good. It's been too long, half a year since I've held a woman on my lap.

I curse under my breath when she doesn't heed my warning. She ignores my hands squeezing her sides trying to gentle her hips as she grinds down onto me. I'm about to fucking lose it and Raelynn teases me more, kisses me harder.

My hand slides down her neck, over her collarbone and chest. The strap on her dress dangles off her shoulder and I take full advantage, pulling the delicate fabric down farther to expose her small breast.

She watches me do it, holding her breath as I continue. The fabric peels away in slow motion and then I'm leaning down



before I'm consciously aware of it, covering her with my mouth, kissing her breast as she arches up.

Suddenly the front seat isn't good *enough*. I can't touch her *enough*. I can barely move. I tilt her to get a better angle and the steering wheel digs into her back, then her elbow hits the window. She winces and I kiss up her neck, apologizing before I unlock the door and yank her out of the car. She laughs as her feet dangle above the ground. I don't put her down, don't let her come down to earth before I open the back door and lay her down across the row of seats. I stand there in the doorjamb, getting my fill of her. She props herself up on her elbows and watches me as I inhale every inch. Her dress is askew and barely covering her panties. Her other strap has worked its way free now and dangles precariously above her elbow, leaving her mostly naked from the waist up. Her blonde hair is a wild mess and her eyes are wide and curious. I watch her lips part as she tries to get a good breath of air, to steady herself the same way I'm trying to, but it's futile. We're in it now.

"Do you want to keep going?" I ask, suddenly needing to be crystal clear on that answer before I crawl into the back seat with her. My position in life doesn't afford me unclear boundaries, and I want to make sure she's still as crazy for this as I am.

Again, she nods, and I realize I haven't heard her speak actual words since she told me to pull over.

"Birdie?" I goad, careful to keep my hands off her right now. "Say it."

"Ben," she replies impatiently. "*Please.*"

# Chapter Fifteen

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I'm on her in an instant and she yelps when I tug her toward me, closer to the door so she falls flat on her back. I crawl down onto her, balancing one leg on the ground and wedging my other knee between her hip and the seat. My hands work in tandem with my mouth, unveiling parts of her body for me to taste and touch. I skim the smooth curves of her ankles, up along her soft calves, the hollows of her knees, a thin scar on her right thigh, a stray freckle just below her panties. She's wearing a lavender pair and they're soft and wet right in the center. I keep them on as I bend her knees and split them apart. One leg tumbles off the side of the seat and the other rests gently against the back cushion.

She doesn't resist. She's lying back now, watching me with a soft, sweet expression as I run a finger down her center. Her hips roll in tandem with my touch, and I can't resist doing it a second time, forcing that same reaction. God, she's hot in a way I'm not used to. Hair tumbling in every direction. Cheeks flushed with color. No pretense, no games. Just an exposed heart, mine for the taking.

I should encourage her, pepper her with flowery words, spill my secrets so she can take them for her own. *You're*

*beautiful. Sexy. Tempting beyond belief. I can barely stand to look at you.*

It breaks my heart to see her this vulnerable, to know she's giving herself to me in this way. I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's the gentle blue in her eyes. The fragility inherent in her small frame. I want to hold her close and cherish her, and yet...I want to devour her.

I bend down and kiss her navel, feel her body quake for me.

More.

I catch the top of her panties in my teeth and tug gently. Her hand finds my hair and she uses it to plead with me to continue. Her small approval is enough to goad me into moving lower, pressing a kiss to the flimsy lavender cotton that still conceals her from me.

“Ben.”

Her voice is barely above a whisper, but it stops me dead in my tracks. I look up to find her watching me with a worried look in her eyes.

“Can you...” Her gaze flits to her panties. “Will you...”

I almost chuckle at her request. I want to tell her she doesn't have to ask for this. I always planned on hooking my fingers into the sides of her underwear and tugging them off. I was always going to have her pinned underneath me. But now that I know how badly she wants it, a part of me wants to draw it out even more. I'm evil as I press the pad of my thumb over the damp cotton and rub. Her eyes flutter closed and her hips start to roll in a poor attempt to milk me for more. My touch is feather soft and driving her mad.

Her hand in my hair tightens and pulls, and I get the message loud and clear. Still, I take my time, touching her again, dragging my thumb up and swirling it in a circle over the spot that makes her squeeze her eyes closed. Then, instead of pulling her panties off, I tug the cotton to the side and expose her just enough that I can touch her—skin to skin. Warm and wet.

“Oh...*my*...” falls from her lips and then she’s silent, and I repeat my torture from a moment ago, this time without the barrier in between us.

Eventually, I’ll feel the inside of her. I’ll taste her and make her come, but she’s making it impossible to rush. Every little sound, every jerk of pleasure makes me want to press pause and slow down time, to savor this moment.

I wedge myself down so my shoulders are between her thighs and she has to split them wider to accommodate my size, but she doesn’t protest as my hot breath falls against her skin. I kiss up her inner thigh as I continue circling my fingers. Her muscles tense then relax with every new spot I touch. She’s so responsive to everything, and it makes me want to try it all.

I know from her quickening breath and her quivering stomach that my fingers are enough. I could have her undone from this alone, but I want more. I flip my hand so my palm faces the ceiling and slowly—*finally*—start to slide my middle finger inside her. She throws an arm over her eyes and I still for a moment, wanting to confirm she’s okay to continue.

Then, annoyed with me for stopping, she reaches down, grips my wrist, and pushes my finger inside farther. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. I fucking lose it.

The feel of her is...it's enough to make me forget my own name. My job. My life.

I pull my finger out and slide it back in, and she whimpers. Again. More. Fuck. She's already coming and it feels too soon. I want more. I feel her squeeze around my finger, and I'm jealous of my hand. Lucky bastard.

Her back arches up toward the roof and her head tips back. My hands are everywhere on her—pumping inside, covering her breasts, splaying out across her chest as I watch her finish coming.

I know she'll be sensitive, and I know this is all probably a little too much, but I still drop my mouth down between her parted legs and I taste her. Just as I expected, she makes a little sound of protest, a shocked gut reaction.

I'm gentle with her though, easing her legs back apart after she tries to squeeze them closed, kissing her gently, lapping her up with my tongue until she's pliant on that seat, racing right back to that sharp edge of pleasure. My finger is still inside her and I add another as my mouth works her up. Her breath starts to quicken and that sexy rhythm falls right back into place. Already, I could have her come again, but I rip my mouth off her, press up onto my hands, and look down at her.

She's flushed from head to toe, bathed in the SUV's warm overhead light.

I have the sudden insane urge to declare things to her I can't possibly mean. Words I haven't felt like saying in a very long time. Words that get lodged in my throat, stuck there as I look down at her sweet face.

“Birdie.”

She doesn't realize how tangled my life is.

How messy this could become.

But she's reaching up and gripping my face, tugging me down to kiss her, to beg me for more. I have a condom in my wallet. I put it in there a few days ago and felt like a bastard when I did it, but here I am, tugging it out, leaning up onto my knees, unbuttoning my jeans.

Her hands are on me, finishing the job for me. Her small hands are so soft as they unzip my jeans and push down my boxer briefs. She tugs me free and her eyes widen. I bite my lip as I watch her curiosity bleed into hunger, then she takes me in her hand, covering me with her palm, and pumps up and down, testing me, exploring me. *Fuck.*

It's been too long to endure any of this. She doesn't understand she's playing with fire.

I rip open the condom and start to unroll it onto myself, working it down all the way while Raelynn watches with rapt attention.

"Lie back," I say, pressing a kiss to her forehead before gently pushing her shoulder until she's flat on the seat again.

I move over her, eclipsing the night sky and the overhead light so she's shadowed in darkness. I still see enough of her though, her eyes meeting mine, so trusting and open. Her hands come up to curve around my neck and she nods, over and over again, a silent consent for me to start pressing into her. I go so slow I worry I'm going to die in the process, but she's small and tight and I don't want to hurt her. Another inch and her eyes pinch closed. More and she takes her bottom lip between her teeth to keep from crying out. It's so hard to stay in control. It feels like this is all she can take, and I'm not nearly all the way in.

“Please don’t stop,” she whispers.

I rock my hips a little more, press farther in. Maybe I don’t understand what I’m feeling. Something isn’t right though, but I don’t realize until I rock in another inch and she cries out in pain.

I wince before I can help it, and she sees. She fucking sees, and I know it breaks her heart.

“Birdie…”

I start to pull out and she grabs my shoulders, squeezing, her imploring gaze impossible to turn away from.

“Please don’t. *Please.*”

Still, I pull out and sit up, dragging a hand through my hair, trying to piece together how I could have failed to realize Raelynn was still a virgin.

She sits up and closes her legs shyly, resting her head on her knees.

“I’m sorry.”

She squeezes her eyes closed as if I’ve just somehow wounded her even more by apologizing. Then she groans in annoyance. “Please don’t. It’s not what you think. I wasn’t waiting for any particular reason. I wasn’t saving myself for some narrow-minded view of purity and virginity. I don’t have this ‘true love waits’ attachment to the concept of sex, okay? Honestly, it’s just life hasn’t given me a ton of time for romance and relationships.”

“I understand. Believe me.”

She gathers the courage to look up at me, keeping her chin resting on her knees. “Sorry I didn’t tell you. I’m just… I didn’t want to make a big fuss about it.”



I reach out to stroke her cheek, and she leans into my touch like a cat hungry for affection.

“I should have asked.”

“I should have said something.”

“I’m sorry.”

Her face falls. “Don’t apologize,” she says gently. “I don’t want you assuming you know how I feel. Everyone says the first time has to be this special thing with rose petals and candles, but maybe *this* is exactly what I wanted. Maybe this is better than all of that.”

This is Raelynn wearing her heart on her sleeve. She sits in the back seat of my SUV naked with her blonde hair spilling down around her shoulders. Her blue eyes stare up at me, heavy and sad, and all I want to do is make her smile, make her feel as good as she felt a second ago.

Maybe we should pause here for the night and pick this up another time, but she’s been so honest, so forthright with everything she wants, and my desire for her wins out. The need to lean over and kiss Raelynn wins, to accept her words at face value and give her what she’s asking for. She’s right, after all. I lost my virginity at fifteen on a couch while crappy daytime TV played in the background. It was awkward and clumsy and nothing like this. Miles away from how it feels to gently press Raelynn back down onto the back seat and kiss her slowly, to let my weight drop down onto her and feel our bodies press together again. I yank my shirt over my head, and it’s so sexy to feel her smooth skin on mine. Her breasts brush my chest and she arches up, chasing more of the sensation.

I reach between our legs and reposition myself just right, then start to slide into her, telling her to warn me if it’s too

much, too fast. She wraps her arms tightly around my neck and rocks against me, showing me how good it feels, how much she wants me to continue. I worry this is still wrong. I worry I'm taking something from her, but she relaxes her thighs and I settle deeper inside her, hold still, and look down at her until she nods. I start to pull out and press in, creating a slow, steady rhythm until I know she's worked up and ready for more.

There's no fuss. No rose petals. No pre-planned playlist. It's us in the back of that car with sweaty limbs and greedy mouths and a perfect fit. It's Raelynn coming undone with a silent cry. Me kissing her cheek, tasting salty tears, wanting more from her even while we're still here, in the thick of it. I try to make it last forever. I stave off stave off stave off, rock my hips, piston into her, listen to her sounds of pleasure until I lose the battle of wills and start to come, feeling her milk me dry, and then we heave a collective sigh as we collapse on the back seat. Changed.

# Chapter Sixteen

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It's a slow morning at Dale's. Cook is in the back watching a taped football game, and I'm reading through a packet of *Planetary and Space Science* journal articles Professor Olmsted mailed to Sheriff Corbin's house this week. I'm more than a little distracted though. Every time I try to refocus my attention on the article about functional analogues in planetary exploration, I fail and drift right back to thoughts of Ben.

My mind has really done its best to try to morph last night into something big. I have to keep reminding myself that it didn't change anything between us. I'm still in the same boat as before, and so is Ben. We just...had sex.

*God.*

Memories flash through my mind unbidden: his face settled between my parted legs, his body on top of mine, that sharp sting of pain, exquisite fullness, his gentle kisses on my cheeks.

My face flushes all over again and I turn away from the few customers we have so they won't notice. It's silly, really. No one is in my head. No one knows what I did last night with Ben. *Ben*, the man who might seem normal when he's around

me, but who is, in fact, a freaking Olympic athlete, NBA superstar, celebrity, and gazillionaire.

We lay there for a while afterward, in the back seat, catching our breaths, kissing and cuddling like two teenagers trying to delay their curfew. He held my hand as he drove me to my car, then he followed me home and walked me to the door of my trailer. We kissed more and it turned into something hot again. His body pressed me flush to the metal and I thought he'd come inside and we'd start everything all over again, but then he broke the kiss with a resigned laugh, stepped back, and smiled.

I told him good night with a devious smile of my own, and that was that. His tall frame disappeared back into the SUV before he drove off. I didn't even have the good sense to feel bereft as I walked inside, showered off Leanna's makeup, and slipped into my old comfy pajamas.

Only when I woke up this morning did I realize Ben and I still don't have each other's cell phone numbers. I forgot to ask for his last night, and now I've decided I want to keep it this way. This forced distance is a good reminder for me that in twelve days, he's gone.

Last night changed a lot of things, but it didn't change that.

The bell over the door dings and I turn around, hopeful, only to find Doyle and Mable walking in.

"Morning, you two. Have a seat. I'll bring over your coffee."

My cleaning job for the afternoon gets canceled, and though I'm disappointed to lose out on the money, I use the extra time to visit Nan. She's awake when I walk into her

room at the care home, watching *Jeopardy* on the TV across from her bed.

She doesn't look at me when I first walk in, her focus on the TV, though I get the sense she's not really watching it. Her eyes are glassy and red-rimmed as I step farther inside and announce myself.

“Nan? Can I come in?”

Her gaze shifts to me, and she lifts her hand but doesn't respond. I force myself to step inside, take a seat beside her bed, and talk as if the Nan I know is still listening. I take her outstretched hand in mine and squeeze.

“I brought you some lunch from the diner. Cook packed up some of your favorite chicken and dumpling soup.”

I unpack the food and set everything out on her bedside tray. I feed her small bites and fill her in on the last few days, showing her a picture on my phone that Leanna forced me to take last night when I was all dolled up. She makes quiet noises, almost sounds of acknowledgment, but nothing else. I retrieve my journal articles from my bag and get back to reading through most of the afternoon. Ben still plagues my thoughts though, and on a whim, I decide to tell Nan about him.

“I have a new friend,” I venture since my secret is well and truly safe with her. “His name is Ben, and he's really...he...”

I realize it's not so easy to describe him.

“He's not overly nice or anything, but I think he's a good man with a good heart.” I chew my bottom lip, thinking it over. “He's quiet and reserved at times. It seems like there's so much more going on behind the scenes, things he hasn't shared with me. I told him he seems lonely and it's true, but

when he looks at me..." I shake my head. "I guess I just know how he feels, and I think he can recognize that. Maybe he and I are kindred spirits."

Her gaze meets mine, and I swear I see my real Nan buried deep down in her blue eyes. The moment is fleeting though; she's already looking away, back to the TV.

"You wouldn't know him, but he's pretty famous too. He plays in the NBA. I know that sort of thing wouldn't impress you. It didn't really impress me either at first, but now I find myself just a little bit curious. I wish I could watch him play before he leaves. Oh, did I mention that part? He's leaving in twelve days to go play basketball in the Olympics." I laugh. "Yes. *The Olympics*. You and I didn't watch much sports growing up except for when the Summer Games came on. Remember how much we loved watching the gymnasts in Rio a few years back?"

There's a knock on her door and I know it's time for me to go. They'll want to help Nan with her supper then get her ready for bed, and I'll just be in the way.

I stand to gather my things, about to head out when I get intercepted by Lori, one of the women who works in administration. She looks tired and I think, not for the first time, what a tough job it would be to work in a place like this.

"Raelynn, do you have a second? I'd like to discuss a couple things with you."

My stomach drops. I've been worried about this day for a long time. Either I'm too overdue on bills here or her disease is progressing faster than they thought it would. Lori never pulls me aside with good news. I eye the hallway behind her, contemplating for a brief second whether or not I could just bolt.

“—whether you want to focus on occupational therapy two times a week or—”

I frown and refocus my attention on her, not sure I fully understand what she was saying.

“Occupational therapy?”

“Yes. We’ve not been able to offer it to your grandmother before now. As you know, specialists like that are expensive in a private facility like ours, but the lump sum that the foundation donated will afford her any specialist she might need. I’ve been in touch with her care team and they’ve suggested occupational therapy as well as speech therapy. We also have someone we could bring in from Austin who’s done music therapy with our patients before, and we’ve seen wonderful results. As you know, we can’t reverse the prognosis of your grandmother’s disease, but with the right combination of medications and therapies, we can greatly—”

“Lori, what in the world are you talking about? What lump sum? What foundation?”

She frowns, looking just about as confused as I am.

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I’m glad it’s a long drive from Nan’s facility to where the basketball team is training. It gives me enough time to work through a whole gambit of emotions, starting with rage and leveling off at simmering annoyance by the time I park and step out of my car. I have no idea where to find Ben. I don’t know which cabin is his and I don’t know if he’d even be there right now. There’re people milling around everywhere though, security guards and staff. I had to check in just like last time, and for a split second I panicked that I wouldn’t be allowed to



stay since I don't have a cleaning job here or anything, but apparently, I'm on some list of approved guests. Ben's doing, I'm sure. That innocuous action is another tally mark against him in my book. Don't ask me why.

I walk up to a security guard standing near the parking area and try to give him a convincing smile. "Sir, do you know if the players are still practicing?"

He shakes his head. "They're eating dinner," he says, nodding toward the main house behind him. "You can go on in. Most of the wives and girlfriends eat in there too."

Over my dead body.

I can't imagine what it would feel like to walk in there, all eyes on me.

"Okay if I just sit out here for a bit instead?"

He shrugs and I get the sense he couldn't care less about what I do, so I go back to the car, climb up onto the trunk, resting my feet on the back fender, and wait.

The sun creeps down, starting to hide behind the dense forest around the property. I garner a few curious stares from passersby, but they all leave me alone. Eventually, guys start filtering out of the main house. They must have wrapped up practice well before dinner because they all look showered and most are wearing comfy lounge clothes. I spot Trey and Leanna and wave. She beams and hurries over, tugging Trey behind her.

"I didn't know you were coming over today! I would have made you come inside for dinner." She frowns. "Wait—why are you sitting out here anyway? You look like you've been waiting a while."

I pray the security guard can't hear me as I lie. "Only a few minutes. I wanted to have a word with Ben."

"Want me to go in and grab him?" Trey asks.

I should tell him yes, but I don't want to inconvenience him. "It's okay. I'm sure he'll be out here eventually."

Leanna nods. "Right, well, we could wait with you if you want?"

Trey shakes his head. "No need. Here he comes now."

I follow Trey's gaze to find Ben walking out of the house alongside an older black man with a shaved head and a neatly trimmed goatee.

"That's our coach," Trey supplies.

Ben walks with the man for a few more yards while they talk and then he branches off, turning to head toward the cabins. He looks down at the ground for a second and then glances up and Trey waves, catching his attention.

He spots us and my body goes rigid.

Was it really only last night that we were in the back seat of his car?

It seems impossible.

I can barely hold his gaze, barely look at him as I remember what it felt like to lie naked underneath him. I feel like my whole body is buzzing with nervous energy. His brown eyes crinkle at the sides as he takes me in from afar, a playful smile tugging at the edge of his lips. He's happy to see me. Happy I showed up here after last night.

"We'll let you two talk," Trey says, pushing Leanna along even though she protests.

“I’ll come see you at the diner this week!” she calls, but I don’t even respond. “Sorry I couldn’t come in for pancakes this morning. I overslept.”

I’m too caught up in Ben’s approach to worry about what she’s saying. Too scared all of a sudden of the discussion we’re about to get into. I could forget everything, fall into those brown eyes, and never come up for air.

He stops only a few feet from me, crosses an arm over his chest, and takes me in as I sit propped on the back of Nan’s old car. His gaze lingers on my bare legs for a beat too long and then his gaze flits up to mine.

*“Birdie.”*

I study him, trying to work up the nerve to speak.

“You know I still don’t have your number?” he says, grabbing his cell phone from his back pocket.

“That’s fine. We’ll keep it that way.”

His brow arches but his expression doesn’t lose the playful edge as he slips his phone back where it was and steps closer to me.

“No numbers?”

I brace myself as he comes even closer, his jean-clad thighs brushing my knees.

I keep my arms locked tightly across my chest lest they get any ideas. With him this close, it’d be so easy to circle them around his neck and lean in for a kiss.

That’s not why I’m here though.

I straighten my spine.

“No numbers.”

“Interesting. Why?”

“Well, two reasons, really. Right now, I’m pissed. But even if I wasn’t, I still don’t think it’s a good idea that we do all that.”

“*All that.*”

“Yes.” I wave my hand. “Y’know, the whole song and dance where we pretend you aren’t leaving soon.”

For the first time, his smile slips. His eyes narrow and I swear, he almost looks annoyed with me.

“So you’re just going to decide that for the both of us.”

I uncross my arms and prop my hands behind me on the car, cool and unaffected—at least on the outside. “Sure am.”

He hums, and I can tell he’s not quite done with the subject even as he moves on.

“Right. Now go ahead and tell me why you’re pissed.”

My annoyance from earlier creeps right back in. I hate that it feels like he’s the one conducting this conversation, always in control.

“How much do I owe you, Ben?”

My question catches him off guard, and at first, he plays dumb.

“For dinner last night?”

“Sure, *that* on top of all the money you ‘donated’ to my nan with that phony foundation.”

He cocks his brow. “The foundation is real.”

“Great. So have them take the money back.”

“Doesn’t work like that, Birdie.”

I lean forward. “You had no right to give her money like that.”

“You would have done the same thing if you were in my shoes.”

I look away because yeah, he’s right. If I could help someone in my position and I had the means, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

Still, I don’t like it. I wish he had consulted me about it even though I understand why he didn’t. I would have flat-out refused. I hate the position I’m in. I know this is a good thing for Nan. A wonderful thing, in fact. She’ll get the best care available thanks to Ben, but I feel bad about taking a handout, and I want to know just how much he gave us.

“How much, Ben?”

He sighs in frustration. “I honestly don’t know. My financial manager was in contact with your grandmother’s nursing home. They suggested an amount that would cover her end-of-life care, and he facilitated the payment.”

I’m quiet as I stare out at the forest, trying to cool my temper. I can feel him studying me and I wonder what he must think, what he could possibly be doing standing here with a girl like me, getting tangled up in my life.

“I promise it was nothing much. Really.”

My eyes start to sting as tears gather on my lashes. I blink quickly, trying to wash them away.

“It was a really kind thing you did,” I manage, still not looking his way.

If I do, there’s no telling how many tears will fall.

“I didn’t look at it that way. It just seemed like an injustice to me. You shouldn’t be in this position. You should have never had to quit school and move back here, working two jobs and living in that trailer to help take care of your nan. You should never have been left like this all on your own.”

I look back at him and smile, and it encompasses every ounce of injustice and sadness I’ve felt over the last few months. “Haven’t you heard? Life’s not fair, especially for people like me.”

He looks crushed, and I realize I wasn’t too good at keeping my tears at bay. They roll down my cheeks unbidden before I look back down at the ground, wiping them away furiously.

He reaches up and drops his hand on my shoulder, real slow and gentle, like he’s worried I’ll spook. His hand curves around my shoulder as he tugs me close and envelops me in both arms. I smell him everywhere. It’s like the world only exists with him in it. My eyes close and my head falls into the crook of his neck. The ball of anxiety in my stomach unravels for the first time in a long while.

Then he teases, “You really won’t give me your number?”

I almost smile at the fact that we’re already back to that subject. I knew he wouldn’t let it go.

“I told you I don’t want to do that.”

“What? *Talk?*”

“No. Just...let’s keep things casual. If I see you, I see you.”

He quiet after that, hugging me in silence. Then he steps back, and something shifts when we meet each other’s eyes. It’s the strangest thing to be around someone you haven’t

known that long but who feels like your most intimate friend. A person who's felt you on the inside, *seen* you on the inside, and yet there are so many details missing: birthdays, middle names, favorite foods. Getting to know him more is a dangerous game, though. He's the very definition of too good to be true. I know he's leaving, and even still, I'm getting swept up in the idea of us being together. It's unhealthy and sad. A surefire way to land me a broken heart.

I make my apologies, slide off the car, and head for home before I do something stupid like follow him back to his cabin and give in to him a second night in a row.

# Chapter Seventeen

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I t's early morning, predawn, and I'm sitting at the table in my trailer, sipping coffee. When I can, I try to make a batch with my cheap French press before I head into the diner. It's much nicer to sit and enjoy my morning cup while I read than when I'm running around like a crazy person at work. It's dark outside and earlier than I used to ever dare dream of waking up. My teenage self would call me crazy if she knew I would one day *willingly* wake up earlier than I absolutely *had* to so I could get things done before work.

Usually, I'd have a textbook or journal spread out before me. Occasionally, I'll read through some old notes from my classes to brush up on the material. Today, however, I'm contemplating my path forward. Ben's donation changes a lot of things, but not everything. I can't go back to California right now. I can't leave Nan. I could quit one of my jobs, but I'd rather keep working both and save up as much as I can so that when the time comes for me to leave, I'm prepared to do it. I do think I'll cut back one of my days with the cleaning company though so I can have another free afternoon with Nan. I'm going to coordinate her first session with the occupational therapist today and ensure I'll be able to be there with her.

I finish my coffee and change into my dress for the diner, smoothing out a few wrinkles before tossing my hair into a ponytail and heading out. When I pull into the parking lot at Dale's, I spot a familiar black SUV parked right by the front door. I park beside it and get out, laughing under my breath when I catch Ben asleep in the front seat. For a fleeting moment, I take him in with his head propped up by his hand and his sharp features in sweet repose. He's so unbelievably attractive sometimes it just hits me square in the gut.

How annoying that he gets to go through life looking like that.

I tap the window with my knuckle and he jolts awake. I laugh as he wipes sleep from his eyes and opens his door.

"Did you sleep here all night?" I ask, genuinely worried he might have.

He's wearing lounge pants and a t-shirt sculpted across his broad shoulders. His hair is a ruffled, sexy mess.

He scrubs a hand down his face, clearly still tired. "No. Since I can't just *call you*, I woke up early and drove out to see you. Wanted to get here before you started work."

He shifts in his seat to get out and I step back, but my car's behind me and it blocks me from backing up even more. His size makes it so I feel caged in as he stands up and looks down on me.

"Morning," he says with an easygoing smile as he leans in, his gaze flitting back and forth between my eyes.

"Technically it's not morning yet. The sun's not up," I point out.

His smile widens and he bends down the rest of the way, pressing a chaste kiss to my cheek.

“Come inside. I’ll make you breakfast.”

I’m the first person in most days, which means the lights are off and the doors are locked. I make fast work of both, stepping in before Ben and flicking on the light switch so we’re bathed in the diner’s familiar warm glow. He yawns and stretches his hands over his head, revealing a tantalizing sliver of his lower abs. I shift my gaze away and keep on walking, heading toward the counter so I can stow my purse and get the coffee going. I work while Ben walks around the place, taking chairs off tables and helping me with my duties.

“You don’t have to do all that,” I tell him.

He shrugs like it’s no big deal.

“You ever have a job like this?” I ask him as we go about our separate tasks.

“When I was twelve, I lied and said I was sixteen so I could bus tables at a restaurant near my house. I only worked there a couple months, but it was nice to have some spending money.”

“Yeah, when I was that age, I worked for a lady who ran a dog kennel. I came in on the weekends and fed the dogs and gave them walks. It was a good job for a young kid.”

“Have you worked ever since?”

I nod, and he hums like he doesn’t like my answer.

“Most people do, Ben. Can’t all be fancy basketball players like you.”

He shoots me a teasing look and I give him one right back.

“Finish up with those chairs and I’ll get you some coffee. Cook won’t be in for a little while, but I’ll make you something to eat.”

“I liked what you made me that one time.”

Why that tiny compliment makes me blush, I’ll never know.

I’m fast back in the kitchen, careful not to dirty the place up before Cook gets in. He’s meticulous with his stuff and likes it all organized a certain way; he’ll get onto me if I mess up his system. I make some hash browns and eggs and fruit with a side of sausage patties. I set the plate down in front of Ben then reach out to steal one of the strawberries.

“You eaten yet?” he asks, eyeing me as he unrolls his silverware.

“I don’t normally eat breakfast.”

“Sit. Eat with me for a second.”

“I need to get things going or I’ll be behind.”

“I can help you when we’re done.”

I don’t have a rebuttal for that, so I make my way around the counter and take the stool beside him. He scoops up some eggs and holds his fork out for me to take. I eat it and pass the fork back to him. He turns on his stool to move closer to me and his knee slides between my legs. It looks innocent enough, but it doesn’t feel that way. He pushes his plate between us and holds up his fork so I can grab another bite. I take some hash browns, and he watches me chew.

“What?” I ask skeptically once I swallow.

He shakes his head and takes the fork back for another bite.

“Nothing.”

I narrow my eyes in disbelief, but he doesn't elaborate. I'm not all that hungry so I let him finish most of the plate while I surreptitiously watch his every move. The way his forearm gently flexes when he scoops his food. The way his jaw tightens and relaxes when he chews. The curl of his eyelashes. The warmth in his brown eyes.

"You're going to make me blush," he says, cutting his gaze to me.

I smile. "Sorry. Can't help it."

He chuckles. "Now you know how I feel."

He pushes away his empty plate of food and picks up his coffee, taking a few big sips before setting it down and dropping his hands to either side of my knees.

"I feel like a teenager sitting here with you."

I tip my head. "Yeah? Why?"

"If you could hear the thoughts running through my mind...you wouldn't be asking that."

I flush and look down.

"Right, well..."

"How long did you say until Cook will be in?"

"I don't know, maybe twenty minut—"

I don't finish the sentence before his lips are on mine.

He tastes like coffee and I lap him up, more than happy to accept a kiss I've been longing for for the better part of two days.

God, things are getting complicated between us.

The physical part is easy. Wanting to kiss him, having my hands on him, letting him take what he wants from me—that's a no-brainer. It's the other parts that are starting to get messy. There are plenty of reasons why I shouldn't be falling into him like this. I should be upset with him for snooping into my life, contacting Nan's nursing home, paying her bills—but can I really be mad at him for that? Can I truly punish him for his curiosity and generosity? My emotions are all over the place, and it's such a complicated thing for me to relinquish control because I've had to keep such a tight death grip on my life that at this point I'm terrified to let someone like Ben slip in even a little bit.

He can feel that, I think, even in my kiss.

He grows hungrier, needier as he wraps his hands up around my neck and tips me toward him. I slip off my stool, but he's right there propping me up as we kiss. It's not a kiss we should be sharing in the twilight hours of the morning. It's a kiss that should be kept behind locked doors, a kiss between two lovers so hungry for each other clothes will shred, nails will sink deep, lips will bruise.

One of his hands leaves my neck, and I flinch in surprise when I feel it on my thigh. There's no hesitation as he slides it higher, up my skirt so smoothly and deftly I don't even think to protest. I only kiss him more as he parts my thighs just enough that his hand can slip between them, up along my panties until a shudder racks through me.

Ben groans like I'm hurting him, but my touch is featherlight compared to how he's holding me.

In a second, he has me up off the stool and propped lazily on the counter for him. At this height, we're perfect. He has the advantage as he steps between my legs, kisses his way

down my neck, slides my panties to the side and sinks a finger into me.

My thighs shake as he moves it out and back in, deeper this time. He whispers *Little Bird* reverently against my neck, and I tilt my head up to the ceiling and pinch my eyes closed. It feels like I have to disappear from reality to let this continue or my brain might try to sabotage me. Even now, prudent thoughts are trying to ruin this: Cook could arrive early, someone on the highway could look in and see us, my heart could lose sight of who it belongs to even more.

But he starts to swirl his thumb in circles while his finger stills inside me, and I'm already falling...sparks in my toes... sparks in my spine...I shudder and cry out and he doesn't stop, not when I dig my nails into his shoulders, not when his name escapes between my lips.

I'm barely finding my breath again when it feels like a match has been lit inside me. Rather than feeling sated, I feel ravenous, wanting to chase another high, a better high, a high with him sunk into me to the hilt.

I'm telling him this, begging him for more, but he's aware of the world around us in ways I'm not because my first thought when he slides me off the counter and drops me back onto the stool is the sharp sting of rejection, but that's gone in a flash when the door to the kitchen swings open and Cook steps out to wave hello.

"You eaten?" he asks Ben.

"Birdie made me something," Ben says, and I swear his voice has a husky edge to it.

"Better not have messed up my kitchen," Cook says with a good-natured shake of his head before disappearing back

behind the door. Thankfully, I think he's none the wiser to what he almost walked in on.

A laugh bubbles out of me, and I let my forehead sink down onto the edge of the counter.

Ben leans over and kisses my hair.

"I have to get to practice anyway. I lost track of time. Sorry I can't stay and help you open like I said I would."

I don't miss the despair in his tone.

"Are you kidding me?" I say, tilting my head to get a good look at him. "Do you think I care about that? *That's* not what I'm upset about."

Even sideways, he's gorgeous.

He reaches out to run the back of his pointer finger up the back of my arm. "I'll come to your trailer later. Wait up for me."

"Maybe," I say cheekily.

He leans down to give me a love bite on my shoulder before sliding off the stool and dropping cash on the counter.

I growl in protest.

"Don't fight me on it," he says, nodding toward the money. "Give it all to Cook if you want, but I'm not eating for free."

"You're insufferable."

"Yeah, well...that makes two of us."



# Chapter Eighteen

---

**T**here's a persistent drum of the basketball as I dribble downcourt, my sneakers screeching as I fake left around LaMarcus, spin right, and then take the open shot from the right wing. The basketball brushes the net, nearly lost, but Anthony tips it in then Coach Dalton blows his whistle. We walk to the sidelines, exhausted. Anthony bumps his fist against mine—a silent agreement that the two of us are as unstoppable as ever. When Coach's back is to us, I shoot LaMarcus a wink just to needle him. He flips me the bird.

It's been a long day in the weight room and on the court. My muscles are already aching as I take a seat on the sidelines, but I have an endless fount of energy knowing that soon we'll break for the day and I'll drive out to see Raelynn. She's been on my mind constantly. Short reprieves only come when I'm in the middle of play—too focused on winning and racking up points to worry about anything else.

Now, I find it hard to focus on Coach as he delivers his daily debrief. He can tell, apparently, because when he asks me a question and I don't have a good answer for him, the whole team laughs.

He shakes his head and tells us to go, eat well, rest up. There are only a few more practices here before we leave for Tokyo.

I stand to grab my stuff and head out before anyone else. I'm in a rush and I want to get to Raelynn as soon as possible. Her days are as long as mine. She'll be tired, and I don't want her to have to wait up for me. I wonder if she's already eaten dinner. Even if she has, she could save whatever I bring her for later. I worry about her. At certain angles, she seems too thin to me. Too slight for the amount of work she has to do. I wish I could fix that, wave a wand and end her hardships.

I race back to my cabin after practice. I shower quickly and dress quickly, reaching for some black sweats and a t-shirt. Then, as I grab my keys, my gaze catches on my laptop and I remember that I was supposed to call my agent back tonight, and on top of that, my manager has been hounding me to reply to some emails for brand partnerships. Apparently, I've been slacking with communication lately.

I groan in protest as I reroute, grab my laptop, and get to work, hoping to slog through everything in under an hour. It ends up taking me almost three. My agent keeps me on the phone forever, and it's good and dark by the time I have a chance to escape.

I'm starving, so I swing by and grab some dinner to-go from the main house, making sure to grab extra for Raelynn. The kitchen's closed and I'm not surprised. Everyone else would have already eaten by now. I eat on the way to Raelynn's, racing down the dark highway at breakneck speeds. It's stupid, but I can't lay off the gas. I'm chasing a high. I expect to see flashing blue and red lights cut into my rearview at any moment, but even that thought doesn't slow me down.

Off the highway, onto a gravel road, I park beside Raelynn's old car. I'm outside, carrying to-go food and knocking on her door before I realize I accidentally left my engine running. I double back, turn the car off, grab my keys, and knock again. Still, no answer.

"Raelynn?" I ask to the chirping cicadas and frogs.

I try the handle on the trailer door, and it gives. I tug it open and step inside to find it dead quiet. There's a dull light over the sink, just enough that when I glance down the narrow hall, past the small galley kitchen and the bathroom, I spot Raelynn asleep on her bed.

Without a second thought, I slip off my shoes, walk quietly to her refrigerator, and pull it open so I can put the extra food I brought on an empty shelf. On the other side of the kitchen, I dip into the bathroom, wash my hands, and use some of her toothpaste with my finger then top it off with mouthwash. I try to stay as quiet as possible as I finish up and step into her tiny bedroom at the end of the trailer.

Raelynn is on her side in the middle of the bed, a tangle of blonde hair spread out over her pillow. Her blankets are bunched around her waist and her loose pajama top has ridden up to reveal the cinched part of her waist.

She must be exhausted if all my clatter didn't wake her up. I consider leaving her to rest, but I can't do it. I'm too greedy, too tempted now that I'm here with her. We have so few days left that I can't give up this opportunity. I slink around the side of her bed, and she finally stirs.

"Ben?" she asks, her voice scratchy with sleep. "I left the door unlocked for you."

I smile. "I know. Can I stay?"

She nods, but she still doesn't open her eyes, as if she's too tired to bother. She starts to scoot over to make room for me, and I sink down onto the stiff mattress and crawl under the blankets. Her bed is only a queen, which means it's a tight fit once I lie down beside her.

For a moment, I hold perfectly still. I'm so rigid, so aware of how much room I'm taking up, how uncomfortable I am. I want to adjust my head on the pillow, fit myself better against her, but I don't want to keep moving around and wake her up even more. I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until she turns and nestles into my side, tugging me closer with her arm around my stomach. I never sleep with a shirt on, and it's already warm in here.

"Hold on," I say, lifting up enough to tug my shirt over my head and drop it on the floor.

I lie back down and find Raelynn looking at me.

"Sorry I was late."

She smiles. "It's okay."

"Go back to sleep."

She doesn't argue, her heavy lids closing quickly. I finally relax, scoot closer to her, and get comfortable. It won't be the best night's sleep of my life, but even if we were on a plush California king, I wouldn't sleep well. I'm so aware of Raelynn: her shallow breathing, her small hand resting on my chest, her bare legs brushing mine underneath the blankets. I want to do a million things to her, but I won't be that selfish. I'll let her sleep for now, and I'll lie here with her and tell myself it's enough. Truthfully though, holding her in my arms is the strangest sort of torture.

I haven't slept beside a woman since Shelby, and there's still some part of me that feels like I'm doing something wrong. I shouldn't be here. I'm cheating.

But...I'm not.

I have to remind myself of that.

I glance up at the ceiling, trying to convince myself to close my eyes. Then I lose out and look back at Raelynn, studying her face, her cheeks, her lips. I lean in and kiss her before I stop myself. Then, I kiss her again. I shift and turn toward her.

"I'm sorry," I whisper more than once. Sorry that I can't let her sleep. Sorry that I can't give her the rest she so desperately needs because I need her. I need her in a way I don't think she understands, and it's fucking terrifying me.

I kiss her again and she arches up against me, raking her hands down my back. I shift until I'm up on top of her, careful to hold my weight up so I don't hurt her.

She whispers my name in a low, husky voice, and it's my undoing.

I'm touching her like I've been craving to since we got interrupted at the diner this morning. My hands slide up underneath her pajama top, skimming over her bare breasts, and I groan with how sexy she feels pinned underneath me. I want her now and I'll want her again later, I know it. I'm already imagining more. This time and another time and once more in the morning before I have to drag myself out of here for practice. I want it to last forever, but this first time can't. I'm delirious with need and she knows it. Her hand skates around the top of my pants and then she dips it beneath my

waistband, lower until she squeezes her palm around my length in a tight fist.

*Fuck.*

I brought two condoms, but they're in my pocket and getting one out seems like too great of a feat. I'll die if she takes her hand off me, especially as she starts to slowly pump up and down, teasing me, working me up. My stomach tenses as I try to quell the rush of desire bombarding me from all sides.

I need her with such intensity it's like this is my first fucking time. My eyes pinch closed as her hand squeezes tighter. I inhale a sharp breath and try to get a grip, but I'm losing the battle.

I groan and reach for a condom, angry that it takes me a second to find the opening for my pocket. She laughs as I rip one out, tear the foil, and lean up off her just enough to put it on. Her hand leaves me and rips away every good and wonderful thing in this life. I'm quick, unrolling the condom with speed and pumping my fist up and down my length to ensure its placement.

Raelynn watches me with rapt attention, her tongue absently licking her bottom lip. Does she realize? God, does she even get it?

I lean down and capture her mouth in a soul-searing kiss as I part her legs and start to press into her. I didn't work her up nearly enough, but she's ready for me, as impatient with need as I am. Thank god. Because I can't stop. I want to bury myself inside her until I pass out, until there's nothing left of either of us.

She kisses her way down my jaw and neck as I sink into her all the way and hold perfectly still, trying to get used to how fucking good it feels. There's nothing quite like it. Nothing quite like *her*.

“Let's do this all night,” I tell her. “Let's never stop.”



# Chapter Nineteen

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I've never felt anything like this tight pinch of pain in my stomach, the incessant ringing of warning bells inside my head. There's no reprieve from the worry. I'm standing on shaky ground. I know at any moment, this man I'm touching might disappear into thin air. In fact, he *will* disappear in only a few short days.

The sensation of missing someone while they lie beside you is unnerving and scary.

After our night together, I should feel content and sated. Instead, I *want*. My fingertips skim down his chest as he sleeps. I don't know when we finally closed our eyes—midnight, two, four? My alarm will blare soon, and I'll don my work dress and slide my feet into my old sneakers and tug my hair into an ever-present ponytail and my life will continue churning forward. So I focus on my fingertips in the dark, tracing down the center of his chest, through dark hair and tan skin and rigid muscles. I flatten my palm and feel his heart, and I try to fight the sudden overwhelming urge to cry.

I blink and refocus, my gaze following my hand as it slides over his hard stomach. There's not a lick of fat on Ben's body, no fluff. He's like a machine in that way, built for basketball. I

inch closer to him until my side brushes against his arm and my leg covers his beneath the blankets.

It's like I'm trying to crawl into him.

I wish I could. Then I could stay forever.

Forever.

What a word. Would it give me peace if I knew I had that long with Ben? Would this tension inside me ease then?

Throwing caution to the wind, I push up and crawl on top of him, my knees falling on either side of his hips, my chest pressed against him. I let my head fall into the crook of his neck on his pillow, and he turns and inhales. I know he's awake now because his hands come up to grip my thighs, keeping me in place on top of him.

I kiss him good morning on the side of his neck and he makes a low sound in the back of his throat to tell me he liked it, so I do it again.

I want to seduce him in ways I've only imagined, me pinning him down, playing the aggressor. I feel sexy and bold as I start to rhythmically grind my hips down against him. He shifts me lower until I feel his hard length press between my legs, covered by his boxer briefs. *Now* I'm in control.

I kiss a trail down, taste his collarbone, graze his navel. He hisses as my lips press against his stomach and he knows where I'm headed, what I want to do in these black early-morning hours. How can we survive this? Exhaustion, worry, pain.

I want to make it all go away, so I focus on his boxer briefs as I slide them just low enough that I can take his length in my hand and then in my mouth. What a mess I make, tasting him, licking him, trying to take him all the way down into my throat

and failing miserably. I keep expecting him to laugh and tug me up, tell me “Nice try” and then get on with the next step, but he keeps me in place, bucking his hips, tangling his fingers in my hair, thrusting up into my mouth, faster, harder, taking back that control just enough that I feel emboldened by it. *More, he shows me, like this, wrap your hand around my base and fuck, just like that...*

He comes and I swallow it down, trying to catch all the breaths I’ve held in for the last few minutes. I feel weak when he turns me and lays me down flat on the bed, throwing the blanket off onto the floor with a whirl of impatience.

My alarm goes off and he silences it.

“Five minutes,” he tells me, weighing me down as he settles on top of me.

“I have to—”

“Five minutes, Birdie.”

And then he’s not asking me for permission, he’s sliding down my body, returning the favor, spreading my legs and kissing me awake.

# Chapter Twenty

---

BEN

“**Y**ou gonna sleep over there again tonight?”

I drag my towel across my face, mopping up sweat. “I’d planned on it.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

I shoot Anthony a look, and he laughs.

No I’m not tired. I should be. For the last week and a half, I’ve been living life in fast forward. I’m running on fumes, but there’s no sense in dwelling on it. I have three days left in Texas before we fly out to Tokyo. Three days left with Raelynn. Since the night I woke her up in her trailer, I’ve been with her every single day. I usually beat her to Dale’s in the morning, or I drive over to her trailer at night. If I could sneak away at lunch to visit her too, I would. I want to be with her whenever I can.

“Hate to break it to you, man, but you’ve got circles under your eyes. You need some cucumbers or some shit. Maybe one of those masks ladies put on that make them look like a serial killer.”

I whip him on the arm with my sweaty towel. He dodges out of the way, but the tail end still gets him and he howls

playfully.

He makes a big show about rubbing his arm as he continues nagging me. “So what are you gonna do when we have to leave in a few days? You haven’t made her any promises or nothin’, have you?”

“Promises?”

“Yeah, like you and her really having a future.”

My hackles immediately go up. “Why are you saying it like that? You’re the one who was pushing me to get to know her in the first place.”

“Yeah, get to know her, get out of your funk. Not fall in...”

His voice trails off once he gets a look at my face.

He rears back. “I mean, c’mon, you barely know the girl —”

“I know her enough.”

He snorts. “Right. There’s also the fact that you two live in completely different states? That she hasn’t even seen your real life? Does she even know about fucking *Shelby*? Jesus. Should I keep coming up with more reasons for why you’re being dumb?”

Out of everything he’s said, I get hung up on the most innocuous. “This *is* my real life.”

“*No*, this is the middle of fucking nowhere, Texas. Wait until you get back to Los Angeles. You’ll remember who you are.”

Who I am.

The man I’ve been for the last few months? Depressed? Aimless?

I'm in no hurry to get back to that.

We walk over to get our bags from where we stashed them on the side of the court. Now that practice is done for the day, I want to shower fast and get to Raelynn's trailer.

"You taking her back to LA then?" Anthony asks.

It's not an option. Raelynn won't leave her grandmother. She's here in Texas to be with her, and I know if I ask her to join me in Los Angeles after the Summer Games, she'll say no. So I haven't asked.

It's been eating away at me though. I've been trying to build up the courage to sit her down and get into the big stuff. Everything Anthony's pointed out. We have so little time together though, stolen hours in the morning and at night. The last thing I want to do is pile more crap on her shoulders. She has enough going on without me making life worse for her. That's been my explanation all along, but now I wonder if I've just been deluding myself into thinking I've been acting in Raelynn's best interest instead of my own. When I see her in those fleeting hours, I want her sweetness, her honest blue eyes staring up at me, the sounds she makes when I touch her, and for that, I'm a selfish bastard.

I reach down to grab my bag, annoyed by the guilt clawing away at me from the inside.

I knew this day would come. I knew I'd have to reckon with my decision to keep Raelynn in the dark about parts of my life.

Anthony nudges me. "Dude..."

"What?" I ask with a hard tone.

I'm annoyed with him. Sure, it's misplaced anger, but still, it feels good to be mad at someone other than myself. If he'd



kept his mouth shut, I wouldn't be feeling this way right now.

“Ben,” he says again, sounding like he's seen a ghost.

I finally glance up and notice he's stopped packing his bag. He's staring across the court, mouth agape, eyes wide.

“Is that *Shelby* over there?”

Anthony's question comes from so far out of left field it takes me an obnoxiously long time to catch on to what he's just said. Shelby?

*Here?*

I turn abruptly to see where he's looking. Sure enough, there she is, standing in the doorway of our training complex, holding one arm across her stomach as a deep frown mars her features.

My heart immediately stops.

What the fuck is Shelby doing here?

I can barely process the sight of her in a loose white button-down shirt, rolled up to her elbows, cropped jeans, and simple flats. Her hair is much shorter than the last time I saw her, and the cut suits her. She looks well, and the petty part of me resents that. She shouldn't get to look so happy and healthy.

Seeing her here feels like a punch to the gut.

I want to be unbothered, but there's still a lot of anger simmering deep down.

I hate it. Hate that I haven't overcome those feelings of betrayal and lost love.

I also fucking hate that she's pulling a stunt like this, showing up in Texas, at training camp. She has some nerve.

My teammates glance from her to me, and I swear I could hear a pin drop inside the complex now that everyone's aware of the situation. With a sigh of impatience, I grab my bag and head straight for her, trying and failing to rein in my anger by the time I reach her.

I don't even stop walking, don't deign to meet her gaze as I speak. "I don't know what you're doing here, but we're only supposed to communicate through our lawyers."

"Yeah, I'm aware. Ben—"

She has to turn and race after me.

"I'll call my assistant and get you on the first flight back to Los Angeles. Whatever you thought you were doing by coming here...it's not happening."

"Would you stop for just a second, please?"

I don't listen to her. I keep walking, out of the complex, past the cars, and toward my cabin. She follows behind me, trying hard to keep up with my long strides.

"Listen, I'm sorry for just showing up like this. I knew if I called first, you wouldn't give me the time of day."

I don't deny her claim.

"Ben, *please*."

I barely contain the urge to shout. Who does she think she is? Pulling this after everything? Everything.

We reach the line of trees where the forest starts and I keep going, anxious to put distance between us and the rest of my team. We don't need an audience for this. I have enough eyes on my life as it is, and I don't trust every guy to keep his mouth shut. Some of them like the limelight. Some of them would love feeding this story to the press for a nice lump sum.

“Ben, you’re being—”

“*Don’t.*”

My tone is biting, and she immediately goes silent as she follows behind me, hurrying as much as she can. I’m relieved when my cabin is in sight. I don’t know what will happen when we get there, but it feels like the only option is to continue forward, away from Shelby.

I stomp up the stairs and bang open the door. I don’t invite her in, so she comes to an abrupt halt in the doorway.

I toss my bag and mean for it to land on a chair, but it hits the wall instead. I see her jump in shock and I tense, aware of how nervous she is. *Fuck.* I’m being an asshole. I take a calming breath, tell myself to get it together. Then I turn, and when I speak, it’s finally with a cool, measured tone.

“This couldn’t have waited until I got back to Los Angeles? Did you really need to drag this shit across state lines?”

Up close, she’s as beautiful as ever. Smooth black skin, curious hazel eyes. She looks resigned and downright sad, and I’m shocked to realize I still have the capacity to feel pity for her after everything.

“No. It couldn’t wait.”

Her hand goes up to cradle her stomach, and I see for the first time what’s been so obvious since I first spotted her. Underneath her loose shirt, she’s concealing a very pregnant belly.

I have tunnel vision as I stare straight at it, trying to process what this means.

Shelby is pregnant.

Shelby is pregnant with Mike's baby.

I feel like I'm sinking down into quicksand, like I need to hold on to something or I'll go under. I reach out and grab ahold of the table beside me, hunching forward.

Shelby takes a hesitant step toward me, obviously worried about my reaction.

"Why?" I ask, and it sounds like my soul is being crushed. Why did she need to come here and show me this? Rub salt in a wound that was damn near healed?

"It's not Mike's baby."

# Chapter Twenty-One

---

**T**hree more nights with Ben isn't enough. Three nights is...*god*. What am I going to do? I wish I had cash to blow on seductive lingerie. I wish I could whisk us away to some fancy hotel. I want to make these nights memorable. Why? Because after Ben leaves for Tokyo, I'll go right back to living a mediocre no-lingerie-necessary existence. There's a sharp reminder of that this morning when Patrick arrives at Dale's. He hasn't been around the last few weeks, and I'd fantasized that maybe he fell off the face of the planet. Wouldn't that be lovely?

At least this morning, he's not drunk.

"Heard you been sleeping with that basketball boy."

Okay, maybe a little drunk.

He doesn't seem to mind that there are people eating at the counter, well within earshot of him as he throws barbs at me.

I choose to ignore him and continue working. I refill Doyle's coffee and reach over to grab Dr. Tully's empty plate. Before I can, Patrick yanks my ponytail, throwing me off balance. I stumble back and try to catch myself.

"You hear me, Raelynn, or you gone deaf?"

He lets me go, but my equilibrium is off. I tip forward and clutch the edge of the counter, and there's a long awkward beat where my cheeks flame red and I straighten my dress as if I'm the one who acted out of line. I can't meet anyone's eyes as they all stay conspicuously silent. Maybe they aren't sure they saw what they think they saw. Heard what they think they heard. Whatever the reason, their silence hurts worse than Patrick's words.

He comes up behind me again and crowds my space.

“Is that another one of your jobs now? Fuckin—”

There's a flurry of motion and I yelp in shock as Dr. Tully leans over the counter, grabs Patrick by the scruff, and squashes his face to the counter. Patrick struggles but Dr. Tully doesn't let up.

“You keep harassing her and I'll call the sheriff. You understand, boy? That goes for when I'm not around either. I'm sick of your shit. Your daddy lets you run around town acting like a fool, but I won't.”

Patrick resists at first, and Dr. Tully leans in closer.

“Do you understand?” he asks again, enunciating every syllable.

Patrick lets loose a sound like a distressed animal as he nods over and over again.

Dr. Tully lets go of him and shakes out his hands. “Good. Now get outta my sight. You smell like a damn liquor store and it ain't even nine in the mornin'.”

I hold perfectly still, tense from my head to my toes as Patrick grabs the baseball cap that got knocked off his head and stomps out through the kitchen without looking back at me. I watch the swinging door after it closes behind him

longer than necessary, wondering if maybe he'll come back through it, hotter than ever. Eventually, when I'm sure he's well and truly gone, I look over at Dr. Tully to see he's right back where he was a moment ago, sipping his coffee and reading the newspaper, unbothered. He's not looking at me or anything. It almost feels like I imagined the whole thing, except for when he turns the page of the newspaper and casually says, "I'm calling the sheriff. Enough is enough."

"Thank you."

He shakes his head, still not looking at me. "Don't thank me. I should have said something a long time ago."

Even with Dr. Tully stepping in, my encounter with Patrick throws me into a funk the rest of the day. My scalp still stings from where he yanked my hair. His disgusting words circulate in my mind even when I try desperately to think of something better. At the trailer that night, I make a simple turkey sandwich and eat it on the steps outside, willing Ben's SUV to appear down the gravel drive. He could distract me. He always does.

*"Heard you been sleeping with that basketball boy."*

*"Is that another one of your jobs now?"*

A part of me is surprised we've been found out considering we haven't been gallivanting around town or anything. I guess I've been with him in public a few times. He insisted on putting gas in Nan's car for me last week, and two days ago, we drove up to the Piggly Wiggly to get some late-night cartons of Blue Bell when we were both craving something sweet. I hadn't thought much of it, but now I wonder if everyone in town is thinking exactly what Patrick is and they're just too polite to say it.



I set aside the last half of my sandwich, sick to my stomach all of a sudden. I want Ben to get here already. He told me this morning that he'd be coming back tonight. I kissed him good and long before he walked outside to his car.

“Sure you have to go?” I teased, knowing full well I had to get going soon too.

“Think they'll notice if I don't?”

I laughed. “Yeah...I guess you're sorta hard to miss.”

He looked back at me for a long beat, smiling wide, and my heart caught in my chest. I wish I could have heard his thoughts in that moment, but he turned and kept walking and now I sit, waiting.

Usually, he's here by now. It's later than usual. I had a big house to clean in the afternoon and I really dragged. The sun's good and set. The stars are starting to shine and the bugs swirl above my head, circling the light near the trailer door. I strain my ears and listen for the telltale sounds of tires on gravel or the whirr of an engine. I know what I'm doing. This eagerness inside me, nervous energy brimming over so I can't keep still. My feet bounce on the stairs, my finger drags across my thumbnail, back and forth over and over. A critter moves to my left and I whip my gaze in that direction, trying to discern what it is. A rabbit locks eyes with me for a fleeting second before scurrying away.

I told Ben we couldn't exchange phone numbers in a feeble attempt to keep restraints on a relationship that was never going to be contained in the first place. It was futile and naive and now I'm paying the price. I'm sitting here waiting on a man, desperate and hopeful, and it's making me feel like an open wound.

He leaves in three days, I tell myself. *Three days.*

The warning falls on deaf ears though.

I keep sitting, waiting until my back starts to ache and my butt has gone numb. Something is keeping him. He isn't coming tonight.

I fight the sudden, ridiculous urge to cry.

It's not a big deal.

I'll just go inside and change into my pajamas, grab something to read, and focus on that for a few minutes before bed. I'll brush my teeth and wash my face and ignore the tear tracks on my cheeks. I'll pretend this is any other night and I'll keep on playing the denial game with myself until it actually works.

I have no other choice.

---

I'm still not myself the next morning at the diner. At some point last night as I lay in bed, I started to pin my hopes on Ben showing up at Dale's first thing in the morning with a good excuse for why he wasn't able to make it out to see me. When I arrived at work to find an empty parking lot, that hope vanished too.

I'm quiet as I get my work done, rolling silverware, taking orders. A few people ask me how I'm doing, and I suspect they're worried Nan has taken a turn for the worse. I try to pin on a smile, but it's not real big or genuine, and I know they can tell. I wish I could shake off my foul mood, but it seems to be impenetrable.

The bell rings over the door as another patron walks in. I look up to see a woman heading for the counter. I don't recognize her, but if I had to guess, I'd say she's with one of the basketball players. She's gorgeous and polished, and I highly doubt she'd end up in this town if the guys weren't here training. I suppose she could be press, but she's dressed casually in a light blue sundress and only has a tiny clutch with her.

"Can I just sit anywhere?" she asks me with a small smile.

"Sure, yeah. Grab a seat and I'll bring you something to drink. Water? Coffee?"

"I'm trying to lay off caffeine," she says, patting her pregnant belly. "Do you guys have any freshly squeezed juice?"

I grimace. "Sorry, we've only got the good ol' stuff from frozen concentrate."

She laughs. "Actually, you know what? I'm fine with that. I used to drink it all the time as a kid, and I could use the pick-me-up."

I nod. "One old-fashioned orange juice coming right up."

When I return with her juice, I bring her a menu and tidy up nearby in case she has any questions.

"Ow. You stop that," she says, looking down at her belly.

I chuckle. "Is your baby kicking?"

"Yes," she groans. "He's lodged his foot right up into my ribs and is using them as a soccer ball." She leans lower. "Stop all that kicking. Don't you know you're meant to be a basketball star?"

So I guessed right then. She must be with one of the guys.

“His father is here practicing for the Olympics?”

She looks up and nods, her smile faltering slightly. She looks wary of sharing that information with me, and I get it; if he’s a professional athlete, she’s probably worried about too much information getting out to the press. Maybe she’s even trying to keep this pregnancy under wraps.

“Secret’s safe with me,” I assure her, in case that’s what she’s worried about. “If you told me the father’s name, I probably wouldn’t even recognize it. I’m not the biggest basketball fan.”

“Really? God, I love it. I actually played back in college.”

My brows shoot up. “Dang, then that baby really *is* going to be a basketball star.”

She laughs then winces again, pressing on the top of her stomach where the baby must be kicking. “That is if I survive the rest of this pregnancy.”

“How far along are you?”

“Seven months, though it doesn’t feel like it’s been that long. I actually didn’t know about it until well into the second trimester.”

I lean in. “Really?”

She shrugs. “I didn’t have any symptoms. It wasn’t until I went in for my annual and they did a pregnancy test that I found out.”

“*No way.*”

She nods, and her expression looks as if she still can’t believe it herself.

“He’s paying me back for it though. The first few months were easy, but these last ones are going to be hell. He was already huge on the last ultrasound I had. Doctor warned he could be close to ten pounds by my due date.”

My jaw drops.

“And don’t even get me started on the heartburn.”

My eyes widen, and she cracks up.

“I’m terrifying you, aren’t I?”

“Only a little...”

She shakes her head playfully and reaches for her menu. “Ignore me. It’s really not *that* bad. The baby is the easy part compared to his father. How are your pancakes here?”

“Delicious. Get them with the whipped cream.”

She slaps the menu back onto the counter and wiggles her eyebrows at me. “Yes. That. Bring me a big stack please.”

I chuckle as I write down the order so I can pass it back for Cook. After, I do a quick pass around the diner, making sure everyone’s got what they need. I refill waters and coffees and clear a table. When I’m done, I return to the woman and ask if she’s still doing okay.

“Oh, fine. Yeah.”

She smiles tightly and puts down her phone. She must not have been enjoying whatever she was looking at.

I wonder if it has something to do with the guy she’s here for. I tip my head and study her. “Earlier, you mentioned the baby is the easy part compared to his father?”

She frowns in confusion, then it clicks for her. “Oh right. Yeah. He’s...we’re...”

She trails off, and I throw her a bone. “Sounds complicated.”

She hums. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s fine. It’ll shake out eventually. *Somehow.*”

I lean in closer, careful no one else can hear us. “I actually know some of the guys. They come in here and eat. I’ve become friends with Leanna, too—do you know her?”

Her eyes light up. “Leanna? Yes. She’s a sweetheart. I didn’t realize she was here in Texas with Trey. I would have asked her to breakfast.”

“You might still see her. She comes in most days to hang out while Trey is busy.”

She nods and grabs her juice, taking a small sip.

Then her eyebrows pinch together as if she’s mulling something over. Finally, she sets her juice down and looks up to ask me gently, “Has Ben come in to eat?”

“Oh.”

I wasn’t expecting her to ask about him directly. I haven’t had to outright lie to anyone about our relationship yet, and I don’t have a ready-made explanation on the tip of my tongue.

She misunderstands my delay though.

“I guess you might not know his name if you aren’t a big basketball fan. He’s one of the only white guys on the team though. Tall, *obviously*. Brown hair?”

I swallow and nod. “Yeah. He’s been in once or twice.”

“So then you’ve met him.”

Maybe I'm a little groggy this morning. I didn't sleep well last night. I can't seem to understand what she's trying to tell me.

"Met him?" I repeat, trying to get the pieces to fall into place.

"The baby's father."

"Ben Castillo?"

She nods. "So then you do know him?"

My gaze loses focus as the revelation floods my mind. Betrayal and deceit rush in, drowning me from the inside, and I can't breathe.

"Are you okay?"

Her voice sounds miles away, and I can only nod as I turn away from the counter and stumble toward the bathroom.

Her hand shoots out to grab on to my forearm, and it's as searing as a branding iron.

"Please don't say anything to the press. I mean, you seem trustworthy enough, but I really didn't mean to share this much, and you have to understand...he's pretty famous. If word got out..." She shudders at the thought.

"I..." I clear my throat. "I won't."

Then I shake her hand off me and continue to the bathroom. I have no recollection of getting from my spot behind the counter to the inside of a stall, but I slide down onto the toilet seat and drop my head into my hands, stifling my sobs. Tears pour down, never-ending and painful. I can't catch my breath. I can't stop shaking. I can't begin to process how this could have happened.

*Ben got a woman pregnant. Ben is going to be a dad. Ben lied to me. Ben is a cheater. Ben made me a cheater too.*

I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes, trying to stem the flow of tears, but they just keep coming.

I feel sick to my stomach. Sick to the tips of my toes. I want to crack myself open and cut out every trace of Ben. I want to make him disappear from my body. I want to erase every memory of him. I wish I could stand at the sink and wash myself clean of him. I want him out of me. I want to scream. I want to tear things apart and storm out of town. I want to do...something. And I can't.

I'm on the clock, working.

I'm the only waitress at Dale's and there are a dozen people waiting for me to help them with their breakfast. I can't afford to lose this job. I can't afford to feel in this moment.

I stand and double over, another sob racking through me before I flatten my palm on the bathroom door and steady myself, breathing deep. *Please*, I beg whoever will listen. *Please stop.*

I unlatch the stall door and take a hesitant step forward. My chest quivers and aches. I press a hand to my stomach and take another step. I make it to the sink and stare at myself in the mirror, and there's no disguising what a godforsaken mess Ben has made me. Splotchy cheeks. Red, swollen eyes. Shaky lips.

I sniff and wipe my nose. I wet a paper towel with cold water and press it against my cheeks, trying to cool them down. Nothing works. Traces of Ben's deceit live on my face and I'll never forgive him. I walk back out of the bathroom. Blinding, fleeting memories race through my mind: soft brown



hair woven between my fingers, his sharp dimple-framed smile, water raining down on us in my trailer's tiny shower, skin sticky with sweat, hearts beating wildly, mouths colliding.

So this is what it feels like to have your soul crushed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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I sit at Nan's bedside, staring out the window with a forgotten textbook open on my lap. She's asleep beside me. It's not one of her good days. Not one of mine either, I suppose.

I watch a bird on the branch of an oak tree outside, hopping around. Flapping its wings. Trying to take off, it looks like.

There's a knock on the door, and I don't turn around to see who it is. Her care team filters in and out of her room all day, and they don't need my attention to do their job. If I'm lucky, they'll ignore me altogether.

"I was scared I wouldn't be able to find you."

Ben's voice is so beautifully soft, I almost forget he's a villain.

I stay looking out the window until I've conquered the shock of his arrival. Then I turn slowly and assess his presence near the door. He looks like hell. His white shirt is wrinkled. His hair is in disarray. There're bags under his eyes and no hint of happiness on his handsome face.

I don't greet him. I don't say a word, in fact.

“I went to your trailer last night and again this morning. You weren’t at Dale’s...”

I’ve been here with Nan ever since I left work yesterday. It was excruciating to walk out of that bathroom and finish serving Shelby. I know her name now. *Shelby*. I had to bring her breakfast and smile politely and ignore her curious stares at my splotchy cheeks. She tipped me in cash and I still have it stuffed into the front pocket of my diner dress. I haven’t taken it off. I sit here, smelling like Shelby’s breakfast from yesterday, and I wonder how I factor in with this convoluted mess Ben has dragged me into.

I called in sick for my cleaning job yesterday afternoon and again today. Same with the diner. Three missed shifts already. My stomach is already grumbling, but it’s faint compared to the roar of blood in my ears, the thump of my beating heart. I look at Ben’s disheveled appearance and try to decipher the truths on his skin. I wish it were that simple.

His sad brown eyes plead with me to speak, so I do, and my voice isn’t cutting or cruel. It’s resigned and flat, very nearly indifferent. I’m not trying to catch him in a lie or needle the truth out of him with tricks. I’m too tired for all of that.

“The woman who’s carrying your baby came into Dale’s yesterday. I met her.”

His eyes narrow as he takes in that information.

So he didn’t know.

Interesting.

“Is it your baby she’s carrying?” I persist, needing to know.

A long moment of hesitation, an eternity of seconds, then...

“Yes.”

A tear drops from the corner of my eye and I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, trying to keep the rest at bay.

“I’d like to know the truth now please. All of it.”

“I should have told you about Shelby, but there...”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

He sighs. “My soon-to-be ex-wife.”

Ben was married. *Is* married.

“So you’re getting a divorce, but you’re currently married?”

I want to have everything laid out crystal clear.

“Yes.”

“Does she know that?”

“That we’re divorcing?” He looks offended. “Yes. Of course, Birdie.”

I wish he would stop using my nickname. I wish he would just do me a favor and walk right back out that door.

“I’m not guilty of the crimes you might think I am,” he continues. “I didn’t leave a pregnant wife behind in Los Angeles and start an affair with you. I would never...could never...”

He speaks with so much vehemence, I glance over at Nan briefly to confirm she’s still sleeping. Watching her shallow, constant breaths momentarily dries my tears as Ben inches farther into the room, closing the door behind him to presumably give us more privacy. I hadn’t even thought of it.

“Shelby and I got married very young,” he starts. “Straight out of high school. You can’t imagine the amount of pressure on me then. A young rookie in the NBA. Our marriage was the last thing on my mind, and I regret that. That’s on me. Shelby stuck by my side though, tried her best to make things work for us in the beginning. I thought we were okay—sure, looking back, I see now that I was deluding myself, because the writing was on the wall. She’d been sleeping with her trainer for two years and was getting sloppy about it. She wanted to get caught and have an out, but I was too distracted to even notice her infidelity. Around Valentine’s Day, she sat down and told me everything. Explained that she was in love with Mike and she wanted a divorce.”

“How did you feel?” I ask, wanting to know.

His eyebrows furrow. “Betrayed...angry. Sad.”

“Because you still loved her?”

His brown eyes flash with unnamed emotion as they flit to me. My stomach squeezes tight as I watch him shake his head. “Don’t think less of me, Birdie. Please. Now that I look back, our marriage was barely surviving. We were friends more than anything, but it’s taken me a long time to see that. I felt so betrayed by my partner who had vowed to be honest and faithful to me. I was so stuck on the fact that she cheated, that she could do that for so long without telling me. It seemed unforgivable.”

“But the baby...”

The tension leaves his face as his eyes pinch closed. He inhales and props his hands on his hips, and when he blinks his eyes open again, tears swim in the corners.

“She’s pregnant with your son, Ben.”

His jaw ticks and he nods. “What are the odds? Less than a lightning strike maybe. At first, she assumed the baby was Mike’s, but she and I had sex—”

I wince and he pauses, only trudging forward when he’s sure I can handle it.

“It was the only time we’d slept together in almost a year. Like I said, we’d drifted apart. I thought it was normal for couples to go through dry spells like that. It didn’t bother me as much as it should have.” He scrubs his hand through his hair. “I feel like I can’t emphasize enough how fucking stupid I was, how caught up in the game...I just thought we’d figure it all out eventually.”

“But if she was sleeping with you both—”

“They did genetic testing. It’s not Mike’s baby.”

It’s dead silent inside my nan’s room. Out in the hall, a door opens, wheels screech and beg for grease, voices drift in and out of earshot.

Our end is so blatantly obvious it should be written in red paint on the wall. We’re fish trying to swim upstream, wriggling and writhing in agony. I see that now. There is no way to recapture the ease of the last few weeks, the slow nights in my bed, the quiet hum of life together out in the country. We were never going to make it work, but now, with Shelby and the baby, it’s more than difficult—it’s impossible. I don’t know if they’re going to try to resolve their issues, but I know I won’t stand in their way.

“I leave tomorrow, Birdie. For Tokyo and the Games. After, I’ll be back in Los Angeles. My schedule—”

“Ben.”

He steps forward, hand outstretched. “I could have my assistant take a look and—”

“*Ben.*”

He’s still trying to swim upstream, but I know better. I’ll be the one to save us the trouble. This won’t work. This fleeting affair between two star-crossed lovers. This tender love built on a bedrock of subtle lies. His *and* mine. I believe him now. I trust his story, but it still won’t save us.

Even if Shelby had never showed up, this was always going to happen. He was always going to leave town without a trace. My troubles will rush in to fill the void he’ll leave, and it’ll be like he was never here in the first place.

I push to stand on shaky legs and walk toward him slowly, caving in to the urge to wrap my arms around his middle and squeeze. My face falls against his chest, and like a flash flood, my tears come with utter abandon.

He holds me and buries his head in the crook of my neck.

His scent wraps around me, and I wish I could siphon it and use it like a drug when I feel especially weak in the coming weeks.

I think I hear him whisper, “*Please,*” but I convince myself I’m wrong.

I can’t do this for us if he gives me too many reasons to beg him to stay.

In fact, I gather strength from all the reasons to push him away.

I step back from our hug even though he resists. I keep my hands gripping his shirt at his waist and I push him back gently and then, when that doesn’t work, harder. I straighten



my elbows until he's an arm's length away, and I look up into his sorrowful brown eyes with my jaw locked tight.

*"Little Bird."*

In an instant, I release his shirt like he's burned me.

I'm shaky and dazed. I want this to end, but even still, I won't kick him out. I won't scream at him to go. I merely walk back to my chair and take a seat, grabbing my textbook to prop on top of my lap. I drop my gaze, look down at it, and still, his feet are in the top of my line of sight. He stays there and stays there and my tears roll down my cheeks and splash down onto the book cover, then I squeeze my eyes shut, and when I open them again, he's gone.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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BEN

If I thought me staying in Raelynn's life would be better for her, I'd do it in an instant. If I thought I could button up this situation with Shelby quickly, shield her from the press, give her my undivided attention, ultimately make her happy... I'd take her from Pine Hill today. Right now.

Even looking at the hard facts, I still consider doing it. I'm a selfish man. I want to force her hand. Beg and persuade her by any means necessary. I know I could. I've seen the way she looks at me, those secret feelings she tries to keep buried when we're in bed together. I know if I pressed on that tender heart of hers, I could convince her to give us a chance.

But ultimately, I do the right thing.

I can't give her peace.

Definitely not now, maybe not ever.

I ride with the team out of Pine Hill and head to a tiny airstrip where three private planes are waiting to fly us and the Olympic coaching staff to Los Angeles where we'll get on the flight to Tokyo.

I have a note clutched in my left hand with Raelynn's phone number on it.

Lele got it for me.

She went to see Raelynn at the nursing home last night to say goodbye. When she boarded the private plane this morning, she walked down the aisle and stopped at my side, pressing the note to my chest. I took it and looked up at her. She was staring straight ahead, chewing on her bottom lip, her brows furrowed with concern.

“I swore I wouldn’t give it to you.”

She let her hand slide away and I reached up quickly to grab the note before it fell. She left me in peace and I stared down at those numbers, my heart pounding with all the possibilities. I contemplated calling right then, but instead, I programmed her number into my phone then repeated it over and over again in my head, memorizing it during the flight.

When we touch down in Los Angeles, it’s only for a few minutes. They whisk us onto another plane, trying to condense our travel day as much as possible. My teammates joke and laugh, eager to get to the Games. Enough of them have tried and failed to engage me in conversations that they know to just leave me alone at this point.

Anthony sits across the aisle from me with his headphones on. He knows everything. Talked to Shelby himself.

Coach Dalton passes me in the aisle and pats my shoulder, a silent show of support for whatever I’m going through. He knows better than to ask. We all have complicated lives we keep off the court.

Unfortunately, there’s no getting out of staying in the athletes’ village once we’re in Tokyo. For security reasons, they have our team sequestered on the top floor of a large recently built apartment complex that’s next door to the

stadium where we'll play our games. Single players have to share rooms, which means I'm bunking with Anthony.

Our bus drives through the village and pulls up to the complex. We shuffle off one by one to a crowd of rabid fans. Some of them are spectators for the Games, some are other athletes. It's a tricky ordeal with all the competitors in one place. Most of the young ones lead relatively normal lives outside of the Olympic Games. Other than the few standout stars, no one really experiences the level of celebrity that I do.

*"Ben Castillo!"*

*"Can I get an autograph?!"*

*"A picture? Please?! Oh my god."*

A camera is thrust in front of my face before a cluster of security guards rush forward and push the crowd back to let me and the rest of the team pass.

I'm not usually a dick, but I can't drag my gaze up off the ground. I can't interact with fans right now. I walk straight into the complex, ignore the fact that everyone is still looking at us, and let security lead me to the main bank of elevators. There's a whole security team surrounding us now, and I will the elevator to hurry the fuck up.

I imagine Raelynn here in the middle of this mess, and it makes me feel even worse. I clutch the note tighter in my hand, wishing I'd thought to stow it someplace safe before getting off the plane. Even though I saved the number in my phone, I want to preserve her handwriting.

"Ben!" someone shouts. "Dude! Just one picture! PLEASE!"

The elevator dings and security ushers me inside quickly. I don't release a breath until the doors glide shut and I'm away

from the crowd.

“From now on, we’ll enter through the back entrance,” the head of the security detail informs me.

I nod and look away.

I realize the entire Olympic Games will be lost on someone like me. I’ve been here before, and any modicum of excitement I felt about defending our Olympic title is dead now. I’ll attend practices, turn it on when I hit the court, stand up on that podium, and hold up my gold medal for the flashing cameras. I’ll attend the required press conferences, host the scheduled Nike-branded luncheon for the release of my sneakers, and I’ll do it all without a single complaint. But here, in this tiny apartment, reality will hit me so hard it feels like I might double over from the weight of it.

Inside our room, I toss my bag on the bed, and Anthony follows suit.

“I’m going to go check out the food situation,” he tells me, leaving without asking if I want to go with him.

I sit down on the edge of the bed, look at the bleak decor, and then slowly unfold my hand. The note is moist on the edges. Some of the ink has run. I flatten it out on the nightstand and grab for my phone, confirming I have the right number saved. Then, before I can think better of it, I press call.

I hold the phone up to my ear with bated breath. It rings over and over, and it feels like a dagger is slowly sinking into my gut.

Then, finally, a guy picks up. “Hello?”

I frown in confusion. “Oh...sorry. Is this Raelynn’s phone?”

“No, man. I think you have the wrong number.”

His voice fades out at the end and I can tell he’s taken the phone away from his ear, about to hang up.

“Hey wait.” I read him the number on the note.

“Yeah, that’s my number,” he says, growing impatient. “I think you got it by mistake.”

Then he hangs up and I stare down at the numbers I memorized that are now utterly useless.

Raelynn gave Lele a wrong phone number, maybe by accident, but most likely on purpose.

Just to be sure, I call it once more, being sure to dial every number with careful attention to detail. The same guy answers and tells me to fuck off.

Desperate now, I open the internet browser on my phone and type in Dale’s Diner in Pine Hill. There’s no website, but I find its Google Maps landing page. There are three reviews alongside an address. Under that, it asks if I own this business and want to add a phone number and operating hours.

I try to think back and determine if I ever saw Raelynn answer a phone while she was working.

No. *Fuck.*

How can a place exist today without a phone number?

I’m starting to feel anxiety creep up my neck. My hands are shaking. My chest burns with every breath. *It’s fine.* I have money to burn. Resources at my disposal. I’ll ask my assistant to look into her. Hire a private investigator if needed.

Then I remember.

The nursing home.

*Yes.*

I search the name on Google and there's a number listed on their website. Thank god. I dial it and my heart pounds while I wait for someone to answer. Then—like I've been doused in frigid water—I realize what I'm doing with aching clarity.

“Hello?” someone answers in a polite tone.

Silence.

“*Hello?* This is Brookdale Assisted Living. Can I help you?”

I immediately cover my mouth with my hand as I slide the phone away from my ear and hang up.

I can't do this. I can't invade her life like this. No private investigator. No leaving messages for her at her dying grandmother's nursing home. *Fuck. Oh fuck.*

What do I do?

What *can* I do?

“Ben? You okay?” Anthony asks sometime later when he finds me sitting on the edge of the bed, right where he left me hours ago.

No.

I'm not.



## Part Two

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# Chapter Twenty-Four

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**T**here are four of us crammed inside the tiny office on the third floor of the research lab. They've given us this one corner of the building to designate as ours, and we've really done our best to make it feel like home. Julia strung heart-shaped twinkle lights from the ceiling for Valentine's Day and never took them down. The massive cutout of Jamie from *Outlander* (kilt and all) we gifted Kayla for her birthday last month lives here too, taped to the wall beside a headshot of Kayla puckering her lips at him.

I can't turn my chair completely around without bumping into Ryan, and he has to ask me to scoot back and stand up if he wants to leave. I don't think the space actually qualifies as an office, more of a broom closet, but as lowly graduate students, we're lucky to have it. The others might begrudge this stuffy office inside the Cahill Center at Caltech, but I don't. I could be back at Dale's, delivering pancakes at this very moment.

This is where I dreamed of returning to when I was stuck in that trailer back in Texas.

That dream sustained me during the long hours waiting tables and cleaning houses.

And that dream was realized much sooner than I thought it'd be. Sooner than I *wanted* it to be.

I wasn't prepared for how quickly Nan passed. How suddenly she was struck with a bad case of pneumonia. I was by her bedside for a week straight, missing my shifts at Dale's, asking for time off from the cleaning company. When they fired me, I couldn't blame them. I was too caught up with Nan to worry about getting a paycheck. I was so laser-focused on her treatments, worried when they said the medicine wasn't helping like it should, worried that my time with her was getting cut short. Sure, I wanted to chase my dreams, but not at the expense of Nan. I would have stayed with her forever. I would have lived in that trailer and worked at Dale's for years if only it meant I could keep her alive.

She passed a mere three weeks after Ben left. He was still in Tokyo for the Games, winning a gold medal, carrying the American flag for his country, highlighted on every magazine cover at the supermarket. Meanwhile, I was standing at a gravesite, burying the only person who ever truly loved me. The only family member I've ever known.

My stomach hurts just thinking about that time in my life—that depression I might not have escaped from if not for Professor Olmsted. She's the one who came to Texas and convinced me to leave after Nan had passed. She was the one who helped me pack what meager belongings I had into boxes and helped me move back across the country. I don't know what I would have done if she hadn't bothered to care about me, if she hadn't continued to call even though I never answered. She never gave up on me, and with her help, I finished my undergraduate degree and applied for this master's program.

Somehow, things have worked out, but even now, today, I would trade it all to have Nan.

I push all those memories aside and swivel in my chair to face the others.

We're quite a crew of misfits, stuck in this astronomy and astrophysics building under the tutelage of Professor Olmsted. We each have a different role in her research lab, but right now, mine consists of getting everyone to focus on lunch.

"Have you guys made a decision yet? I'm starving!"

"I would kill for some pad thai from that place down the street," Ryan says with an audible groan.

"Yeah, well, unfortunately, it's like \$20 a plate," Julia says, thumping Ryan on the head with her pencil.

"Can't we all split it?" Kayla suggests.

"*Four ways?*" Ryan scoffs. "We'd end up with like two bites each."

Kayla lets her head drop to her desk. "Oh my god, it *sucks* being a poor grad student. Remind me to come back pretty instead of smart in my next life."

I laugh. "Right, okay, pad thai is out."

"Surely we can find free food somewhere," Ryan suggests. "This is a college campus! There's always some weird organization trying to draw unsuspecting undergrads into their clutches with the promise of pizza and soda."

"Last time we did that, we almost accidentally became Scientologists," Kayla points out with a visible shiver up her spine.

“You don’t just *accidentally* become a Scientologist,” Julia insists. “It’s this whole *thing*, I’m pretty sure. I don’t know, ask Tom Cruise.”

“We’re getting nowhere,” I remind everyone as my stomach growls for the hundredth time.

There’s a knock on the door of our small office, and Professor Olmsted dips her head inside.

“Julia, were you able to make those slides for Thursday’s lecture?”

Originally from Iran by way of London, Professor Olmsted has an accent that was tricky to place when I first met her. She’s in her late 50s, tall and lithe with dark brown skin. I’m so envious of her effortless style. She’s always so put together. Today it’s tailored wide-legged trousers that remind me of Katharine Hepburn paired with a crisp white button-down rolled to her elbows. I’ve never seen her in a dress or a skirt, and if I had any money to my name, I’d totally copy her outfit for outfit. As it is, I’m rocking a free Caltech sweatshirt and jeans.

“Yes, and I’ve emailed the new slide deck out to the class already. They should have enough time to review it all before Thursday.”

“Good. Thanks.” She props her shoulder against the doorframe, assessing us with an amused glare. “What were you all moaning about when I walked in?”

“Food,” Ryan replies. “What else?”

She rolls her eyes and disappears, returning a minute later with a tray of sandwiches in tow.

“I stole these from the faculty lounge. Don’t rat me out.”

She sets the tray on the edge of my desk, and like hungry vultures, we converge on it.

“Hey, *easy!*” Kayla says, shoving Ryan with her shoulder. “That was my finger you nearly yanked off.”

“You do all eat, don’t you?” Professor Olmsted asks, looking to me for an answer.

I shrug as Julia replies, “Sure. We’ve got our three basic food groups: cereal, ramen, and Pop-Tarts.”

“Lord help us,” Professor Olmsted says, pressing her hand to her forehead.

“I did have a vegetable last week,” Ryan says with a proud smile.

We all laugh as Professor Olmsted shakes her head.

“Right, well. I’m sure you all have enough work to get to so I won’t keep you, but I wanted to give you these.”

She tugs a white envelope out of the back pocket of her pants and holds it out for Ryan to take since he’s the closest to the door.

“What’s this?”

“A little treat.”

Ryan opens the envelope and slowly pulls out what looks to be a stack of tickets. His eyes go wide with wonder.

“No shit.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Professor Olmsted says with a cheeky smile.

His gaze flits back and forth between her and the tickets. “Is this a joke? These are insanely good seats. Practically courtside!”

“Courtside for what?” Julia says, trying to grab for the tickets, but Ryan holds them just out of her reach. The two of them are eternally at odds and, I suspect, secretly in love.

She pokes his ribs and he finally passes three of them over. She takes one and keeps them moving so Kayla gets one and then finally the last one is passed to me.

I look down at the ticket in my hand and my heart stops, then immediately starts hammering hard in my chest, pummeling my ribs.

“These are basketball tickets,” I say dumbly.

“What gave it away?” Ryan asks sarcastically. “The huge basketball in the top right corner *or...*?”

Professor Olmsted laughs. “I know none of you are the sporty type—”

“I take no offense to that,” Ryan retorts with a wide-mouthed grin.

“But...I figure it’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience. *And* it’s free.”

“I love free,” Kayla says.

“Don’t *you* want to use them?” I ask, trying to foist the ticket back on Professor Olmsted. “I can’t accept this.”

She shakes her head. “They were a gift to my husband from his firm, but we have dinner plans that night. I thought I’d pass them on to you lot since I know how hard you all have been working lately. *And* they include a meal and drink package too. It’s a real splurge.”

“You had me at meal,” Kayla says before taking another bite of her sandwich.



Professor Olmsted smiles. “Good. Go and enjoy. *Raelynn* —” My gaze shoots up to meet hers, and she smiles gently. “You’ll go, won’t you?”

I nod gently, knowing full well that I’m lying. When she looks relieved, guilt washes over me. I know she keeps a careful watch on me compared to the others. She worries about me when she shouldn’t. I’m doing perfectly fine. I’m doing well in all of my seminars and courses, and my work on my master’s thesis is ahead of schedule. Though something tells me it’s not my schoolwork she’s concerned about.

After she leaves, running off to a staff meeting, I set my basketball ticket down beside my laptop, my attention sliding back to it every few seconds. Annoyed, I eventually shove it into my bag so I don’t have to keep looking at it—not that it truly matters. Even if I were able to focus on my work, the others are still chatting about the basketball game. They can’t believe their luck; I can’t believe the odds.

“I don’t know a single thing about the sport,” Julia admits. “Are there halves or quarters or what?”

“Who cares? Ben Castillo will be there. That’s reason enough to go,” Kayla insists.

“Ben Castillo?” Julia asks curiously.

I squeeze my eyes closed as my stomach ties itself into a knot.

Kayla groans. “Hold on.” I listen to her turn back to her computer and start to type. Then she swivels her screen so Julia has a clear view of it. I glance quickly over my shoulder to confirm what I suspect, and then I force my attention back to my computer.

“Are you *kidding* me? That’s a real basketball player?”

“Yes. God, look at him.”

I can't.

Even after all this time.

“Raelynn, check him out.”

I wave her off. I refuse to turn and ogle whatever image Kayla has pulled up. It'll only hurt to see him, and I already have it hard enough as it is. I've been back in Los Angeles for a year and a half, and everywhere I turn, Ben is there. He's on magazine covers and in commercials. Yesterday I heard people discussing him on the campus bus and wished I could afford fancy headphones to block them out. Half the student body at Caltech owns at least one of his jerseys, and I've seen even more crop up lately because of how well Los Angeles has been playing in the western conference. They're currently on a winning streak, and Ben's expected to carry his team to another NBA title. I know all of this not because I seek out information about him—in fact I actively try to keep my blinders up when it comes to Ben Castillo, but it's utterly futile in a city where he's so beloved.

“So we'll go and pig out on free food and check out the eye candy. Basketball might be my new favorite sport,” Kayla says.

I spin my chair to face them—difficult as it is in the cramped space—and dig my ticket back out of my bag. “Do you guys know anyone who would want mine?”

Three faces slack-jawed and frozen with disbelief stare back at me. Then they all start firing off questions one on top of the other.

*“Are you kidding?”*

*“You know we don't have any other friends.”*

*“Why can’t you come?”*

I lean over and drop my ticket on Ryan’s desk. “I’m busy that night.”

“Not any busier than the rest of us,” Julia points out.

“I have some reading I need to catch up on.”

Kayla guffaws at this. “Now I *know* you’re lying. You’re never behind on reading. Never. The world would have to be ending. And even then, you’d be fighting off zombies *while* up to date on Dr. Hughes’ seminar slides.”

“Besides, spring break is coming up,” Julia adds.

I don’t make eye contact with a single one of them as I leave my ticket on Ryan’s desk, roll my chair back, turn, and try to focus on my emails.

None of my officemates know about Ben, obviously. And something tells me, even if I tried to tell them about it now, they wouldn’t believe me. *Yeah, yeah, hilarious. And I had sex with Chris Evans last week. Good one.*

“You know what? I just realized we should turn this game into a birthday celebration for me!” Julia says.

“How humble of you,” Ryan teases.

“What? It’s a good idea. My birthday is in two weeks and we’re too poor to celebrate it, so let’s go to the game and do it there! Maybe I can get on the jumbotron or something.”

“*Yes!* I’ll splurge and buy us all matching t-shirts to wear,” Kayla adds. “Raelynn, c’mon you have to join. What size shirt do you want?”

“I—”

Julia cuts in. “And before you insist you aren’t going, remember, it’s my birthday. Since you’re my friend, you’re contractually obligated to celebrate with me.”

Even though I’ll keep trying to weasel out of it with half-feeble excuses, I know it’s decided right then and there...I’ll go.

The next few days pass by in a frenzy of activity. I’m the teaching assistant for one of Professor Olmsted’s freshman courses, which means there are over a hundred students that demand my time and attention on a weekly basis. I arrive early to the course each week, set up Professor Olmsted’s slides on the projector, pass around the required materials, check attendance, and then take my seat at the front. In addition to her seminar, I host four small-group sessions with students from her class so we can review the material again and work through more conceptual ideas. I grade assignments, answer emails, and meet one-on-one with any students who’ve requested extra help. On top of that, I have my own studies. I’m in twelve hours of graduate level courses with an emphasis on computer science and electrical engineering. I’m a member of Caltech’s Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, which works closely with the university’s observatory. I help bridge the gap between the two fields while maintaining a GPA high enough to continue to be supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. My work is specifically focused on imaging outer space and building on the work of the Event Horizon Telescope team, who were the first group to capture an image of a black hole back in 2013.

My life revolves around school, and when I’m finally free, I cram into a room I share with Kayla in a rental house near campus filled with other graduate students. It’s a nightmare

situation, too many people and too few bathrooms. I never have privacy, Kayla loves chatting late into the night, and her side of the room is constantly messy. I never thought I would, but I actually miss that old trailer on Sheriff Corbin's property. Sure, it had its faults, but it was quiet and all mine.

Saturday evening, I sit on my bed in my room with my back against the wall and my laptop propped in front of my crossed legs. I'm supposed to be working. Even now, a new email from a student tumbles into my inbox, demanding my attention, but I'm staring out the window, remembering. Recalling my time with Ben is more pain than pleasure, but still, I do it all the time. I dwell in memories more than I should, and even now, I can picture my moments with him all too well.

The night we lay in the back seat of his SUV, the air a warm blanket surrounding us, his hand between my thighs. Sometimes, it's not the intimacy I crave the most, it's the friendship. The tilt of his smile and the cut of his deep dimples as he sat across the counter at Dale's watching me while I worked. God, I miss it.

I've been with someone else since him. One drunk night at a party here on campus, I let a friend of Ryan's kiss me to see if maybe I'd been building Ben up in my mind. Maybe any guy would make me feel the same way he did: worshipped and admired, crazy with desire. Maybe I just needed to get back out there. Maybe I put too much emphasis on him. He was the first guy I had sex with, and it's not out of the question that I might have latched onto him solely because of that.

At the party, Ryan's friend was so eager, so wide-eyed and surprised when I let him lead me upstairs to his room. I had every intention of having sex with him, just ripping the Band-

Aid off with a cute, simple guy and getting it over with. He laid me down on his bed, wedged his knee between my legs, and started kissing me. I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to push away the nagging doubts, and still, I couldn't get into it. He tasted like cheap beer and his hands were too rough and too eager. He found the zipper on my jeans and I winced. He felt it and pulled back.

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

I was crying by then, and he could tell. There was no way for me to stem the flow.

“Shoot. God. I'm sorry.”

He was so nice and helped me sit up and straighten my shirt.

I bawled on the edge of his bed, and he just sat there and let me.

“I...I didn't hurt you, did I?”

I shook my head, trying to assure him he hadn't.

We've run into each other around campus a few times since then, and he's always been extremely nice, if not slightly awkward.

Other than that night, I haven't delved into any other relationships while back here in California. For the first while, it made sense. I told myself I needed time to heal and refocus my attention on school. I wanted to mourn Nan in peace, but thoughts of Ben were always there. Months slipped by and then a full year passed plus some, and now it just feels embarrassing. How long am I going to grieve a fleeting romance? How long am I going to pretend what we had was something worth this much heartache? It's pathetic.

The doorknob jangles and Kayla curses. Then the door flies open and she spills inside, arms laden with her book bag, water bottle, sweater, textbooks, and a bright blue shopping bag. She shuffles over to her bed quickly and plops everything down before it all tumbles onto the floor. From the top of the pile, she plucks a t-shirt out of the shopping bag and tosses it over to my bed.

“Those things are everywhere. Some guy set up a table on Del Mar and they were going like hot cakes. I grabbed four. He was sold out of our size, but I’ll cut them and make them crop tops or something.”

I hold up the white t-shirt that’s meant to mimic a basketball jersey and laugh when I see it’s Ben’s number. Fate has a cruel sense of humor.

“What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“I know it’s way too big but, like I said, I’ll fix them before tomorrow. They’ll be cute.”

Tomorrow.

I’ll see Ben in the flesh tomorrow.

Why does that make me feel so sick?

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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“**W**ould you stop fussing with it?” Kayla says. “It’s *fine*.”

I tug on the crop top as we walk past the security checkpoint at the Staples Center. “It’s a little short.”

She grabs my hand and squeezes it. “It’s *supposed* to be. That’s the style these days.”

“Are you sure? I swear my midriff is showing.”

She rolls her eyes, but I’m not convinced. I feel like I’m trying too hard in this outfit. A crop top? *Who am I kidding?* I’m a boring grad student. Most days, I don’t even bother with makeup. I toss my hair into a braid or ponytail, throw on a pair of leggings or jeans, and call it a day. I spend my life hunched over textbooks and computers. I’d look pale and sickly if I didn’t make a point to eat my lunch outside every day and soak up as much vitamin D as I can.

Since we rarely see the outside of a research lab, Kayla and Julia both insisted we really try to go all out tonight with hair and makeup. Kayla hopes we’ll catch the eye of one of the basketball players (dear god, please no), and I suspect Julia secretly wants Ryan to take notice of her. So far so good. Since we all met up near campus to catch an Uber, he hasn’t been

able to peel his eyes off her. Even now, he edges toward her as we walk through the crowd toward our section of seats.

“Stick close together,” he says, touching her elbow.

“It’s not a big deal if we lose each other,” Julia says with a shrug, holding up her ticket. “We know where to go.”

He frowns, and I look away to hide my smile. How can two people be so oblivious to what’s right in front of them?

“Food first?” Kayla asks, veering off toward the line for the concession stand.

“Yes!” Julia claps. “I want to try it all.”

I would join them in line, but my stomach is in knots. Nothing sounds appetizing, least of all a heaping plate of nachos or a massive chili cheese dog.

“Raelynn?” Kayla asks. “You want anything?”

I shake my head. “No. You guys go ahead.”

Ryan frowns and leaves Julia’s side to head over to me. “What’s up?”

I train my face into a gentle smile. “Nothing.”

He arches a skeptical brow. “I’m not buying it. Are you stressed about finals coming up or something?”

Not in the least, but I appreciate him feeding me an excuse that’s somewhat feasible.

“Oh...kind of.” I shrug.

It’s not an outright lie, right?

He huffs in disbelief. “If *you’re* worried, there’s no hope for the rest of us. Besides, spring break is next week. You’ll have tons of time to study with us out of your hair.”

“Ryan!” Kayla shouts. “What do you want?”

He hurries to join them at the front of the line to order his food, and I hang back, looking around and checking out the stadium. Even here, in the mezzanine, it’s all decked out for the team—their logos and signs are everywhere, posters boasting past championships, and huge cardboard cutouts of Ben and Trey and Anthony that fans can pose with. People are actually doing it too, lining up and everything.

Everyone’s dressed in jerseys and gear, and I’m suddenly in disbelief that I’m here, putting myself through this. Maybe I didn’t resist hard enough. I could have faked an illness or something. What good is it going to do to sit here in this stadium confronted by all of Ben’s greatness? How will that end well for me? Spoiler: it won’t.

After my friends have their arms laden with food and drinks, we head toward our section of seats. The circular mezzanine branches out on the left and right so fans can go up to level two or down toward the court. Our tickets are on the lower level, so we head down, and down some more. With every step, I start to lose my cool more and more.

“These tickets are insane,” Ryan says, leading us into a row on my left.

We’re smack-dab in the middle of the arena, only six rows back from the court.

“We’re almost close enough to touch them,” Julia says in amazement.

“Just how long do you think your arms are?” Ryan teases.

She rolls her eyes. “You *know* what I mean.”

She grabs a seat, Ryan quick to sit beside her. Kayla is next, and I take up the tail end, right on the stairs, which is

great in case I need to make a clean getaway.

“Tip-off should be any minute now,” Ryan says, leaning forward eagerly. “If we’d arrived earlier, we might have been able to catch them before they went back into the locker room.”

Thank god we didn’t.

There are dozens of people on the court, preparing for the game, dancers and mascots entertaining the fans while music blares overhead. The camera for the jumbotron jumps around the crowd, highlighting all the enthusiastic fans with their painted faces and foam fingers.

I bounce my knees nervously, wishing I had something to do with my hands other than wring them out. Kayla looks over at me, and I realize how weird I’m being. I slide my hands over my knees and offer up a smile. She eyes me suspiciously before getting distracted by her nachos.

The lights in the stadium suddenly go black, and the crowd roars. The noise level inside the Staples Center is at an ear-piercing all-time high. The center bank of screens and scoreboards hanging above the court start blinking neon colors in time with the music. An announcer encourages everyone to welcome the Utah Jazz as they take the court, and most everyone does the exact opposite. There’re a few errant cheers, but this home crowd is loyal and saves all its love for when the announcer starts to list off the starting lineup for Los Angeles one by one, building up the suspense.

It’s such a huge production. Flashing lights and plumes of smoke and pulsing music accompanies each player as they emerge from the locker room to screams and cheers from the crowd.

With all my worrying about Ben, I hadn't even considered the fact that I would know the other players taking the court.

“Number fifteen, *ANTHONY BRADSHAW!*”

The announcer's booming voice sends goose bumps cascading down my arms.

I whistle and clap as loud as I can, genuinely excited. “Go Anthony!”

Then I look over to see my friends staring at me oddly.

“Are you a big fan?” Kayla teases.

I shrug and lean back in my chair. “Just being nice. I would want people to clap for me too.”

Fortunately, they brush off my enthusiasm, and when Trey takes the court next, I rein it in a little.

Still, I can't keep a huge smile from spreading across my face. This really is cool. When I first met the guys, it was in my diner, in my tiny neck of the woods. It was easy to forget who they are in real life.

“And now, your three-time NBA finals MVP, Western Conference Player of the Year, number twenty-eight, *BEN CASTILLO!*”

The stadium rumbles as the cacophony of cheering fans roars louder than ever. I feel the noise drumming in my chest. My heart pulses to Drake's “Forever” blaring from the speakers as Ben emerges from the dark tunnel out onto the court.

At first, he walks with his head ducked, his attention down at his feet. He jogs out, wearing the team's dark purple tracksuit over his jersey. I can see nothing but his tall frame and rich brown hair, highlighted by the neon colors. I don't

blink, don't breathe. Time ceases to exist as he slowly lifts his head to look out at the crowd, and the air rushes out of me as if I've just been struck square in the chest by a well-aimed arrow.

It hurts more than I expected.

*God.* He looks good. Better than anyone *should* look. It's horribly unfair. His dark brown hair is trimmed shorter than the last time I saw him but still blessedly carries a hint of curl on top. His patrician nose, dark brows, and sharp cheekbones bear no mark of peace. He's a soldier walking onto the battlefield. His intimidating jaw is clean-shaven, and he looks utterly focused as he joins the rest of his team on the court.

The lights come back up and the players immediately start running through short drills. Utah sticks to one side, Los Angeles across from them. I watch with rapt attention as the players warm up before tip-off, basketballs flying toward the net three at a time as the players pass and move aside quickly.

My stomach squeezes tight as I stare at Ben, completely mesmerized. His handsome face is a mask of determination. I've never seen him look so severe. It almost takes me back to the first time I saw him at the gas station, when he seemed closed off and unapproachable, before I knew him. It's his game face, and I'm sure it works wonders.

Just when my heart rate finally starts to settle and I think I've come to terms with his unholy hotness, Anthony passes by him and says something as they bump shoulders. Ben smiles and my mouth gapes open.

Okay.

There we have it, folks—I've just caught my death.

*That* smile on *that* face is just it for me. Put me in my grave.

“He’s so freaking hot,” Kayla says before proceeding to shout at the top of her lungs. “Ben! BEN! WE LOVE YOU!”

I drop for cover like I’m in the middle of a war zone. Then I grab Kayla’s arm and yank her down beside me. “Are you insane?” I hiss.

“Ow! You’re hurting me!”

“Don’t shout his name! He’ll hear us!”

She’s looking at me like I’m certifiable. “You mean among all the other fans *also* screaming his name?”

I loosen my grip, and she extracts her arm and shakes it out exaggeratedly.

“You’re lucky I just set down my nachos. Had you spilled them...” She mimes a finger slicing across her throat.

Yeah, yeah.

I peer back out onto the court, and sure enough, Ben still doesn’t know I exist. He’s over on the side talking to a coach. I’m in the clear.

“Seriously, what’s going on with you? Can I get you a beer or something? Here, have mine.”

She presses her drink into my hand, and maybe that’s not such a bad idea. Maybe it’ll give me a little bit of courage to endure the next few hours. I take a sip and settle back down into my seat. Ryan and Julia and Kayla eat their pregame snacks as the team finishes their final warm-up drills, then the team jogs toward the sidelines and starts stripping out of their tracksuits.

I keep my attention on Ben like I'm being graded on it. I watch him peel that jacket off and expose his tan arms. I will him to look in my direction, and I also live in fear that he actually might. I should have known better though; Ben is fully focused on the game. The rabid fans screaming at the top of their lungs don't even register for him.

By the time the starting lineup takes the court for tip-off, I've downed half of Kayla's beer. I squeeze the cup with my hand as Anthony jumps up and taps the ball toward Trey. Los Angeles stays in control most of the first half, and it's easy to follow the game play even though I barely know anything about basketball. Sure, I couldn't name Ben's position, but I know he scores a lot. Trey and Anthony pass him the ball, he deftly sinks it into the net, and points build and build on the scoreboard. Everything happens so fast. They sprint up and down the court, and I can barely keep up. God, he must be exhausted. How does he do it?

The second half is no less amazing than the first. Ben and his team seem unstoppable. It's like they've found a pace of play that can't be matched. Ben and Anthony are especially in sync. At one point, Ben gets a rebound and passes the ball down to Anthony all the way on the other side of the court. Before Utah can even catch Anthony, he's already dunked it in the basket.

"Hel-lo, earth to Raelynn."

Kayla waves her hand in front of my face and I blink and lean toward her. Only a bit though, my attention still on Ben as he attempts a three-point shot.

The ball swoops through the net, and I clench my fist and barely refrain from leaping off my feet in celebration.

"We're going to get more food. You want anything?"



They've already had multiple rounds of snacks: popcorn, hot dogs, cotton candy. Anything you can eat in this stadium is now sitting in their stomachs. If the chairs weren't bolted to the ground, they'd probably go for those too.

Any other night, I'd join them, but I still have no appetite, especially now. Watching Ben play isn't relaxing by any means. I'm on the edge of my seat, holding my breath with every pass, every shot, every block. Earlier, when a player from Utah rammed his elbow into Ben's ribs and garnered a foul, I nearly stopped breathing altogether. I didn't feel like the two measly free throws the referee awarded Ben were good enough. After it happened, Ben winced and pressed a hand to his side, obviously in pain, and I chewed my bottom lip, wondering how badly he was hurting.

Now, Kayla throws her hands into the air in defeat, having had enough of me.

"Oh...no. No. Sorry, I don't want anything." I wave her off.

On the court, Los Angeles calls a timeout and the players jog over to the side. Ben is right in front of me, but we're divided by the five rows of people between us. Still, it doesn't feel like much at all. It's closer than we've been in years.

A trainer passes him a towel and he wipes his face, leaning in to listen to his coach.

I'm oblivious to the fact that the jumbotron has turned its attention toward the crowd, hopping from fan to fan as they go wild seeing themselves on screen.

"Oh my god! Hold on! We can't get food yet. This is my chance!" Julia screams, leaping to her feet and dragging Ryan with her. Kayla joins in too, and then she grabs my hand. I've

been such a horrible friend tonight that I don't feel like I can deny them this too.

I stand and wave my hands gently while they all dance around, enjoying themselves and letting loose. I'm actually shocked when their endeavors pay off and we suddenly appear on screen.

“GUYS!” Julia screams. “That’s us!”

Ben, the team, everything is forgotten in that moment as we all go crazy, shouting and dancing and making a spectacle of ourselves. Even I'm excited to see myself up there, blown up and huge. I'm laughing alongside Kayla, who's thrown her arms around me, and together, we jump up and down. Then the jumbotron swoops to another section of the crowd and we all turn to each other in disbelief.

*“We’re celebrities now!”*

*“Can you believe we made it on there?!”*

*“Why didn't I think to get a picture?! No one will believe us!”*

It takes us a second to catch our breaths and calm down from the experience. As they leave to get food, I take my seat and turn back to the court. The guys are back in play now, but when I look down at the row of players resting on the bench on the side of the court, I find Anthony staring back at me, brows furrowed in confusion. When our eyes lock, he rears back, and I suspect he finally realizes I'm the person he suspects me to be. *A ghost back from the dead.* I don't know what I expect him to do—scowl, frown, flip me off, but he does none of those things. Instead, he unveils a huge megawatt smile. Fans notice and turn back, looking at me.

I smile and give him a small wave before he shakes his head, almost in disbelief, and turns back to the game.

Fortunately, my friends aren't there to notice.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

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I'm walking out of the Staples Center toward my car, escorted by security on both sides. My attention is down on my phone as I check to see if Caleb's nanny, Donna, messaged me at all during the game. She's in her mid-sixties and flat-out hates technology. When I first hired her last year, I bought her the newest iPhone and walked her through how to use it. For a few months, she knew nothing beyond how to answer a phone call. Now, she can call and text, and recently, she's learned how to send photos too. It's her crowning achievement.

Tonight, she snapped a shot of Caleb tucked in bed, and I zoom in on it, trying to see as much of him as I can. Donna's hands aren't steady and the photo is a little blurry, but I can see that he has one arm wrapped around his Lightning McQueen stuffy and his thumb stuck in his mouth. His face is so relaxed and sweet while he's asleep. It's such a juxtaposition to the kind of kid he is when he's awake. A wrecking ball. A cyclone. A boy on a mission to destroy the world. I smile thinking about it.

“Bro! Ben! WAIT UP!”

I glance back to see Anthony all-out sprinting to catch up to me. His security guards are barely able to keep up with him, and I can tell they're annoyed by having to try.

I pause and turn back, irritated. I'm ready to be home. I want to check in on Caleb and get some sleep. We play again the day after tomorrow, and I'm tired just thinking about it.

“What do you want, man?”

He hunches over and grabs his knees. “Damn, I've been trying to catch up with you since the game ended. I lost track of you when you were doing postgame press. I just fucking *ran* from the locker room.”

“You in that bad of shape?”

He shoots fire with his gaze. “You're kidding, right? How many damn points did I put up on the board tonight? Huh?”

I grin. “Well, here I am. What do you want?”

He stands up and his entire expression changes; his eyes go soft and his smile falls. “Raelynn was at the game tonight.”

For one second, hope lives inside me—before it's snuffed out by a cold dose of reality.

I roll my eyes and turn around to keep walking.

“I'm telling you, it was her!”

“Right.”

He runs to catch up to me again. “Dude. Why don't you believe me? She was there in the stands!”

I give up fighting him, exhausted from the game. “Okay, she was there.”

“Why don't you sound excited? She's in California!”

I do a poor job of masking my annoyance when I answer him. “What do you want me to do about it?”

For one, I don’t really believe him. He *thinks* he saw Raelynn, but there’s no way she was here.

No way.

I’ve had a hell of a time in the last year and a half. It’s been one thing after another—a constant fire burning in every direction. Half the time, I can barely sleep with all the things running through my mind. It’s not as if I’ve been able to properly put Raelynn in my past. I left Texas and flew straight to Tokyo for the Olympic Games, and while I was still there, playing in the tournament, Shelby went into labor three weeks early. Mike called me in Tokyo, and I’ll never forget that moment, where I was, what I was doing. I was back in my apartment at the athletes’ village with the name and number for a private investigator pulled up on my phone. It was a shitty thing to consider, hunting down Raelynn’s information like that. I would have never gone through with it; I’d already decided against it, but still, I vacillated between thinking it was only a little wrong and convincing myself it was outright criminal.

When Mike called, I already had my phone in my hand, finger poised over the number for the private investigator. I answered in a daze, barely comprehending what he was telling me. Words leapt out at me like “preterm labor”, “NICU”, “premature lungs”, “on oxygen”.

Here was this pivotal moment in my life, the exact instant in which I went from caring solely for myself to desperately loving another human beyond comprehension. I barely knew about this baby boy. It shouldn’t have wrecked my world that his life was in peril, and yet, it did. I was a mess from what

had transpired with Raelynn, and I was already not in a sound state of mind. I barely recall how I stayed in Tokyo the last few days of the tournament. I packed my things after I got off the phone with Mike, called Coach Dalton, and told him I was getting the first flight back to the States. I remember Anthony finding me at the elevator bank, yanking me back, trying to get me to look him in the eyes as he convinced me my baby boy would be alright. He'd talked to Mike on the phone too. Caleb was stable, for now. It wasn't as dire as it seemed.

Still, I was a mess. Coach Dalton didn't force me to stay those last two days, but what choice did I have? We had that final game in the championship, blew Spain out of the water, and I took the first flight back to California before the dust had even settled on the court.

My feelings for Raelynn were never something I could fully dwell on once I arrived back home. Caleb was in the NICU for a week and I barely got to visit him because of all the restrictions at the hospital, not to mention, once he was released, Shelby and I were still finalizing our divorce and barely on speaking terms. The custody arrangements hadn't been worked out, and since she was exclusively breastfeeding, Caleb had to stay with her. It was a fucking mess. I was drinking more and losing focus. I didn't return phone calls and missed offseason practices. I barely saw my friends and teammates and considered ending my contract with Los Angeles, taking a year off, or even quitting the game altogether.

Through it all, somehow, during dark moments and lonely times, I thought about Raelynn. I wondered what she was doing, how she was, if Patrick still messed with her, if people were tipping her well at Dale's, if her grandmother was still doing okay. On my worst days, I imagined she'd moved on



from me and had a boyfriend. I pictured her with some guy from her small town. The two of them settling down together, starting a family. I bought plane tickets to Texas four times, telling myself I was just going to show up and see her, convince her to give me a real chance. I'd pack my bags, drive to the airport—one time I even made it all the way to the gate, and then I looked at my life and realized I had nothing to offer her. Everything was chaos.

Even after Caleb made it out of the woods, he was a small baby. The first few weeks were touch and go, and his pediatrician was concerned with his failure to thrive. Shelby and I argued about our custody agreement, and I still couldn't stand to be in the same room as Mike. A part of me hoped their romance would fizzle out once Caleb arrived, not because I loved Shelby still, but because I was miserable and I wanted everyone else to be miserable too. But Mike didn't disappear no matter how much I wanted him to.

Slowly, over time, Caleb started growing, and since then, that boy has never stopped. He's an eater. Anything we put in front of him gets shoveled into his mouth, and now, he's off the charts for height and weight.

Against all odds, we adapted to our nontraditional family dynamic. I learned to live with Mike. He learned to defer to me concerning my son, and Shelby and I eventually agreed that we would split time with Caleb down the middle, though she takes him more when I have a heavy travel schedule, and I get more days with him during my offseason.

A few months back, Mike and Shelby even got married, and though I didn't attend the small ceremony, I was somehow...*okay* with it all, even somewhat happy for them. Don't ask me why. I guess I just know that Mike's good with

Caleb, and I'd rather Shelby be with someone I can trust around my son.

So here we are. One big family.

So what if I'm lonelier than ever? So what if I haven't had time or interest to delve into dating since I left Raelynn behind in Texas? I've been focusing on being a dad, and right now, that's the most important thing in my life. There's no room for anything else. Caleb needs me.

"She's here, Ben," Anthony repeats like he wishes he could shake some sense into me.

I turn and walk away from him.

I don't know what he wants from me. I'm still not even convinced he saw her. He's my friend and he wants the best for me, but telling me Raelynn is here, giving me that hope...

I just can't do it again.

I can't go back to that place.

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In the morning, I wake up when a foot collides with my nose.

*Jesus Christ.*

I jolt awake and look over to see Caleb sleeping sideways on the pillow beside me.

I went in and got him out of his crib last night. I don't do it all the time. I know Shelby would kill me if she knew I was messing with his sleep habits, but I was away a lot last week and I didn't get to see him much yesterday either.

I shift him and tuck him in right beside me. He stays like a limp noodle, totally out.

I glance over at the time, and once I see it's past five AM, I know there's no chance I'll be able to fall back asleep. Even if I do, Caleb usually wakes up around six.

I grab my phone, keeping the light directed away from Caleb, and ignore the emails piled up. I scroll through social media, get bored, open the Kindle app, read a few pages, then get bored of that too. I glance over at Caleb to make sure he's still sleeping, and then I open the internet browser and pause. I haven't looked into Raelynn in months. It was a bad habit I needed to break, stalking her like that, perpetually hungry for details about her life. Now though, since last night, I'm too curious to resist the urge. What if Anthony was right? What if she's back in California? I type Raelynn's name into Google alongside Caltech, and I'm surprised when a new result propagates. I'd done the same thing in the past, and there were only the old articles about her scholarships and grants. There's a link to the Caltech directory for her specific department. The page has a list of faculty, administrators, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students. Raelynn is listed among the graduate students, and her name is a link as well. My pulse pounds as I click on it, but then disappointment follows swiftly when I see how little information the page actually contains: just her email, department, faculty adviser, and the physical address for the Cahill Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics.

I go back to Google and try a different combination of search criteria. I don't delve too deeply into the implications of what I'm doing. It's early and I'm lying in my dark bedroom, and I can almost live in denial. It's not until I combine her name with her faculty adviser that a course website and PDF syllabus appears. At the top of the syllabus there's a class name, time, and location.

I stare at it and contemplate doing the unthinkable.

Then Caleb stirs and I turn my phone off quickly, setting it face down on my bedside table like I've been caught. He pops his head up, his short curls flying in every direction.

“Morning, buddy.”

He tries to say morning back to me and he's almost got it.

“I brought you into Daddy's bed last night.”

He looks around, assessing the room. Then he laughs and throws himself on top of me, his head slamming into my rib cage.

“Ow! You stinker, that hurts.”

He only laughs harder, climbing on me. I tickle underneath his chin and he really loses it, and then I slide off the bed, grabbing him by his legs, and swing him up and into my arms.

“Let's go eat breakfast.”

“Eggs!”

“How about a waffle?” I ask him, playing our game.

“Eggs!”

“Cereal?”

“*Eggs!*” he repeats vehemently.

“Ohhh, you want some scrambled eggs. You should have *told* me.”

My housekeeper, Nina, and Donna are already in the kitchen when I arrive with Caleb in my arms. He squeals and wriggles and demands to be put down so he can run over and cling to Donna's leg.

“Good morning, baby,” she says, rubbing her hand through his curls. “I went in to check on you this morning and you'd

mysteriously disappeared from your crib.”

Her gaze slices up to me, and I wink. She laughs and shakes her head.

“Are you cooking breakfast or do you want me to whip something up?” she asks me.

“I’ve got it. In fact, I’ll be fine with Caleb most of the morning. I just have to go in this afternoon to review film.”

“That’s fine. I have a date with my coffee and *The Today Show*. Don’t you two bother me.”

She tries to walk away, and Caleb clings to her leg.

“Has anyone seen Caleb?” I ask, starting to turn in a circle as if looking for him.

He erupts into a fit of giggles.

“Caleb? *Caleb?*”

He lets go of Donna and runs over to tug on my pajama pants, trying to get my attention.

“Cay-yub. Cay-yub,” he says, trying to alert me to where he is.

I make a big show of being shocked when I discover him standing right beneath me.

“*There* you are.”

Donna shoots me a conspiratorial smile on her way out of the kitchen with her coffee mug in hand, and I lift Caleb up to strap him into his high chair. At this age, he’s fine sitting in a regular chair, but breakfast runs a lot smoother when he’s strapped in and has no chance of running around the kitchen like a wild banshee.

After I cut up some fruit and drop it onto his tray, I scramble some eggs for the two of us then blend up a smoothie that he drinks down in three big gulps.

He has a green mustache, and I tell him he looks handsome.

He really is the cutest kid I've ever seen, and I don't care that I'm biased; it's a fact. He has dark skin and hair and eyebrows and these long lashes that highlight a pair of huge hazel eyes. He's all cheeks and big smiles and curly hair. Shelby says he looks just like me, and I'm starting to see it.

"Where should we go this morning? The park?"

"Daddy," he says, pointing to me.

"Yeah, I'm staying with you."

He grins and looks back down at his fruit, smashing a good bit of strawberries into his pudgy palm then shoving it all into his mouth in one go.

"Small bites, Caleb. Small bites."

He completely ignores me and goes right back to acting like a Hoover vacuum.

I set more food down on his high chair tray, and he gobbles up every morsel of it. I think he'd keep on going forever if I didn't stop him.

"Trying to outgrow your dad?" I tease.

Once he's done eating, I lift him up and carry him to the sink to rinse off his hands and face. After, I dress him quickly. It's a no-brainer on what he wants to wear: it's Lightning McQueen or nothing in this house. I grab his hat, some sunscreen and bug spray, and extra diapers and wipes. When I'm with Caleb, I can't leave the house without a whole damn

arsenal of supplies, but I've learned it's better to just take everything. I have a black backpack I use as a diaper bag, and I toss it into the front seat of my Range Rover as Donna buckles Caleb into the back seat.

"I'll have lunch ready for you both if you call me on your way home."

"Okay, I'll let you know. We might eat out. I don't have to be with the team until 1:30."

Out on my driveway, two security guards nod at me then hop into their respective SUV. They know to follow me. They're always with me, especially when I have Caleb. I've had to keep security even tighter than usual since he was born. I don't post images of him online, and I'm careful where I take him. If I had it my way, I'd keep him safe and sound at home at all times, but I know that's no way for a kid to live, so today, I go out on a limb and decide to take him to my gated neighborhood's private park. Paparazzi and press can't get through the gates that surround my neighborhood, but there's always the chance that helicopters could be circling overhead. I check the skies, anticipating them, but I think we're lucky Caleb likes to wake up at the crack of dawn. We might have a little peace and quiet this morning.

The park is deserted and my security guards hover near the street, giving me some privacy with Caleb. Even still, Caleb can't resist picking flowers and running them back over to the guys.

"Dunk-Dunk," he says, holding one up for Duncan, my head of security.

It's pretty hilarious to see a guy with about three hundred pounds of muscle accept a tiny yellow daisy and tuck it into his suit pocket.

“Thanks, Caleb,” Duncan says, all business, before he scans the perimeter of the park.

After we’re there playing alone for a while, going up and down the slides, I glance up to see a woman pushing two toddlers in a stroller. I recognize her from around the neighborhood, and she’s always been polite and distant. Caleb has played with her son before, and he’s as eager as ever when he sees the little boy climb out of his seat and run toward the playground. Caleb trots right after him.

Duncan looks to me for input, and I shake my head. I don’t think we need to have a discussion with the boy’s mom. She doesn’t have her phone out, and this neighborhood is filled with people who value privacy. There’s a reason we live behind two gates and multiple guard houses. Everyone is here for the same goal.

I take a seat on the park bench after waving at the woman. She waves back but gives me distance, which I appreciate. I’m not really in a talkative mood. I like watching Caleb chase the little boy around to the stairs, climb up, and then slip down the slide. They go one after the other, over and over again before settling in the grass babbling to each other.

I grab my phone out of my pocket, telling myself I’m going to check my texts, but I actually click on the maps icon, typing in the address to the Cahill Center and checking to see how long it would take me to drive there from Beverly Hills. Half an hour. That’s nothing.

I consider it, and it fills me with a complicated combination of anxiety and excitement. I stuff my phone back into the pocket of my jeans and lean forward, dropping my forearms on my thighs.

It would be insane, right?



Showing up to see her?

What the fuck would I say?

I laugh out loud to myself, and the woman looks at me from across the playground like I'm utterly crazy.

Guess what? Apparently I am. Because fuck. I'm doing it.

I just have to figure out how.

I can't drive over to see Raelynn right now on a whim. For one, I have Caleb with me. I haven't thought about how I want to introduce him to women I'm seeing—I've never had to deal with that issue—but it's not the sort of thing I want to spring on him, *or* Raelynn. He shouldn't be involved when I go to meet her for the first time. Second, I have to contend with my celebrity. As much as I wish I could, I can't just walk freely onto a college campus. Not even my security detail would be able to keep the crowds at bay.

In Pine Hill, I could get away with pretending to be a normal person, but in Los Angeles, there's no way. Maybe if I dropped my security, I could blend in better, but then I'd be on my own, and things tend to escalate quickly around excited fans no matter how well meaning they are.

I could never admit it aloud because it would be misprinted and misinterpreted a thousand different ways, but at this point in my career, more than appreciating my fame, I feel imprisoned by it. Every simple act from going to the grocery store to running through a drive-through line is impossible. I can't live outside of a tight set of parameters, and part of me wonders if that's why Texas was so memorable. With Raelynn, it was like I could press the reset button. To her, I was just Ben, and looking back, those few weeks seem too

good to be true, like maybe it was all just a dream. I want to press the issue. I want to see her now, here, in California.

The fact that I can't just drop everything and go find her, talk to her—hell, just *see* her—makes me all the more eager to do so.

I'm forced to sit on the idea. I hang with Caleb at the park the rest of the morning, and we head back to eat the lunch Donna makes us. After, I go in to watch film and run drills with my team, and then I make it home in time to tuck Caleb into bed. While I sit at my dining table, eating alone, I think about my options for contacting Raelynn. I can't drop the idea of seeing her.

I let two days pass, play and win another game against Sacramento Tuesday night, drop Caleb with Shelby and Mike Wednesday afternoon, and then tell Duncan he and I will take my car out the following morning, just him and me.

“Where to?”

“Caltech campus.”

“Alright. I'll have Lee and Nikko tail us.”

I frown. “That's fine, but I'd like them to stay in their car once we arrive.”

“We'll have to see what the situation's like. I'm sure I could be more helpful if you told me what you're planning. Will you meet with the coach or players? Is this a university event? I didn't see it on the schedule.”

He thinks this is basketball-related, and that's fine. I'm not prepared to tell him the truth. It's not a well-formed plan. In fact it's...mostly idiotic, and I don't need him to confirm that for me.

“It’s personal.”

He nods, understanding. “Then Lee and Nikko will remain in a car close by. Let me know when you’d like to leave.”

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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**A**fter Professor Olmsted's class on Thursday, I have a dozen students block my way to the door with questions. Most of them would be answered if only they'd read the syllabus, but I feel bad saying that. The sheer desperation in their eyes is a familiar feeling for me, so I'll respond to each inquiry, but I'll do it while on the move. It's lunch time and I'm starving, and I want to get some fresh air. I'll be stuck in the lab all afternoon, hunched over a computer.

“And is the final cumulative?” a student asks, walking fast to keep up with me as I head out into the hall.

“Yes. Professor Olmsted has gone over that.”

“How many review sessions will there be?” another student asks, holding his phone up so he can take rapid-fire notes on whatever I say.

“At least two. Check your email over the coming weeks, I'll send out the dates and times for both sessions. If neither works with your schedule, let me know and we'll figure something out.”

“And do you think she'll really include—”

I have no choice but to turn and cut them off; by now we've walked far enough that we've lost the lazy ones. The students standing in front of me are the absolute cream of the crop, the try-hard geniuses. "Listen, you all have good grades in this class. Unless there's an earth-ending meteor or something, I have no doubt you'll all finish on top. Stop overthinking it."

The student closest to me—Neal, I think his name is—laughs and shakes his head. "Right. Yeah, okay." I think I've finally gotten through to him, but then his wide, frantic eyes meet mine again. "Concerning the group project—"

Lord have mercy.

I finally feign a bathroom emergency just to get away from them. I wait in there for a few minutes, until I know for sure the coast is clear. Then, finally, I'm free.

I take the stairs down from the third floor and push open the side door. Blinding California sun instantly warms me, and I can't resist the shiver of pleasure that runs down my spine. All day, I'm freezing. I swear they keep these buildings below zero. I peel off my sweatshirt and start to thaw as I walk toward a large cluster of oak trees in the Cahill courtyard. It's a nice little pocket of green space surrounded by the building on all sides. Over the years, it's become less organized and more overgrown, as if the university landscapers have accidentally abandoned it. It's where I eat my lunch during the week, and it feels like it belongs solely to me. It's a nice secluded spot compared to other parts of campus, but today, I'm disappointed to see that my usual bench by the fountain is occupied by two guys. The secret's out about the courtyard, apparently.

I peer over at them as I walk closer, trying to decide if I should take the bench across from theirs or head back inside and cut my losses. If I go over to sit by them, I run the risk that they won't mind their own business. I hate the idea of having to endure awkward small talk with strangers during my one-hour lunch break. Or worse than that, they could be students from Professor Olmsted's class, here to demand more answers from me.

To better assess my odds, I give them both a surreptitious once-over and nearly trip over my feet when I do. *Jeez*, they stand out. For one, they're both super tall. For two, they're definitely not dressed like normal students on a college campus. The bigger one is wearing an all-black suit, for Christ's sake. Is he in the Secret Service or something? Am I about to meet the president?

When they notice me, the bigger one stands up and nods to his friend, who is wearing a black baseball cap and is hunched over with his elbows on his knees. I frown as a weird trickle of awareness makes me stop dead in my tracks.

I look between the two of them rapidly, trying to process, trying to comprehend how this could possibly be, and then I flinch when I get a better look at the guy in the hat. A guy I immediately recognize.

Clarity sinks into my stomach like a two-ton boulder.

Ben stays sitting on the bench as his suited friend passes me by and disappears back inside the building. We both stay perfectly still. Outwardly, I'm a statue, but inside, my body riots. My heart races and leaps, trying to make sense of the fact that Ben is sitting in front of me, flesh and blood. *Real*.

For so long, we just stare at each other, looking, appreciating, cataloguing, grasping, waiting for the other to

disappear into a cloud of smoke.

He's wearing jeans and an unassuming gray t-shirt. Sunglasses rest on the bench beside him, and I wonder if he wore them, along with the hat, to better disguise himself. He has a bit of scruff that does a poor job of softening his sharp jaw, but I'm focused on his eyes. The ones that always used to carry a hint of sadness. The same eyes that drew me in from the very beginning.

I finally start to walk again, going right to the bench beside his, and I drop my book bag down onto it with a heavy *thunk*.

Ben sits up and leans back, and even though I'm watching him do it, he keeps right on inspecting every inch of me. He doesn't even care that I'm observing him soak me in. There's a confidence and a laziness to it, like he's telling me he's waited all this time and wants a good long look at me. I endure it, trying not to fidget. Finally, his brown eyes meet mine, and my stomach squeezes.

"How's your nan?"

I wince and look away, surprised that's his first question. Emotions, raw and tender, still live so close to the surface I can barely whisper, "She passed away."

"When?" he says, sounding more distressed than I anticipated.

"Not long after you left."

He doesn't say anything for a few long beats. Birds circle each other, chirping near the fountain. Then finally, he tells me sincerely, "I'm sorry."

I shake my head, not quite up to the task of talking as I take a seat on my bench. Finally, the lump in my throat eases. "It was quick. Better than it could have been."



“Still...”

He doesn't have to go on for me to know what he's trying to say. I finally peer back over, willing him to be less intimidating than he seemed a few moments ago.

Sadly, he's not.

“How'd you know to find me here?”

“I didn't, actually.”

I frown in confusion.

He looks between me and the building behind me. “I knew you had a class in the Cahill Center. I looked it up, but once I got here, I realized I couldn't just walk in, not during the lecture. I was trying to figure out what to do—how to find you—when you walked out here.”

*Genuine luck.* We haven't had much of that in the past.

“Well, you happen to be sitting in my favorite spot.”

He glances around the courtyard, assessing it with careful attention.

“It could use some love,” he notes.

Yeah, well, couldn't we all...

“I like it,” I say, a bit defensively.

“So do I,” he says seriously, his gaze flitting back to me.

An unexpected pang of sadness and yearning settles over me.

God, why does it have to be like this?

I'd hoped I would run into him someday and get another conversation, maybe even one more night, but this isn't how I imagined it would go. This isn't carefree or fun. This isn't one

last hurrah between old lovers. This feels like I'm rubbing salt in an open wound. I realize now, to my chagrin, that my heart just doesn't stand a chance against Ben. I'm right back in that diner dress, heart on my sleeve, desperate and hopeful.

I force myself to look away and sit up straighter, pretend to be okay so I don't have to pick my dignity up off the floor later, after he leaves.

"If you're wondering how I'm doing, I'm fine. Back in school, just like you wanted. Working on my master's degree."

"I'm glad to hear it, but that's not the only reason I drove out here to talk to you. Yes, I wanted to check on you, of course, but..."

Nerves wash over me. I grip the edge of the bench, staring down at the worn path at my feet.

More silence reigns. We're both squirming and uncomfortable, dragging out this awkward moment and making it worse. Why is it so hard to see him again? Why can't I just treat him as I would a friend?

I swear I hear him curse quietly under his breath, and then he quickly asks, "Are you seeing anyone right now?"

My wide-eyed gaze darts up to him then shyly falls right back to my feet.

I shake my head slowly and gulp down a million questions.

*Why does he care? Why does it matter?*

*Please, Ben, don't do this to me again.*

"Are—are you?" I ask after mustering an ounce of courage.

He shakes his head and I lean forward off the bench, hopeful despite all the warning bells blaring in my head.

“What about Shelby?”

He frowns. “What about her? She’s married.”

And then suddenly I remember the most important question of all, the question I’ve been dying to know the answer to for the last year and a half. “And the baby?”

He nods. “Caleb. My son.”

I smile, and for the first time since I recognized him here in the courtyard, I feel weightless. “Congratulations.”

He nods, studying me curiously. “Haven’t you looked me up online? You could have learned about Caleb. Seen him, probably. I try to keep him out of the public eye, but I’m sure people snap photos of him without my consent all the time.”

My stomach squeezes in anger. “I’m sorry to hear that. I can’t imagine what that must feel like. And no, I don’t look you up. I did...briefly in the beginning, but then I learned it’s better not to. There’s a lot of information out there about someone like you. *A lot*. Some of it is silly innocuous stuff, like which brand of coffee you prefer. But there’s other stuff too.” I can’t keep the sour expression off my face. “Things I didn’t like looking at, gossip about suspected girlfriends...”

God, I feel sick.

He nods, understanding where I’m going. “Right.”

I wait for him to set the record straight on that fact, but he doesn’t. I guess he already said he’s not dating anyone, and that’s good enough for now.

“I looked you up in the beginning too. I mean, you gave me no choice in the matter, really. You gave Lele a wrong

number. I tried to call you after I left.”

I can't meet his eyes. “I thought it was for the best then.”

“And now?”

I scrunch my brows, trying to figure out what he means.

“What do you want now, Birdie? You want me to disappear again?”

I don't respond one way or the other because truthfully, I don't know. I've survived this long without him, so maybe that's a sign that I shouldn't go back down this road.

*No!*

*C'mon!*

*Are you aiming to merely survive?*

I'm so desperate for more, I wrap my arm around my stomach to keep from tumbling headfirst into Ben and demanding he remind me of what it used to feel like between us, back when I had something in life to look forward to.

For so long, I've deluded myself into thinking I should be solely focused on school. I could easily spend my entire life inside the Cahill Center, and the faculty and staff would applaud me for it.

*Push him away.*

*Leave now. Just like last time.*

Instead, my lips press together.

I have no idea how he interprets my silence before he continues, determined, “Come to my game tomorrow night. Lele will be there. She wants to see you.”

Now I know he's just being nice. I don't know why Leanna would want to see me. She must know by now that I gave her a wrong number before she left town. I hated myself for doing that, but it seemed inevitable. I knew she was going to pass it along to Ben. I knew a continued friendship with her would be a continued friendship with them all, and how was I supposed to deal with that? I needed a clean break, so that's what I made for myself.

He stands and takes a lanyard out of his back pocket. Dangling at the bottom, there's a plastic sleeve covering a special gold-leafed badge.

"For the private box," he says, handing it over to me.

I take it, but still, I tell him, "You should give it to someone else."

A beat passes—too long, and I lift my head only to realize he was waiting for me to muster up the courage to look at him.

"There's no one else," he says, meeting my gaze with brown eyes so warm I melt into them.

The courtyard doors open, and I turn to see the huge man from earlier standing in the doorway, the man I now realize must be Ben's security guard. It makes sense. He's slightly older, wearing that tidy all-black suit. He's got an earpiece, and I suspect the discreet bulge on his right hip is a gun.

"Tomorrow," Ben says before walking away, but I make no promises.

I sit on that bench, staring down at the badge, ignoring my lunch until it's time for me to head back into Cahill. I keep my encounter with Ben a secret from my friends. It isn't completely intentional. At first, I was in a daze when I arrived back at our shared office. I didn't know quite where to start,

how to condense everything into manageable bites without overwhelming them. Then, the opportunity just passed—we had to get to work and I had assignments to grade and post before the end of the day. I tucked the lanyard and badge into the bottom of my book bag and mostly forgot about it until later that night.

Tomorrow, Ryan, Kayla, and Julia will all leave town for spring break. Ryan’s road-tripping to Portland for a friend’s wedding and somehow convinced Julia to go with him, strictly as friends, but come *on*. Kayla is headed home to see her parents in San Diego. I was planning to spend the next ten days in my office, hunched over my desk, trudging forward. I convinced myself I was lucky to have so much undivided time to work on my thesis. No matter that I’m already way ahead compared to my peers, or that Professor Olmsted forbade me from reaching out to her via email or text over the week under the guise that it would convince me to leave my office. I think her exact words were, “*Go! Get out of here! Take a few days off, for Pete’s sake!*”

“Oh my god, where is that green Revolve dress I wore last week?” Kayla asks, rifling through a pile of clothes on her bed.

This is a near-daily occurrence. Her side of the room is always so messy it’s a wonder she ever finds anything.

“Here!” she says, yanking a green sock out of the bottom of the pile. “*No. Dammit.*”

“Do you really need it?”

She levels me with a sharp-eyed glare. “Of course I do. I’m going home.”

“...to hang out with your parents,” I remind her.

“Yes, which means Daniel might be home too. You never know. So I have to bring that dress because it matches my eyes and Daniel used to always tell me I had nice eyes.”

“Is Daniel the guy who broke your heart in high school?”

“Yes. The one I utterly despise.”

“Interesting.”

“No. Not interesting. Don’t fill your head with ideas. This is simply a Must Be Hot When Facing My Enemy situation. Nothing more. Can you imagine if I ran into him wearing a t-shirt?”

I gasp in feigned horror, and she rolls her eyes.

“Anyway, are you sure you don’t want to come with me? My parents loved having you stay over winter break. My mom won’t shut up about how nice you were. I swear, you pick up one dirty dish in that house and it’s all Raelynn this, Raelynn that.”

“Tell your parents thank you for the invite, but I’m going to hang back here.”

“Ugh. Depressing. Tell me you aren’t going to work.”

“I’m going to work.”

She groans like she’s been shot then falls dramatically back onto her messy bed. “Why do you do this? Why don’t you go out? To a BAR? Meet a MAN!?” She pops up onto her elbows. “Will you let me activate Tinder on your phone? I’ve carefully curated all the photos I think you should use on your profile and have them saved in a folder on my computer. There’s a bikini picture and everything.”

“Are you serious?”

She rears back, as if offended that I would think she was kidding. “*Dead* serious. When you told me how long it’s been since you’ve had sex, I considered it a moral imperative to help you out.”

“It hasn’t been *that* long.”

She purses her lips, and I blush and look away.

“If I go more than a month...” Her eyes go wide. “It ain’t pretty. Remember how snappy I got last semester during my dry spell?”

“Yes. I almost moved out of this room.”

“*Exactly*. Now imagine what it’s going to feel like for you to get laid after all this time. Your head’s going to explode!”

I laugh and shake my head. “You’re ridiculous. I don’t need sex the way you do.”

She unveils a sly grin. “Oh that’s funny considering the recent search history on your computer.”

“KAYLA!”

“What? I needed to Google something and couldn’t find my laptop under all my crap.”

I flip over and bury my face in my pillow.

“What? You had quite a good selection going. No judgment here.”

“STOP.”

“Oh my god! Why are you such a prude?! It’s just sex! Maybe if you were getting some, you’d loosen up a little.”

“Are you leaving yet?”

“Not until tomorrow morning.”



“Shame.”

“You’ll miss me, admit it.”

“Not even one tiny bit.”

“Oh right, of course you won’t—you’ll have your computer to keep you company.”

I throw my pillow, and it’s immensely satisfying that it hits her square in the face. She grabs it and tucks it under her arms.

“All joking aside...do me a favor and get out of this room at least for one night while we’re all gone. *Please.*”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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I couldn't very well ignore everyone in my life telling me what a sad sack I am, and I suppose it's only fair that I take Ben up on his offer and attend the game. It's *just* a basketball game. It's not like there are any strings attached. It's not like I spent four hours this afternoon picking out the perfect outfit, which is slightly ridiculous considering I only have the one basketball shirt that Kayla got me, so I was really only deciding if I wanted to pair it with jeans or jean cutoffs. I went with the shorts and my trusty pair of cowboy boots. Los Angeles is playing the San Antonio Spurs tonight, so in a way, I'm reppin' both my home state and my current one.

I spent longer on my hair than I would ever admit to another living soul. It consists of perfect blonde beachy waves that I coaxed into existence nowhere near a beach. My makeup is subtle and natural, though I do borrow some of Kayla's pink Chanel lipstick. I would have asked her for permission first, but then she'd want to know why I needed lipstick. I know I would have her blessing if she knew where I was headed tonight. God, she'd be proud of me if she could see me now, getting escorted through the Staples Center toward a private box.

While I realized the badge looked fancy when Ben handed it to me, I didn't truly understand its significance. When I walked into the stadium earlier alongside all the other normal fans, I was asked to step aside and wait for a security escort.

"Oh that's not necessary," I said, trying to laugh off the request.

The woman scanning tickets smiled politely. "It's customary for everyone with one of those badges. No worries, I see someone coming right now. You won't have to wait long."

Now as the security guard sticks close by me as we walk through the mezzanine, people part for us with mouths gaping. A few people snap my picture, and I want to laugh. If they only knew I'm a nobody.

We finally reach a discreetly concealed elevator, and the security guard tells me to scan my badge over a small sensor. I do and the doors whisk open immediately. Once we step inside, he inserts a key and presses the button with a capital P beside it.

"Thank you for walking with me," I tell him with a timid smile.

I didn't need the escort for security reasons—obviously—but I would have never figured out how to access the private suite on my own.

"No problem. I'll drop you at the door of the suite. If you need to leave it for any reason, please use the phone to call for security. When you're ready to leave the game, two guards will take you to your car."

"Oh...okay. Thank you."

I choose not to tell him I took the bus here. Something tells me that would throw their whole system for a loop.

I've been carless for a while. Nan's finally crapped out on me a month after I arrived back in California, and I haven't had the cash to buy a new one. Los Angeles is a driving city, so it's been tricky, but I've lucked out living near the Caltech campus. Most everything I need is nearby, and if I ever need to get somewhere far away, Kayla or Ryan let me borrow one of their cars.

The elevator arrives on the private floor and the doors sweep open. The first thing I notice is the floors. No concrete up here. Smooth white marble shines beneath glossy dark purple walls. Spaced evenly on either side, black and white photographs of past players hang side by side beneath museum lights. Between the photographs, there are doors to private suites, each one numbered. My badge is for suite number five, and that's where I'm led.

"Enjoy the game," the guard tells me with a simple nod before leaving me to fend for myself.

I look down at the polished gold doorknob, feeling my pulse pound as I pause and stare at it for a moment. I could still leave right now and scurry right back to my life as I know it. Ben would assume I never showed, and maybe that'd be it for us.

But my hand twists that knob. I enter his world with a racing heart and a held breath. I don't know what I was expecting, maybe a completely empty room, but when I open the door, there are a dozen people inside the suite. Only a handful of them look up when I enter, and thankfully, Leanna is one of them.

"Raelynn!"

She leaps up from her chair and darts toward me with a big smile on her face. Before I can even take a full step inside, she has me wrapped in a tight hug.

“I didn’t think you would show! They’re already in the second quarter.”

“Yeah, I hit some bad traffic.”

I don’t tell her it was really the bus that was delayed.

“No. It’s totally fine,” she says, holding me out at arm’s length and smiling wide.

I feel guilty seeing her again, so guilty I can’t really meet her smile until we clear the air.

“About the phone number—”

“*Stop*. I would have done the same thing!” she says with a playful laugh. “I was only bummed because I *did* actually want to keep up with you. But hey, everything has worked out, right?”

Has it?

It doesn’t feel that way at all.

She leads me back to where she was sitting and points to an empty oversized leather chair beside hers. From our seats, we have a sweeping view of the basketball court through a pane of glass, and I look down to find Ben huddled with his team during a timeout. I wonder if he’s solely focused on the court or if he’s worried about whether or not I showed. Then I blush with embarrassment. Of course he’s not thinking about me at a time like this.

“They’ve been playing really well so far,” Leanna tells me, sounding proud.

“*Sorry*, that’s usually my chair,” a voice says from behind me.

I turn around then tilt my chin up to see a beautiful redhead with crossed arms assessing me with annoyance.

“There aren’t assigned seats, Eva,” Leanna says with a little bite.

Eva looks bored as she replies to Leanna while looking straight at me, “Your guest is in my seat.”

“She’s not my guest. *Ben* invited her.”

Eva’s gaze narrows, and now she looks curious where before she was merely inconvenienced.

“Ben invited you?”

I look to Leanna, and she nods in encouragement.

I shrug like it’s no big deal. “We’re friends.”

Or we *were*, at least.

Eva laughs. “No, sweetie.” She points to the court in front of us. “*Those* guys don’t invite women here to be friends with them. They bring women like you here because they want you to see them look like gods. They want you to watch them on the court, listen to the adoring fans shouting their names, and fall head over heels.” She smiles sinisterly. “Ben wants *you* on your hands and knees, desperate for any little morsel of attention he’ll throw your way. That’s how this works.”

“Ben’s not like that,” Leanna says, speaking up for me.

Eva puffs out a laugh. “They’re *all* like that.”

Then she rolls her eyes and heads toward another cluster of chairs on the opposite side of the suite.

“Don’t listen to her,” Leanna says, leaning toward me. “Trey and Ben don’t do that kind of thing. I mean...Anthony, sure. He brings a new girl to this suite every week, trying to impress her, but Ben’s never invited a woman here since I’ve known him.”

“It’s okay, you know. You don’t have to assure me of anything. I know the score with Ben.”

She frowns.

“He and I aren’t together. I mean, we never *were* together,” I continue, trying to ensure she knows the truth.

She looks away. I assume the conversation is over, but I can’t help but feel like I’ve put her in a bad mood. I peer over at her, and her eyebrows are drawn together in anger. Then suddenly, she shakes her head before spinning to face me.

“God, are we really going to do this all over again?”

I rear back in surprise.

“He was in love with you. When we left Texas for the Games, he was a total wreck. You giving me that wrong number...I mean, I just don’t get it, Raelynn. Why are you here?”

“*What?*”

“Why are you here if you don’t feel the same way he does?”

My mouth hangs agape. I don’t have any words.

She takes in my horrified expression, squeezes her eyes shut for a moment, and then looks away. “Sorry. God, don’t listen to me...” We’re both looking out at the court as she continues, “He would kill me if he knew I said all that. It’s just...it’s hard seeing a friend struggle like he did. And now,



you're here, and I thought..." She lets her sentence dwindle before she shakes her head. "I don't want him to have to go through all that again."

"I struggled too," I whisper, not quite courageous enough to say the words loudly.

I think she heard me. Even still, we both sit in silence for a while, content to let the noise from the other people in the suite blanket us. We watch the game, and I lean forward in my seat, mesmerized by Ben on the court as he shoots and scores a three-pointer, sending the entire stadium to their feet just as the halftime buzzer blares. Leanna nudges me with her shoulder and offers a half-smile, effectively waving a white flag.

"Come on, let's get some food."

They've set up a full buffet in the suite, but just like the last time I was watching Ben play, I don't have much of an appetite. My stomach is tied up with nerves, but Leanna is eating and I don't want to make her feel awkward, so I get a little salad and a fluffy white roll. I break off bits of it and take little bites, trying to ignore my shaking hand. This whole thing is overwhelming, and I feel like Leanna expects me to bolt at any second. It is tempting. The quiet of my room back at Caltech beckons me. My old life with everything lined up in a row, all my classes in order, my resume a mile long. Still, I stay.

Unfortunately, Eva finds us again while we're eating. She comes over to our chairs carrying a champagne flute and perches right on the edge of the low coffee table in front of us, blocking my view of the court and the dancers entertaining the fans during halftime.

“So, you and Ben, huh? Will you be traveling with him the rest of the season?” She looks to Leanna for a moment. “The team goes to New York on Sunday, right? For a game on Monday?”

Leanna nods but stays silent.

“And then on to Oklahoma City after?” Eva shrugs. “I forget. It’s hard to keep up.”

Realizing I’m still shredding my bread into little pieces, I immediately stop. “I’ll stay in California.”

Her brows arch. “Oh yeah? Not serious then?”

“*Eva*,” Leanna warns.

Eva groans. “What? Jesus. Is blondie here incapable of speaking for herself?”

“My name is Raelynn,” I correct her with a hard tone.

“*Rae-lynn*, holy smokes. Where did you get a name like that?” She peruses me from top to bottom as she speaks then holds up her hand once she lands on my cowboy boots. “Wait, wait. Don’t tell me—”

“Texas,” we say at the same time.

She grins. “No shit. I’m from San Antonio.”

“Then you must be secretly rooting for the Spurs.”

She winks. “Don’t tell my boyfriend.”

“I’m actually from Pine Hill, right near Maken.”

“Are you really?! I’ve driven through Maken a thousand times. Didn’t know people really lived around there,” she teases.

I laugh, and Leanna leans forward.

“Oh so *now* you’re playing nice?” she asks.

Eva winks and sips her champagne. “Just for tonight.”

“Well grab a chair already,” Leanna says, pointing to a free one nearby. “The third quarter is going to start soon, and you’re blocking our view.”

Eva pulls a third chair up on the other side of mine then retrieves champagne for Leanna and me from a passing waiter.

“Here.”

“Oh, thanks.”

I hold it out, unsure of what to do with it.

“It won’t bite,” Eva teases.

I roll my eyes and take a sip. It’s ice cold and delicious. Unfortunately, I can’t drink much of it or I’ll be in trouble after the game. It’s hard enough navigating the LA bus system stone-cold sober.

I figure one glass won’t hurt me though, and something tells me I shouldn’t turn down Eva’s fleeting bout of kindness, so I drink it slowly as we chat. Eva and I have more in common than I first assumed. She was a bookworm in high school as well—“dorky,” she says, though both Leanna and I agree that’s impossible. Looking at her now, I can’t believe she could have been anything other than a beauty queen. She swears she didn’t come into her looks until she was older, after high school, when she moved to California to start college at UCLA.

“A talent scout found me one day while I was window shopping, and the rest is history.” She shrugs.

Leanna leans forward. “I hate to inflate Eva’s already *massive* ego, but she’s actually a pretty popular model. She

just got back from Milan fashion week where she opened for Moschino and closed for Fendi.”

I know next to nothing about fashion and even I recognize those brands.

“That’s really cool.”

She sips her champagne like it’s no big deal.

“Tell that to my parents. Even with the amount I make on campaigns and shoots, they’re still pissed I dropped out of college. They’re both lawyers, and it’s almost embarrassing to them to have a daughter whose job it is to look pretty.”

Impossible as it may be, I actually feel bad for Eva in that moment. I see a fleeting moment of humanity behind her glacial green eyes, and I aim a supportive smile her way.

She shakes her head and downs the rest of her champagne before changing the subject altogether.

“So are you guys going to the after-party for Brent’s birthday?” Eva asks, wiggling her brows suggestively at me. “I mean, you’re not exactly dressed for it, but it’s not like it matters. With that face, no one’s paying attention to your clothes, believe me.”

I blush and shake my head. “Probably not. I mean...I don’t even know who Brent is, so I doubt I’m invited.”

She grins. “Brent’s my boyfriend, so if I say you’re invited, *you’re invited.*”

“I promised my nanny I’d be back right after the game,” Leanna says, and I suddenly feel like the biggest idiot on the planet.

With everything else going on, I haven’t asked Leanna about her baby girl. In fact, I almost forgot for a moment that

she was pregnant back when she was in Texas. She looks amazing now, toned and slim.

She meets my eyes and grins before grabbing her phone. It takes her half a second to pull up a whole album of photos of her daughter. She passes me the phone and tells me to scroll.

“That’s Amara. She just turned one last month.”

Amara is such an adorable little baby, pudgy-cheeked and beautiful. She looks so much like Leanna, and when I tell her, she beams proudly.

“Yeah, she could be my twin. I wasn’t sure how Trey’s family would take that. I knew deep down, they were a bit nervous to have a mixed-race grandbaby. Not that they’re narrowminded or anything,” she adds hastily. “I think I was just worried they would want their grandchild to look like them, to fit in seamlessly with their family.” She shakes her head. “I shouldn’t have worried though. Amara is so loved. I swear when we’re all together, I barely get to touch her. She’s passed from one person to the next, smothered with kisses. Trey’s mom is especially helpful.”

“Okay, booooo,” Eva says, waving her hands like a referee. “No we are not lapsing into baby talk. Yes, Amara is cute as shit, but put the photos away, call your nanny, and tell her you’ll be late tonight—you’re going out!”

When Leanna starts to protest, Eva holds up her hand. “Come on. You never go out after the games! You and Trey are like Mr. and Mrs. In Bed By Nine PM. Don’t you want to show Raelynn a good time? Besides, if you don’t come with us, she’ll be left alone with me, and we both know that won’t end well for her. I’m very good at encouraging people to misbehave. She’ll end up dancing on a table or arrested or something.”

I'm not *exactly* sure how I end up at the club alongside Leanna and Eva, but it definitely had something to do with Eva's top-notch persuasion skills, paired with that first glass of champagne I had back in the private suite. It went down a little too easy, and then there was another ready to take its place as soon as I finished. Who was I to turn down free drinks? Kayla would be so proud of me.

To be clear, this wasn't really part of my original plan. That was very simple: I was going to show up at the game, watch Ben, reconnect with Leanna, and then schlep back to the bus stop in front of the Staples Center and return to my bed, all nice and cozy and tucked in by midnight. Then Eva finally convinced Leanna to go to Brent's birthday party, and Leanna said if she was getting dragged out to a club, there was no way I was escaping it. To be sure I made it, she insisted I ride with her, which worked in my favor considering I would have had to take the bus otherwise.

Though I'm nervous about how this will all go, I reassure myself with the fact that I wouldn't have even had a chance to talk to Ben if I'd followed my original plan. As soon as the final buzzer blared, Los Angeles fans went wild, and Ben disappeared through the dark tunnel toward the locker room. Leanna told me how it usually works: they go and shower, dress, and then they're required to do a bunch of postgame press. Depending on the game, it can last a while, which is why most of the time she doesn't wait for Trey.

"Ben and Trey can just meet us at the club," she told me as security escorted us down to her car where it waited in the private parking lot.

She assured me she texted Trey about our plan, but I worry Trey didn't pass on the message to Ben because he's not here

at the club. I look out at the crowd in the VIP area. Most of the other players have already arrived, including Eva's boyfriend, Brent, and Trey.

Much to my relief, Trey was nothing but kind to me when he walked in and found me sitting with his wife. He gave me a friendly hug and asked me how I was doing. I haven't talked to him much since then because we're all sitting on a long bench that runs along the back wall of the VIP section and Leanna is the one sitting beside me, chatting my ear off about their house renovations and anything and *everything* having to do with Amara. I know her favorite food (peaches) and her favorite book (*Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*) and just how long it took her to sleep train (three weeks) and which method she used (something called graduated extinction). Though it's slightly more detail than I need to know, I'm actually glad she's carrying on about Amara because I'm too distracted to be much of a conversationalist at the moment.

The birthday festivities are well underway. Every ten minutes, it seems like the club produces something new to woo us with. There's been a huge cake and sparklers, dancers, and round upon round of drinks. Now, there's new commotion near the entrance of the VIP section, and I tilt my head to try to see around the crowd to figure out what's going on. I recognize Anthony and roll my eyes when I see he's arriving with a harem of women.

He has an arm slung over two of them, one on each side of him, and they cling to him with self-satisfied smiles. The others hang around as if desperate for any little piece of attention they can get.

People at the party all react with excitement, like they haven't seen him in years. They gather to take their turns

clapping his hands and tugging him in for a chest bump. He starts joking around and dancing to the pulse-pounding music, and everyone laughs. Then he shakes off the attention, grabs one of the girls, and turns to where I'm sitting with Leanna and Trey.

His smile immediately drops. He looks completely shocked to see me here in the club, and well...I'm a little shocked myself.

“No shit! Look who we have here.”

His attention draws everyone else's, and I fidget in my seat as all eyes fall on me. I already feel like an outsider. I've never been to a party like this. Everyone seems to know what's up, know each other. They're all dressed to the nines, and meanwhile, I'm still wearing my crop top and denim cutoffs.

“Little Miss *Raelynn*. My hero,” Anthony says, walking over to me until I have to crane my neck to look up at him. “Did you come to our game tonight?”

I nod. “Ben invited me.”

The news shocks him. “Oh did he? So my man took my advice. Glad to hear it. You gonna put him out of his misery and marry him now?”

My eyes practically bug out of my head.

Anthony's lopsided grin stretches wider. “I'm kidding.” He looks to the seat beside mine that was blessedly empty before now. “Mind if I...?”

Before I answer, he's already taking a seat. The girl who was with him doesn't stick around though. She says something about grabbing a drink then disappears back out into the crowd. It's getting so packed in here, it's hard to see the



entrance of the VIP section. I'm worried Ben will show up and I won't see him.

"You don't have to worry. Your boy Ben is coming."

I flick my gaze to him. "Is he?"

He shrugs. "Told me he was, but he had another interview after ours was finished. He always has to stay later than the rest of us. They want every piece of Ben they can get."

I nod and look up as a waiter appears, handing Anthony a drink.

"Thanks. Could I get some water too? Raelynn, you want anything?"

I hold up my water. "I'm fine, thank you."

He thanks the server then leans into me. "Don't get me wrong, I love to party and drink as much as the rest of them, but not when we're in the middle of the season like this. I drag on the court when I drink too much, and Ben chews my ass out."

I smile, imagining it.

"Something tells me you could use a good ass-chewing."

He grins deviously just as a few of the girls he arrived with find him.

"Anthony, what are you doin' over here, baby? Come dance!"

He looks to me and I wave him on, knowing if he doesn't leave with them, they'll just keep pestering him.

He gets dragged out into the thick of the party, and I laugh watching him get swarmed. No wonder these guys have egos the size of California.

When we first arrived, the VIP area was already packed, but now I swear every minute, a new crowd of people rushes in, adding to the crush of bodies and overcrowding the small space. There were cocktail tables in the center of the room earlier, but those have been pushed to the side now. People dance and sing and accidentally bump into me, laugh, and then shout apologies over the music. When I glance over, Leanna and Trey have their heads bent together. Trey gives her a kiss on the cheek, and I slide off the bench to disappear into the crowd and give them some privacy.

I have no real plan. I just feel antsy, sitting there, waiting for Ben. Even though Anthony confirmed it, a part of me still worries he won't come. I can't picture him in a setting like this, drinking and partying, laughing and carefree. I slide through the dense crowd, smile politely when a guy tries to draw me into conversation, but then I keep it moving. I'm trying to make it closer to the entrance so I can see Ben when he arrives.

Suddenly, what little light there was in the club goes out altogether, replaced by a red glow that tints the room and everyone in it. I look down at my arms bathed in seductive crimson light just as a fast-paced club beat starts to blare from the speakers. The energy in the room ratchets up another notch and I feel the bass in my chest, the music pulsing through me. The crowd goes crazy and bodies crush me from all sides. I spin in a circle, searching faces, looking for a familiar set of piercing brown eyes. Another spin and the red room blurs. *Ben, where are you?*

*Why aren't you here?*

Suddenly a hand touches my lower back, and I whip around to see an unfamiliar guy trying to get my attention.

“He’s looking for you!” he shouts over the music.

I frown then follow his gaze, and my heart lurches in my chest. Through the pulsating crowd, between bodies that seem constantly in motion, I find Ben standing in front of Leanna and Trey, staring straight at me.

The hand on my back slips away as our eyes lock.

His gaze is an intimate caress, so all-consuming it borders on inappropriate. It’s like he’s eating me up from a distance, and I flush from head to toe, grateful he’s too far away to take notice, grateful more so that the light in here already casts me in red, so what’s a little more blush?

I wanted him to show up so desperately it takes me a moment to fully register that he’s here in person again after so long. I took the other day for granted. He surprised me by showing up on campus, and I barely had my wits about me. Now, I have enough good sense to feel a trickle of fear as he starts to cut through the crowd to get to me. I resist the overwhelming urge to run, and instead, I brace myself in my spot, waiting with bated breath. My body vibrates with anticipation, as if his journey to get to me has been years in the making. There’s no smile on his face, no joy. His brown eyes barely show relief once he’s upon me, reaching out to take my hand in a tight grip as if he’s scared the crowd’s going to swallow me up at any moment.

I don’t get the chance to properly take him in before he steps closer. His size affords him more space in a setting like this. It’s easy for him to carve out enough room for the two of us, using his body to block me from everyone who surrounds us. His arms circle me, cocooning us as I look up at him, dragging my attention quickly across his lips before my tongue darts out to wet mine.

I hear murmurs around us. His name is on everyone's lips, but his attention is down on me.

"You're going to get crushed in this crowd."

He looks devilish in this light. Haunting.

"I was holding my own," I say, forcing my attention away from his mouth. "Besides, I was only out here because I was trying to find you."

It's so loud we can barely hear each other. He leans down and gathers me closer, his mouth falling right beside my ear as he says, "You're wearing my number."

I glance down at my shirt and feign ignorance. "Is this *your* number?"

He sees right through my act, and the tiny smirk he wipes away sends butterflies swarming through my belly.

There's a mountain of history that threatens to rise between us, blocking our way forward. We have so much to talk about, to catch up on and explain. Apologies need to be made and accepted, and yet we somehow both silently agree to pivot around those hard discussions for the time being, to linger in denial for just a little while longer. I reach up to press my palms to his chest as he grips my waist. His large hands seem to fit around me so easily, his touch familiar in a way that makes my throat tighten with emotion.

"It looks good with the shorts," he says, looking down, not the least bit shy about checking me out.

"And what do you think of my fancy club shoes?"

I tap the heels of my boots together, and he smiles.

"You look sexy as hell."

*Jesus.*

Somehow I wasn't prepared for a blatant compliment, desire spoken out loud.

It was only a few days ago that he and I were complete strangers, and now we stand chest to chest in a dark club, touching like we belong to one another.

A couple of girls laugh as they pass by and stumble into us by accident. Ben's hand slides higher up my waist, barely underneath my crop top. His palm against my bare skin sends a shiver down my spine, and I watch him take notice. It's like my every desire is written across my face, visible to anyone.

*Can you see what you do to me, Ben?*

Without asking, he slides one arm around my lower back and guides me away from the center of the party, back toward a dark corner.

"Don't you want to say hi to your friends?" I ask as he ignores the people very obviously trying to get his attention. They tap his shoulder, shout his name, beg for attention.

"No," he says, keeping his hands on me.

I laugh. "Not very polite of you."

His dark eyes glint in the red light, suddenly seeming untamed.

"You shouldn't let me touch you like this in public."

I frown and drop my hands on top of his, making sure he doesn't think to draw them back. "Why?"

"Have you seen who I am yet, Birdie?"

My old nickname on his lips is a gentle reminder of our history, and I can't help but sidle up closer.

“I like you touching me.”

I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows slowly.

“You might change your mind once you understand what I’ve done by coming here tonight.”

His desolate tone is enough to break my chest wide open. Why is he talking like this? Why does he sound so hopeless now that we’re back in each other’s arms?

“But I want to be here with you.”

He reaches up to trace a finger down the side of my face, then lower along my jaw and chin before he lifts it gently to my lips. I kiss it before I think better of it, and his dark eyes flare with need.

“I understood the implications, and I still came here tonight to hunt you down.”

I shake my head, confused.

“You’ll see soon. It’s already too late for us to go back to the way it was before. I didn’t have to come in here to get you. I should have waited in the car and asked Anthony to bring you out through the back entrance.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“Impatience.”

He says the word like he’s in pain.

My smile fades as he bends down. “When Trey told me you were here at the club with Leanna...I lost my good sense. I raced here and came inside to get you, and the second we touched, the vultures started swarming. If you look up, you’ll see them. Your name and photo will be in the press by tomorrow morning. There’s nothing I can do to stop it now.”

I'm too entranced by his touch, his scent, his proximity to understand the consequences of what he's saying.

“So what happens? I mean...what will they say?”

I can't, for the life of me, draw my attention away from his mouth as he speaks.

“They'll speculate about what we are and they'll embellish it however much they want to better garner clicks and magazine sales. They'll say I dragged an innocent blonde girl to a dark corner of the club and had my wicked way with her. Starting with a kiss.”

My eyebrows draw together. “But you haven't kissed me yet.”

A smile spreads slowly, deviously across his lips as his attention shifts to my mouth. Slowly, excruciatingly, he leans down so his lips almost touch mine. My hand slides up to cradle the side of his neck, and I feel his rigid muscles tense as a soft moan escapes me.

“It doesn't matter,” he whispers before pulling back.

I sway toward him like I'm being pulled by a magnetic force. How can he stand the hunger building between us? How can he stave it off when I'm so close to begging him here in front of everyone, all his warnings and consequences be damned?

“They'll say I couldn't keep my hands off you,” he says, dragging his hand up higher, just beneath the hem of my shirt. The loose crop top makes it all too easy for him. My stomach quivers as his palm covers it, and I know he feels it. My reaction to his touch is so overt and obvious.

“Haven't you been listening? Someone could be taking a photo of us right now. School your features better if you don't

want them to see.”

“See what?” I ask, sounding dazed.

“All those feelings, Little Bird.”

My gaze meets his, and it’s a rush to see everything I’m feeling mirrored back to me.

We’re both careening off track, missing steps. There was supposed to be a nice reunion in a cafe. We were going to catch up on life. I was going to ask him what it’s like to be a father, what he loves the most about his son. I don’t know what he’s been doing since we left each other. I don’t know what he wants from me.

“*Ben.*”

I squeeze my eyes closed as he bends down, enveloping me. My cheek presses against his chest. My fingers dig into his shirt and I hold on like I’m about to tip back off a ledge.

“I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. *No. More. Harder.* He shouldn’t be apologizing. I want this too. Maybe more than he does. I rise up onto my toes and press a kiss to his cheek.

He inhales sharply and peels back from me, taking my hand and leading me out. I ask where we’re going and barely hear his response over the noise.

“We’re leaving.”



# Chapter Twenty-Nine

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**L**eaving the club isn't easy. We can't just march through the crowd and out the front door. Ben coordinates with security before we say our goodbyes to everyone. I barely have a second to hug Leanna before we're led through the back of the VIP section and down a long hallway that leads to a side door. Even though we're surrounded on all sides by security, once we're outside, camera flashes still seep through, blinding me as Ben's hand grips my waist, keeping me close to him as I lower my head and block my face as much as possible. A bright flash to my left makes me flinch. It's jarring and disorienting, and my fight-or-flight reflex wants me to run. My heart pounds as I'm directed, redirected, and shuffled along.

Ben lifts me up into a car, the door slams, and silence ensues.

But outside, the world is chaos.

Paparazzi swarm the front of the SUV, snapping photos and trying to get Ben to answer their lightning round of questions.

*"Who is she?"*

*"Ben! Are you dating?"*

*“What does your ex think about your girlfriend?”*

*“Ben!”*

*“What’s her name?”*

Security pushes them back, allowing him to get to his driver’s door and fling it open. He slides in and slams it closed, starting the engine in one fell swoop.

I hear him curse under his breath. I know he feels bad about all of this. I want to assure him that everything is okay and I don’t mind, but truthfully, words confound me. I must be in shock. My hands sit perfectly still on my lap as I watch two photographers shove each other while trying to get closer to my window so they can snap more pictures of me.

*Of me.*

There are video cameras recording too, and I make eye contact with a guy filming. He shouts, “Smile!” and I blink slowly...dazed.

Through it all, Ben is calm and collected. He reaches over and takes my hand, pulling it onto his lap as he starts to drive us away from the club, moving slowly through the horde.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sounding pained, but I stay silent.

I feel incredibly naive. I knew of Ben’s fame. On campus, I was bombarded by it on all sides all the time, and yet, I had somehow compartmentalized that part of his life as if it would never touch me.

A phone rings and I jump out of my skin. Ben sighs and squeezes my hand before letting it go so he can answer the call through the car’s speaker.

I listen halfheartedly as he speaks with a man who must be on his security team.

“Head straight home,” the man says. “I’m not sure if you were planning to take your friend somewhere else, but not tonight. We didn’t coordinate this well. Had I known you wanted to go out after the game, I could have pulled in more guys. That was reckless to say the least.”

“Right. I apologize. It was a last-minute change. We’ll head back to the house.”

They shift into discussing routes that mean nothing to me. I stare out the window, blinking the remnants of the flashes out of my vision. After they hang up, Ben peers over at me. I can feel him studying my profile, but I’m too busy looking out onto the road, worried about something I can’t quite name.

“Raelynn,” he says, trying to get my attention. “There are a few cars tailing us. Likely paparazzi just wanting to get more photos. My security suggested we head back to my house since it’s secure. No one will make it past the guard house at the front of the neighborhood. If I take you back to your place, I worry about them bothering you.”

*Can they just do that?*

*Follow us like that?*

Surely that’s illegal. Surely we have some kind of recourse.

I want to pester him with a thousand questions, but I swallow them down and simply nod so he can turn his attention back to driving. I don’t miss the fact that he constantly checks his rearview mirror or that he drives in the slow lane on the highway, careful at every turn. We’re quiet on the drive, and the anxiety in the air is draining, especially once the initial burst of adrenaline starts to wear off. My limbs feel

heavy and weak, and by the time we pull up to his neighborhood, my eyelids are fighting against gravity.

I perk up some when Ben waves to the man stationed in a guard house, and once we drive through the gate and the heavy iron bars close behind us, I see Ben visibly relax. We start to wind through quiet neighborhood streets that look like wide Parisian boulevards. Trees dot the median, placed strategically along a well-manicured running trail. The houses we pass are more like mini resorts sitting on obscenely large lots, and they only get bigger as we continue driving through yet another restrictive gate.

I appreciate how secure it all is. I might have thought it was a little pretentious had I not been with Ben at the club a little while ago. Now, I understand the need.

We eventually pull up to a third and final gate that opens to a private circle drive outside a sprawling two-story stone mansion. Ben's home. It looks like it was plucked from the French countryside. Symmetrical wings span off to the left and right. Cast stone surrounds a large doorway flanked by ornate bronze lanterns. Despite the sheer size, there's a tangible charm to it. The pale blue shutters that frame each window and the antique wooden front door are so inviting my mood lifts just a little.

Ben parks near the front door and leaves the car running as he gets out to meet me on the passenger side. The security guard from the other day—the older man with the shaved head and the gun on his hip—greet us at the front door.

Despite the hour, he's still dressed in a sharp black suit.

He nods in greeting at me before directing his attention to Ben. "I'll have Nikko take the car around, and we'll do a perimeter sweep just to confirm all is well."

Ben thanks him then drops his hand to my lower back, guiding me inside and through the grand foyer. Yet again, I'm swept into a world I never thought I'd inhabit—first the private box at the game, then the VIP section of the club, now Ben's lavish home. In the center of the marble floor, there's a circular antique table with a large vase overflowing with flowers. We curve around it and Ben leads me forward into the shallow light of the hallway. We pass dark rooms, and I lament the fact that the dim light doesn't stretch into them. I can only imagine what each one holds. We walk by a small gallery wall filled with black and white photographs, and as Ben guides me along, I catch a quick peek at two: an old photograph of a couple on their wedding day, and a headshot of a man wearing a military uniform. Ben's grandfather, I assume—they look so much alike.

“Are you hungry?” he asks me.

I shake my head.

“Thirsty?”

“No.”

We turn another corner and head down another hallway, and the main suite, Ben's room, unfolds before us. It's stunning to say the least, a room that should exist solely on vacations, not in real life. Just like out in the hall, the light is dim in here. Two bedside lamps cast a shallow glow over the four-poster bed, topped with crisp white linens that have been thoughtfully turned down. On one side of the room, huge double doors lead out toward a balcony, though Ben walks over and tugs the drapes closed so I can't see where it leads.

There's an antique dresser and beautiful modern art on the walls, an intimate seating area with cognac brown leather chairs.

It's all so well designed and not the least bit what I expected to find. What should a bachelor's bedroom consist of anyway? Neon beer signs? Naked pillows? An old *Playboy*?

I walk farther inside, toward the balcony doors.

I glance back at Ben, who's still hovering near the threshold. "This is so nice."

He nods. "I had help when we built the house. I didn't pick out much, but I like how it all came together."

"Where do the doors lead?"

"Out to a private courtyard. When it's quiet you can hear the fountain out there."

A laugh tumbles out of me before I can help it.

Ben glances at me curiously, and I shrug, helpless. "I'm just imagining you living here and then visiting that trailer of mine back in Texas."

I cover my face with my hands and shake my head. It's hard to even compare the two. *You can't!*

"A home's a home, right?" Ben says earnestly. "I seem to remember being really happy in that trailer."

His words are tinged with suggestion, and slowly, I drop my hands and face him. He's watching me with furrowed brows, memories swimming in his warm gaze.

I know he's imagining us together on that tiny bed, and he's right—it didn't really matter where we were. His car. That trailer. The counter at Dale's. We didn't mind one bit.

I wrap my arm around my stomach, grabbing hold of my waist.

Ben watches me, his gaze gentle on my body. He hasn't moved from the door. Something's stopping him.

I tilt my head in invitation, trying to coax the words out of him.

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck, a flash of frustration crossing his features.

"I didn't expect that outside of the club. It's not always like that. Word must have gotten out since most of the team was there."

I stay quiet, sensing that he's not done.

"That was reckless. Meeting you there, like that. Since having Caleb, I don't...shit, even *before* Caleb..." He shakes his head and pivots, his tone sharper as he continues, "This life isn't easy, and there are downsides. Anyone I keep close will suffer consequences from being with me. Things I have no control over. Driving you here...seeing those guys tailing us..."

His hands fist at his sides, finishing his thought for him, and my heart breaks.

It occurs to me that my shock and surprise and silence have worn on him. He's worried about what I'm thinking, and honestly, I don't have a good answer for that. What happened just now wasn't normal by any stretch of the imagination and I'm not sure what this all means for me and my life, but right now, I just want to add it to the pile of problems we already have, problems for the light of day. Because now that I'm here, looking at Ben in this quiet room away from the chaos, it almost feels like nothing else matters.

Nothing could convince me to walk away from him in this moment.



The power he wields...

If he only knew.

I start to walk toward him, keeping my eyes on him until we're close enough that I can rest my hands on his broad chest. It's been so long since we've been alone like this, and I can't resist any longer. I wanted to kiss him in the club and I didn't. I wanted to kiss him on so many lonely nights and I couldn't. So I press up onto my toes and press my lips gently to his. My courage doesn't last long. I pull back, my eyes fluttering open just in time for him to lean down and kiss me again. His arms circle my waist, hauling me up against him so swiftly I nearly lose my breath.

He kisses me slowly, intimately, with feeling. He takes my bottom lip in his teeth, and impatience grows as our mouths collide and flames blaze. He's so tall, so overpowering I feel overwhelmed at times, but he lets me take the lead for a moment as my hands trail up his arms and neck, tangling in his hair. I tilt my head and kiss him deeper. His tongue touches mine, and a shudder racks through me. Then his arms tighten around my waist and he picks me up, walking us toward his bed. He sits down on the edge and I slide down onto his lap, straddling his hips. My jean shorts ride up with the help of his fingers. He slides his palms back and around, gripping underneath the denim, using his hands to tug me up so I can rock against his hardness.

His moan feeds me and I kiss him harder, tasting and taking and still *wanting*.

He grips my hips and guides me back and forth on his lap, slowly rocking forward and backward, driving us both insane. His hands squeeze my backside and he inhales sharply. Then

he draws back suddenly, dragging in a heavy breath, steeling himself as his brown eyes open and his gaze meets mine.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, standing and setting me delicately back on my feet.

I must look like a gaping fish.

“I thought we were...”

He rubs the back of his neck, and there’s an unfamiliar touch of color on his cheekbones. “It’s been a long night for you, Birdie.”

I want to argue, but then he reaches up to smooth the tension between my brows, dragging his finger down my cheek, and my eyelids blink long and heavy. The desire coursing through me doesn’t have the staying power compared to how exhausted I feel. The anxiety of the day takes its toll as Ben stands there, appreciating me.

“I could sleep where I stand, but I feel grimy from that club.”

“Let me draw you a bath,” he suggests with tender care.

“It’s okay. I’ll just take a quick shower. I worry I’ll fall asleep if I take a bath.”

He nods and leads me into the bathroom off the main suite. It’s decadent and peaceful, cool white marble floors paired with warm oak vanities. The shower could fit three or four people. Same with the bath. Ben adjusts the hot water for me in the shower then walks back over to his side of the sink so he can bend down and open the cabinet to reach for a small bag.

When he walks back over and hands it to me, I realize it’s a bag of toiletries meant for a woman, and despite knowing the kind of man Ben is, I still wonder why he’d keep something

like this around. Is there a rotation of women needing to wash their face at his house?

I don't ask this aloud, but Ben still throws me a bone.

"My housekeeper, Nina, thinks of everything. I think she hopes..."

He clears his throat.

I look up to see him frowning at the bag in my hand.

"She wants someone to have to use it," he finishes, sounding annoyed. "She pesters me about being alone."

"And I'm the first?"

He looks over, and his brown eyes seem just as alluring as the first time I met him. "There hasn't been anyone since I left Texas."

His confession strikes me. It's the last thing I expected. I was at the club tonight; I saw the way women react to Ben. The glamour of this life is so appealing to so many. I'm surprised he'd go a single day without sex, much less a year and a half.

"Because you've been busy?"

He nods. "With Caleb, with basketball, yes."

Understandable.

"And also, I wasn't interested in pursuing other women."

I try and fail to hold eye contact with him. The kisses we just shared were intimate, yes, but this feels different...*harder*.

He sighs with his confession, like it took a great deal of courage to admit, and then he turns to leave the bathroom. "Shower, relax. Please take whatever you'd like from my closet when you're finished."

I nod mutely as he leaves, and only after I'm sure the double set of doors that lead out are securely closed, I turn to the mirror.

I don't look like myself. Slightly more pale than normal, small, hunched forward with my arm wrapped around my middle. I look tired and meek. No wonder he's treating me like I'm fragile.

I undress and carefully fold my clothes in case I need them in the morning, then I step into the shower and luxuriate in every single one of Ben's expensive soaps and shampoos. The shower I share in the house back at Caltech has the water pressure of a dripping hose, and I can't use nice soap because, for one, I can't afford it, and for two, if I *did* splurge, everyone else would pilfer it.

I stay in there forever, turning in slow circles, feeling the warm water beat down on my skin. Eventually, I cut it off, worrying Ben might come in to check on me since I'm taking so long.

I wrap myself in a fluffy white towel and pad over to the nearest closet. It's nearly empty inside, save for some storage boxes at the very top, on shelves completely out of my reach. I realize it's the closet Ben's wife will use one day, and that thought makes my heart pound as I quickly back out and close the door behind me. Across the bathroom, in Ben's closet, I find a pair of boxer briefs and an old college basketball t-shirt that's been washed so many times it's decadently soft.

The boxer briefs are comically big even when I roll them twice, but they'll have to do. The t-shirt is large as well, enough so that I don't have to worry about the fact that I'm not wearing a bra.

I leave my hair to air-dry as I rub on some La Mer face cream I found in the toiletry bag. As I'm brushing my teeth, Ben knocks on the door.

"Come in," I say around the toothbrush.

He steps into his bathroom and his gaze immediately lands on me.

I shift on my feet as he takes me in, showered and fresh-faced.

"Good. You found something to wear," he says, looking down to conceal a smile. I must look ridiculous in his clothes, but it's not my fault he's so tall.

He heads into his closet, presumably to change into pajamas. He closes the door, but not all the way, and in the mirror, I can see a sliver of his naked back as he undresses. Smooth tan skin so muscled and toned I momentarily get distracted from the task at hand. My toothbrush dangles in my mouth as he steps out of his pants, and then he looks over his shoulder and finds me staring. I blink and look away quickly, leaning forward to rinse my mouth and tap the water off my toothbrush.

When I finish and stand, he walks out of his closet in a low-slung pair of pajama pants, sans shirt. I watch him as he nears, trying to keep my attention off his bare chest, aware of the blood pulsing in my neck as he steps up behind me and drops his hand to my hip.

"Mind if I...?" He leans around me to get his toothbrush, but he doesn't move me aside. He stands right behind me as he wets it, applies toothpaste, and starts brushing his teeth. His eyes meet mine in the mirror, and his expression is a little cheeky.

He's aware of what he does to me, of course. I make no attempt to hide it. It'd be utterly in vain, anyway. I might as well revel in this moment, watch him all I want as he does an ordinary task while looking drop-dead gorgeous.

Once he's finished, he rinses his mouth and dabs it with a towel. I stand there, waiting for him to lead me to the next activity.

"I should offer to take the guest bedroom and let you sleep in here alone, shouldn't I?" he says as we walk back into his room.

"Please don't."

I understand why we're not rushing straight into things. I know it's been a long day and there's still so much to discuss, but sleeping next to Ben is one of life's simple pleasures, and I don't want him to deprive me of it out of some needless sense of chivalrous obligation.

"It's a big bed," I add, as if that's reason enough for him to stay.

He nods and we each take a side, tugging down the blankets. We climb up and settle in beside each other, separated and chaste. I lie on my back and stare up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to be good before Ben turns out the light. In the dark, he reaches over and grabs hold of my hip under the blanket, tugging me toward him so I'm flush against his chest, my legs tangled with his. Neither one of us says a word. I'm too caught up in my own head, worrying about what this all means, trying to calm my heart so he doesn't notice how erratically it's beating because of him.

His arm circles my waist, keeping me still as we both start to settle and relax, growing comfortable with this closeness.

A few minutes pass, and I think he's drifting off to sleep then he whispers in the dark, "I didn't want to leave you in Texas."

My pulse quickens at the revelation.

"We could have made it work," he insists.

I shift and lean back, trying to find his face in the dark. My eyes have adjusted enough that I can barely make him out in the moonlight seeping in around the drapes.

"You had enough to focus on," I whisper weakly. "Look at everything you had going on. You were flying to Tokyo for the Olympics, you were going through a divorce *and* becoming a father. The last thing you needed to worry about was a brand-new girlfriend."

His finger traces circles on my hip. "*Girlfriend.*"

I roll my eyes. "Of course you'd only pay attention to that word."

"I just like the way it sounds."

"Don't get distracted. I was making a really good point. You and I wouldn't have worked out before." I shake my head, sure of it. "Nan...it wasn't pretty there for a while. I was going through a lot. She passed so quickly, and she didn't leave me much. I had to pack up my life back in Texas yet *again* and get my head on straight...I wasn't even sure they'd let me return to Caltech. I mean, thank god for Professor Olmsted..."

He digests all of that, and I think it might be the end of it until he continues, "I agree somewhat...it would have been hard, but we would have pulled through."

I groan in annoyance. "You're in la-la land. What was I supposed to do? What if you decided you were going to try to

make it work with Shelby so Caleb could grow up with his parents together?”

“That was never an option,” he says, coming toward me.

I back up on instinct. “Well I didn’t know that! It’s common enough. You loved her at one point and you love your son, and I didn’t want to stand in the way of that.”

He hovers over me in the dark. “I was already too far gone, Birdie.”

His declaration sends a shiver down my spine.

“I still am,” he continues.

It’s not possible. This can’t just suddenly...work. That doesn’t happen for me. I’m the kid with flaky parents, the one raised by her grandmother. I’m the quiet girl in school who the boys looked right over like I wasn’t even there. I’m the one who wasn’t all that good at sports, the one who read and read and read until all I knew was books. I’ve kept up that relationship, truly the only one I can depend on now that my nan is gone. It makes no sense that Ben could be into me as much as I’m into him. This hope feels so good, *too* good, *scary* good.

“Ben, we’re just getting our feet wet. We’ve barely spent any time together—”

He suddenly sits up and takes my hand, tugging me out of the bed and into the dark. I trip over my feet and nearly pitch forward, but he has a good hold on me. We’re walking quickly, cutting through his bedroom and out into the hall like we’re on a mission. I can barely keep up with him. We fly through his house until he suddenly comes to an abrupt stop outside of a door. He whips it open and flips on a light, motioning for me to enter. I walk tentatively into his study, taking in the rich



dark decor. I wonder why he's brought me here. Yes, sure, the room is beautiful. The desk itself is tidy, just like the rest of the house. Impatiently, Ben steps in and rotates me until I'm facing the wall across from his desk.

Immediately, my mouth drops. There, hanging on the wall, spanning at least five feet in either direction is a glossy painted reproduction of the *Hubble Ultra-Deep Field*, the same image I had hanging in my trailer, the same one I have by my bed back at Caltech. The painting is as tall as I am, detailed and intricate. The artist did such a beautiful job recreating the iconic photo, but before I can step closer, without a word, Ben takes my hand again, whirling me back toward the door.

I'm laughing now, begging him to let me go back.

"I just want to see it up close. It looked like wet ink...the way the artist painted it. Was it resin or something?"

He doesn't answer any of my questions. He's too busy leading me away.

"Where are we going?" I ask, laughing more.

Back near his bedroom, there's a closed door that leads to another dark room. Unlike in his study, he leaves the light off as we walk inside, and as my eyes adjust I see it's likely because of what's on the ceiling: hundreds of glowing stars. They're not the stick-on kind from the dollar store; these look like they've been painted by a careful hand. Among them, there are swirling nebulas and twinkling constellations. An entire universe lives on the ceiling of this room. A room I would have loved as a child. Through the shallow darkness, I see the spaceship blankets neatly tucked in on a twin-sized bed, the framed photo of Buzz Aldrin on the moon over a dresser, the telescope by the window.

I turn slowly back to Ben, and he looks so frustrated, at an utter loss as he asks, “Do you see now?”

# Chapter Thirty

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I'm lying next to Raelynn in my bed while she sleeps. It's early morning, predawn, and I've tried to close my eyes again and rest, but my brain won't comply. My body is hyperaware that Raelynn is in my bed, and I barely slept a wink all night. At this point, I've given up trying in favor of watching her. She's snuggled up beside me, lips parted, cheeks flushed and freckled. Her hair dried into wild curls after her shower last night, and a few of them splay across my chest, the pale golden strands tempting me.

She hasn't stirred once and I'm glad; she was exhausted last night. I saw what that spectacle outside the club did to her, how quickly she clammed up, nervous and on edge. She seemed so brittle in the front seat of my car, barely breathing as I drove us away from the mess of paparazzi.

I regret my impatience. Had I stopped and thought for one second, I would have never followed her into that club. I would have paced myself, introduced her to this life slowly, eased her in with proper planning, security, warnings. It's too late for that now. Last night's exit ensured the peace and quiet of the life she knew yesterday is now gone.

The hounds will be on her from here on out. As long as we're linked together, they'll want a piece of her, and that knowledge kills me.

What kind of selfish bastard subjects someone he cares for to this life? It's bad enough that Caleb will suffer thanks to me, but I don't want that for Raelynn. I wish there were another way.

A quiet voice inside my head points out that there *is* another way.

*I could give her back.*

I could have my security team drive her home and set her right back into her old life. I could concoct an elaborate diversion with my PR team, be seen around town with another girl, and let Raelynn drift right back into anonymity.

The thought makes me sick to my stomach.

I'm not the man I wish I were, someone honorable and good.

I want her too much to send her back. I've been living and suffering without her for so long. Surely I've paid my dues. Surely I'm owed an ounce of happiness.

I trace a finger down her arm as my throat squeezes tight.

Ultimately, it will be her decision whether she stays or goes, I know that. But I won't do the right thing; I won't push her away to make it easier. I can't.

I drag her closer. She moans quietly in her sleep as I wrap my arms around her and kiss her hair. Her scent fills the air around me, and I breathe deeply as she falls back asleep beside me, her hand flat on my chest.

A little after seven AM, she finally stirs and sits up, rubbing her eyes as she takes in her surroundings.

“How long have you been awake?”

I damn near blush. “A while.”

“Just watching me sleep like a weirdo?”

I chuckle, but I don’t deny it.

She sits up a little more, tucking her hair behind her ear and looking away, almost self-conscious. I reach for her, cupping the back of her neck and tugging her closer to me so I can kiss her cheek.

I tell her she looks so fucking gorgeous just to see that red creep up her neck and color her cheeks. She’s so easy to tease, so responsive and earnest in bed. I’ve been hungry for an hour, was contemplating what I could make us for breakfast, but now I drag Raelynn down onto the bed and decide we’ll stay here a little while longer, just kissing, nothing more. *God*. It’s torture to keep my hands in check, to resist the urge to dip my hand beneath my shirt she’s wearing.

It’s nearly eight before we manage to get up and leave my bedroom.

“I’m so hungry I feel lightheaded,” she says, half teasing.

I grab her hand just in case she’s about to pass out on me and lead her toward the kitchen.

Nina is in there, meal-prepping some lunches and dinners for me. She’s slightly younger than Donna, not quite sixty, with a tiny bit of gray overtaking her short black hair near her temples. She’s petite, but she makes up for it with her personality. She’s got a lot of it crammed into her small frame.

She beams when she sees me coming, then that smile drops completely, replaced with slack-jawed shock when she sees Raelynn tucked by my side.

“Ben, good morning! I didn’t realize you had company.”

She’s already flying, grabbing for a towel so she can wipe her hands clean before rushing over.

“Nina, it’s fine. You keep doing what you were doing. I was just going to make breakfast for us.”

“Of course. Yes.” She nods and reaches out her hand for Raelynn. The smile on her face says it all. “I’m Nina, Mr. Castillo’s housekeeper.”

“And right-hand woman,” I add.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Raelynn,” she says, beaming.

Nina has been with me for years. She’s the one who connected me with Donna. They’re cousins and thick as thieves. When they’re both here, the house is never quiet, and I like it that way.

“You’re beautiful,” Nina tells Raelynn. “Look at you. *Pure sunshine.*”

I smile, glad someone else sees it.

Raelynn blushes and shakes her head, glancing down at the clothes she’s wearing. “I’m...this isn’t...I usually look more put together.”

Nina waves away her explanation. She’s old school and traditional, but she doesn’t seem to mind one bit that I had a woman stay over last night.

“Tell you what, I’m already in cooking mode. Why don’t you two grab some coffee and head outside and I’ll bring you

breakfast?”

She’s already shooing us along, not giving me a chance to protest.

“Do you like your eggs done a certain way, Raelynn?”

“However you fix ’em, I’ll eat ’em, I assure you. I’m starving.”

Nina beams. “Good. Not too high maintenance.” She winks at me behind Raelynn’s back, and I roll my eyes.

At the coffee bar, we each fix ourselves a cup, and then I lead us out onto the back patio. There’s a seating area with overstuffed armchairs, an outdoor couch, and a large black dining table that can seat twelve, but Raelynn heads toward the worn wooden swing near a trellis overflowing with jasmine. Without realizing it, she picked my favorite place to sit in the mornings, especially on spring days like this. There’s a slight chill in the air, but the throw blanket hanging on the back of the swing is enough to keep Raelynn warm as we sit and rock back and forth, drinking our coffee.

This is where I sit with Caleb in the mornings. He likes to be lulled and rocked on the swing after breakfast. Usually while he clutches two (or three) trucks in his hands.

“You have such a lovely home,” Raelynn says, staring out at my backyard. “I’ve only seen a little bit of it, but it’s really peaceful. Especially out here.”

I look out at where she’s staring, trying to take it all in with fresh eyes, see it all as Raelynn would, but it’s hard. To me, this is home. It has been since my divorce was finalized.

Large concrete pads lead from where we sit out to the pool and pool house. To the left, there’s a jungle gym and swing set. Beyond that, there’s plenty of lush green grass for Caleb to



room in. The property stretches back over three acres, filled with trees and gardens. I can't take credit for all of the landscaping. The owner before me had a green thumb, but I did a lot of planting of my own during my offseason last year. Nina loves cooking with fresh vegetables from the garden, and this year, I want to try to add on another raised bed for her. It's gotten so out of hand, I had to hire another gardener to maintain everything, especially while I have a heavy travel schedule.

Near where we sit, there's a dozen pots filled with plumerias and salvia and sunflowers that grew from seeds I planted with Caleb. Purple morning glories have overtaken one wall of the patio, their scent not quite beating out the jasmine.

"It's not quite what I imagined. I mean it is homey, but it's also *huge*. Bigger than any home I've ever stepped foot in." She laughs. "I can't imagine what my nan would think of this place."

I peer sideways at her. "I wish she could have seen it."

Raelynn nods and looks down at her coffee. "Me too."

I reach over and take her hand, covering it with mine. We sit quietly for a bit, and I know she's thinking about her late grandmother. I let her have a few minutes of peace before I speak up.

"What do you have to do today?"

"Well, it's actually spring break next week, and most of my friends have left town. I was going to use the time to catch up on work."

When she talks, I have a hard time listening. The early morning sun is highlighting every feature I love about her,

from her pale hair to her bright eyes. I blink and refocus on what she just said before I ask if she's behind.

She frowns. "No, I just like working ahead. Always have. I'm the type to finish an assignment the day it's given to me. I never wait until the last minute. It gives me anxiety just thinking about it."

I hide my smile.

"Caleb will be coming over later this morning."

She perks up. "Really?"

I nod. "During offseason, Shelby and I split custody fifty-fifty, but she works with me during the season when I travel a lot so I can see him when I have light days like today. I have to leave town tomorrow for another game, and it'll be a few days until I get to see him again."

"Right, yeah. I think Eva mentioned something like that. You guys are heading to New York, right?"

"Yeah, we play the Knicks at Madison Square Garden."

"And then on to Oklahoma City?"

"Two days after," I confirm.

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Busy busy."

"Does that scare you?" I ask, careful to keep my gaze on her. I want her real reaction, not her practiced, measured response. If she's intimidated by my schedule, I want to know so we can work through it.

She takes her bottom lip between her teeth for a moment, mulling it over.

"It's just...unusual."

“Have you been in relationships like it before? Long distance?”

There’s that rosy blush again.

She clears her throat. “I haven’t done relationships, long distance or otherwise.”

“Good. So then there’s nothing to compare me to,” I say, bumping my shoulder lightly against hers, trying to coax a smile out of her.

She looks up, and I watch her force a swallow before asking plainly, “So do you see us like that? In a relationship, I mean in the future...”

“Didn’t I already say so?”

For the first time all morning, she lets loose a real genuine smile, white teeth, dimples and all. Before I can help myself, I lean in and kiss her.

“Daddy! Kiss! Daddy! Kiss!” Caleb shouts, taking me by surprise.

I jerk away from Raelynn just as my son leaps into my arms, spilling my coffee all over us in the process. I swear under my breath before I can help it. That’s just what I need: him learning a colorful new curse word and repeating it in front of Shelby.

Thank god my coffee is lukewarm at this point. I’ll take the coffee stains; it’s the burns on Caleb and Raelynn I’m worried about.

“Oh nooo,” Caleb says, pushing out his bottom lip. He leans back and points down to my shirt. “Dirty.”

“You okay, bud?” I ask, checking to make sure he didn’t get any coffee in his eyes or anything.

“Caleb!” Shelby shouts, running around the corner of the house after him. “You can’t just jump on people like that. What if Daddy’s coffee had been hot?”

I glance up to see her come to a sudden halt, her stern mom face slipping, replaced with wide-eyed shock once she sees I’m not alone.

Then quickly, I look over at Raelynn, who’s gone white as a sheet. This isn’t exactly how I wanted this all to go. I wanted her to meet Caleb, sure, but not like this, and maybe not so soon. And she obviously was going to meet Shelby at some point too, but again, not like this.

I meet Shelby’s apologetic gaze, and she mouths, “*Sorry.*” Then she rushes over to get Caleb off me. “Here, Caleb, let’s go get you cleaned up, and we’ll let Daddy and his friend get cleaned up too.”

Caleb ignores Shelby even as she starts tugging him away.

“Kiss,” Caleb says, puckering his lips and looking between Raelynn and me.

A laugh bursts out of Shelby before she can help it, and then she quickly slaps her hand over her mouth. “Sorry! Sorry! Caleb, let’s go.”

“Cay-yub stay!” he says, trying to wrench himself out of her grasp.

“I think Daddy and his friend might want some privacy. Let’s just go change really fast.”

“No!”

“You want to put on your Spider-Man costume?” she asks, growing desperate now.

Usually that wins him over, but not today. “No! Daddy!”

I meet her gaze and nod to let her know it's alright. There's no need to make him more upset.

"He's been asking about you all morning." Shelby sighs, letting him go so he can rush back to me. He throws himself against my body like the little wrecking ball that he is. Pure muscle, this kid. He climbs up and on top of my lap, swinging his legs as he looks over at Raelynn.

"Hi," she says, speaking up for the first time.

We all three look at her in shock.

"I'm Raelynn," she says to Caleb, offering him a little wave.

"Ray-yin," Caleb repeats.

She smiles. "Good job."

"Kiss," Caleb says again.

I laugh despite myself. "You're really going to hang on to that, aren't you?"

Raelynn glances up at Shelby and shakes her head like she's forgotten something.

"Sorry, I should have introduced myself to you as well. I'm Raelynn. I'm not sure if you remember me from the diner back in Texas or—"

"Yes, of course. Right. I'm Shelby. Nice to meet you again."

They shake hands and I stand, taking Caleb with me. "Sorry I'm doing such a bad job of mitigating the awkwardness of this situation. Shelby, I thought you weren't bringing Caleb until closer to lunch time?"

She rocks back on her heels. “Right, but I figured you wouldn’t mind if we were a little early. You’re usually excited if I bring him early. Just today, you were...occupied.”

Raelynn clears her throat and looks away.

“Breakfast for the lovebirds!” Nina singsongs as she pushes open the back door and walks outside, arms laden with plates. Then she glances up, sees Shelby and Caleb, and blanches. “Oh sorry. I didn’t realize you were here too, Shelby.”

“I came around the side yard. Caleb wanted to check on the garden.”

Nina nods. “Right. Well how about I set these plates down then Caleb and I can go out and check the garden while you three talk.”

Caleb wriggles out of my arms to go off with Nina, leaving me alone with my brand-new girlfriend and my ex-wife. What could possibly go wrong?

# Chapter Thirty-One

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**T**his situation is horrible from every angle. I would never choose to see Shelby again looking like this. I'm not wearing a bra, and my shirt and boxer briefs—which both very obviously belong to Ben—are now stained with coffee and partly see-through. I've got massive bedhead, probably some of last night's makeup still on my face, and I'm about to sit down to breakfast with Ben's ex-wife—who, by the way, is just as amazingly gorgeous as she was the first time I met her. I can't even look straight at her. It's just, *god*, she's one of those women who really takes good care of herself. She looks fresh as a daisy this morning, and it's not just her skin and hair—she's in great shape too. Her muscular arms put mine to shame, and now I'm really kicking myself for not doing a push-up or two over the years.

“I really am sorry about all of this,” she says, hovering awkwardly as Nina leads Caleb out toward the garden.

Our food is waiting for us on the table, and even though I'm starving, I really need to run in and change out of these clothes, or better yet, dig a hole to China and escape this situation altogether.



“I’m actually going to run in and freshen up really quick,” I say, purposely avoiding eye contact with both of them before I hop up off the bench and dart back through the kitchen. I try to retrace my steps to get to Ben’s bedroom, but it’s not as easy as I remember. I first end up in the laundry room and then another half-bathroom before finally making it to his room. Unfortunately, I don’t have much to choose from in terms of clothes, but I can at least put my bra back on. I don’t really want to wear my crop top again, so I borrow another t-shirt from Ben and knot it on my hip so it doesn’t drown me. I decide to go commando underneath my jean cutoffs rather than put on yesterday’s panties. In the bathroom, I dig in the toiletry bag until I find a hair tie and brush. I toss my hair up into a ponytail and brush my teeth. I wash my face and apply deodorant and feel moderately more human by the end, but I’m still not quite up for going back out there.

*Crap.*

I just met Ben’s son and his ex-wife, arguably the two most important people in his life, and did I even smile? Yes...I think. And I introduced myself, so there’s that.

My heart stopped when I first saw Caleb. He’s so ridiculously adorable, so gosh-dang cute I could barely stand it. He takes after both of his parents so beautifully. He has his mom’s coloring—light black skin and dark brown curly hair—and Ben’s big smile. From our brief encounter, I could tell he has lots of energy. I mean, he tackled Ben on the patio swing, spilled coffee everywhere, and seemed totally unaffected by it all. I wonder what he likes to do, if he enjoys reading or if he can even manage to sit still long enough to get through a book. I wonder if he likes the stars painted on the ceiling of his room, and now I wish I were out there with him and Nina, tending the garden and getting to know him better. I haven’t

been around kids all that much. I didn't grow up with any siblings or cousins, and I'm embarrassed to realize I didn't know Caleb would already know how to talk a little bit. I mean, admittedly, his words are kind of garbled, but I could understand him just fine.

I sigh and realize Caleb isn't the one that scares me. No. It's Shelby.

I cringe, wondering what she thinks of me. Surely she doesn't assume I'm just some girl Ben brought home from the club last night, a one-night stand. Has Ben told her anything about us? She acted like she remembered me from our brief meeting at Dale's, but she could have just been being polite.

The longer I stay in Ben's room, the harder it seems to muster the courage to go back outside and face them all again. I sit on the edge of his unmade bed and try to recapture some of the magic I felt this morning. I can smell his scent lingering in the air. It already feels like a million years ago that we were alone in here together, kissing.

I glance over to see my purse waiting for me on the nightstand. I reach for it and tug out my phone, thankful it still has a tiny bit of juice left even though I forgot to charge it last night. I pull up the maps app and check the bus routes back to Caltech. There's a city bus that picks up right outside of Ben's neighborhood. From there, it cuts through Hollywood and around Glendale. In total, it would take me an hour and a half to get home. I'd have to do a good bit of walking in my cowboy boots to get to the first stop and pray I don't get blisters, but it seems like the only viable option.

More determined than ever, I dig in my purse and find a scrap piece of paper and a pen I use to write Ben a quick note that I leave on his nightstand. He'll see it eventually...

I turn off my phone to save the last bit of battery I have and stuff it back into my purse before heading out into the hallway, only to run smack-dab into Ben's chest.

He grabs me by my shoulders, trying to steady me.

"Whoa, hey, slow down. It's not a race," he teases, then his smile falls once he sees I have all my things with me. "Are you leaving?"

I nod. "Yes. I texted you," I say lamely, pointing back to where his phone's charging.

He frowns, obviously confused. "Did something come up?"

I look down the hall, toward my freedom.

"No...it's just..."

He bends so his brown eyes can catch mine, and the sincerity there makes me feel all the guiltier for trying to sneak out.

"I'm trying to fix this," I add. "I know you weren't planning to introduce me to Caleb today, and it probably made Shelby really uncomfortable to find us like that this morning. I mean, that is *not* how I wanted to meet your family."

He drops a bag on the ground then reaches out to take my hands. I didn't realize I was waving them around so much until they hang down at my sides, held in place.

"Yeah, it's not ideal, but the last thing I want is for you to leave. Everyone was going to meet eventually, and sure, I wasn't planning on it going like this either, but Shelby understands."

I look over his shoulder, down the hall toward my escape as I tick my jaw back and forth, gathering the courage to

finally ask, “Does she think I’m just a girl you picked up at the club? She acted like she remembered me back there, but she probably meets a lot of people.”

He rears back, almost annoyed by the question. “She knows who you are.”

The sincerity in his voice causes tears to gather in the corners of my eyes, but before they fall, he brings me up against his chest and wraps his arms around me.

“This is all...a lot. I know that,” he says quietly, reassuring me.

It’s not until now that I consider how much I’ve gone through in the last twelve hours. No wonder I was looking up bus routes. Any normal person would be running for the hills.

“Hang in there a bit longer? Okay?” he asks gently.

I nod and he backs up, holding me at arm’s length as he bends to get the bag he set down a moment ago. He holds out the large black shopping bag for me to take.

“I was bringing this to you.”

I peer inside, past a layer of tissue paper.

“Nina had some things rushed over,” he explains. “I’m ashamed I didn’t think of it myself.”

“Wow, that was really nice of her.”

“That’s Nina for you. She thinks of everything.”

I smile and look up at him.

“You’ll stay?”

What choice do I have? I won’t turn down his request, not when he’s looking down at me like that, so hopeful and earnest. I press up onto my toes and kiss his cheek.

“Let me just change really quickly, and I’ll meet you back outside. Tell Shelby I’m sorry for making her wait.”

“She doesn’t mind. She went down to check on Caleb anyway.”

Once I’m alone in his room again, I unpack the bag quickly, trying and failing to withhold my gasps when I check the price tags on everything. Nina must have ordered a rush delivery from the fanciest boutique she could find. Good grief. *\$98 for a pair of silk black underwear?!*

In addition to the underwear, there’s a bra, two shirts, and a pair of jeans. At the bottom, there are even some cosmetics.

I push past the urge to return it all and instead start to dress. Nina was good at guessing my size. The simple white sleeveless tank I pull out fits me like a glove. I pair it with the relaxed boyfriend-style jeans that are only slightly too big.

I’m quick in the bathroom, dabbing on a little bit of makeup, and I feel a hundred times better when I emerge out onto the back patio again to find everyone sitting around the table, even Nina, eating a late breakfast.

They all make a fuss as I approach, welcoming me back and smiling big as if they all agreed beforehand to be extra nice to me when I returned.

“Here, sit,” Ben says, tugging out the chair beside him, across from Nina.

Caleb’s sitting in a high chair at the end of the table. He flashes me a big toothy grin as I pass by, clearly proud of all the egg he’s got stuffed in his mouth.

I can’t help but smile as I take my seat. Ben takes the empty plate in front of my chair and starts loading it up with

food for me to choose from: an almond croissant, fresh fruit, a small yogurt parfait, and some bacon that's still warm.

"That's plenty," I tell him, taking the plate before he can keep piling things onto it. I won't be able to finish all the food as it is. "Thank you."

Shelby sits across from Ben, cutting up bites of fruit for Caleb to eat. We glance at each other, make eye contact, and then both immediately look away. It's all so silly, I know that, but this is uncharted territory for everyone and it's probably going to be uncomfortable for a little while.

"So Raelynn, Ben tells me you're in graduate school at Caltech," Shelby says with a warm smile. "That's really impressive. What are you studying?"

I flush. "Oh, it's...well...I'm doing both computer programming and electrical engineering."

Nina hums like she's impressed.

"So will you try to go into work as a programmer after you graduate?" Shelby asks. "Develop your own apps and things?"

Ben reaches his arm across the back of my chair, and I appreciate his quiet show of support.

"I do write code, yes, but not for apps or anything that cool." I tack on a self-deprecating laugh. "Right now, we're working on perfecting a program for photographing objects in space that can't be easily captured by standard methods: black holes, distant galaxies, that sort of thing."

Shelby blinks, then blinks again, then shakes her head and laughs. "I'm sorry, I don't really think I understood how smart you are. Ben warned us, but..."

The flush on my face ramps up until my cheeks are undoubtedly a bright shocking red.

Fortunately, Caleb saves me from continuing to be the center of attention by chucking a good bit of egg across the table. It lands with a splat in front of Nina's plate.

"Caleb, food stays on our plates," Shelby says sternly.

Caleb laughs maniacally, and the sound is so cute.

Ben chuckles, and Shelby glares. "He feeds off of you. If you laugh, he'll think he's *supposed* to throw food."

Ben schools his face, trying to help the situation, but then Caleb starts wagging his finger the same way Shelby just was, and it's no use—we all start laughing.

After breakfast, I help Nina clear the table while Shelby takes Caleb inside to clean him up and change clothes since he was still wearing the outfit stained with coffee.

"Breakfast was really good," I tell Nina as we carry plates inside side by side.

She smiles. "I'm always happy to make anything you need while you're here. I'll try to keep lunches and dinners stocked in the fridge so you can just heat them up when you're hungry since I know you're busy with school."

"Oh, I won't...I mean, I'm not sure I'll be here."

She rests her hand on my forearm. "Just *if* you're here, hun," she amends with a warm smile.

"And thank you for these clothes, by the way. Ben mentioned you put in the order."

She waves her hand as if it's no big deal just as Ben arrives in the kitchen with the last of the dishes and sets them on the

counter for Nina.

“I have to take a quick call with my manager,” he says, looking my way. “You’ll be okay?”

“Of course. I’ll just help Nina.”

He disappears down the hall, and I make sure the table outside is cleared and clean of any stray bits of egg. When I walk back inside, Caleb’s barreling into the kitchen dressed in a Spider-Man shirt and matching shorts. Shelby’s right behind him.

“Okay, Nina, I’m going to take off. Thanks again for breakfast.” Then she glances over in my direction. “Raelynn, want to walk me out so we can talk for a second?”

I glance quickly at Nina and she smiles, which gives me the courage to follow behind Ben’s ex-wife as we head down the main hall, back toward the front door.

She walks beside me quietly until we’re out of earshot of the others, then she turns and smiles. I’m sure she can sense how nervous I am. I’m practically sweating.

“Just so you know, I won’t make a habit of dropping in like this unannounced. It’s never been an issue before because Ben...well...he never has anyone over here.” She laughs.

“I don’t mind,” I rush to say, holding out my hand. “I mean, you all are family, and with Caleb involved, it gets complicated.”

She furrows her brows as she studies me as if trying to see something beneath the surface that I’m hiding. Surely she must realize I’m an open book. Everyone says I have the worst poker face on the planet.



“Right. Yes. Obviously, Caleb comes first, but...” She looks down the hall, back to where Caleb is playing in the living room. “There comes a point when it’s not healthy for Ben to focus solely on his son. He’s been so wrapped up in him since he was born, and I understand why, I’m the same way...but still, I have Mike.”

I nod, understanding.

She looks back to me, and there’s a kindness in her eyes I wasn’t expecting to see. “I know you and Ben were seeing each other when I came to Texas to tell him about Caleb, and I know the timing of everything was really shitty and I’m sorry for that.”

I can’t resist the urge to squeeze her hand. “Oh my god, no. Don’t apologize.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “Honestly, I feel partly responsible for what he’s gone through this last year, and I mean, I *am* responsible. I cheated on Ben. I left him for Mike and I have to carry that with me for the rest of my life, but I’ve tried really hard to forgive myself for those mistakes and I’m at peace with it now, especially because I have Caleb.” She shakes her head. “Sorry...I know I’m rambling, I just wanted to let you know I’m on Ben’s side, which means I’m on your side too. I want the best for him, and if you’re the person he’s chosen, that means we *all* choose you.”

I blanch, worried she has the wrong impression. First Nina, now Shelby. “I don’t know if he’s *chosen* me. I mean, we only just reconnected.”

She smiles. “I saw the way you two were at breakfast.”

I flush, thinking back. What did we do? Were we that obvious?

I recall the way Ben kept his arm on the back of my chair as I spoke to Shelby, when he stood to refill my coffee and pressed a kiss to my hair. At one point, when Nina and Shelby were talking, Ben looked at me and smiled. I wrinkled my nose and he winked, taking my hand in his under the table. I thought we were being surreptitious about it all, but maybe I was only fooling myself into thinking that so we wouldn't have to stop.

“You two will figure it all out. I just wanted to take a second to let you know I'm not going to be the bitchy ex-wife you have to contend with if you want to be with Ben. I'd like to see him happy.”

I nod, appreciating her words more than she knows.

She heads to the door after a final parting smile, and then I stand there long after she's gone, mulling over everything she just said.

Am I not seeing what's right in front of me? Or is everyone else insane? Ben and I have barely started dating again. We haven't even worked out the kinks, and though it's nice knowing everyone is rooting for us, it also feels like a lot of pressure. I try to push it all out of my mind as I head back into the living room. Caleb's playing with a pile of trucks while Nina watches on, chopping vegetables in the kitchen. I go sit by him, keeping a healthy distance just in case he's feeling shy, though I realize quickly I shouldn't have bothered. The moment I sit down, Caleb picks up a shiny red firetruck and toddles over to hand it to me. I thank him for it then show him how to make a *wee-eww wee-eww* alarm sound. He copies me, smiling, and we stay down there for a while, playing and crawling around on the ground, zooming our trucks past each

other until Ben finds us and asks me if I'd like to walk with them.

The three of us spend the afternoon together at the park in his neighborhood, and it's all so easy. Caleb warms up to me faster than I expected, especially when I play chase with him at the park. He squeals in delight as I run after him. Then he shouts, "Ray-yin *run!* Ray-yin *run!*" over and over when I stop to drink water and take a break.

Ben takes pity on me and taps in for his turn at playing chase so I can catch my breath. I sit on the park bench and watch them, laughing. It's hard to ignore that pang of *what if* as I watch Ben with his son. I can see glimpses of what could be if Ben and I stayed together, and a desperate longing starts to creep in. This life I want so desperately seems suddenly within reach.

What would it be like to have a family like this? Someone to care for and miss?

Since Nan's passing, I've been on my own little lifeboat, adrift at sea, all by myself. I fill out forms at the doctor's office and have no one to list as my emergency contact. I have no one to call with good news or bad news, no one to visit during the holidays. I've convinced myself it doesn't bother me, but then why does it feel so good to walk back from the park with Caleb and have him hold up his chubby little hands, begging me to pick him up?

I look to Ben for permission, and he nods encouragingly. We brought Caleb's stroller, but I'm happy to carry him even when my arms start to strain under his weight. His legs dangle down by my hips and he sucks his thumb into his mouth, laying his head against my shoulder as we walk. I choke up

and am glad Ben can't see. It's embarrassing to be so moved by so little.

I know Caleb's just a sweet boy who'd warm up to anybody who played with him as long as I did at the park, but I convince myself that I'm somehow special, that he likes *me* in particular, and it feels so good to revel in that fantasy.

Back at Ben's house, we head into the kitchen to wash our hands and get a snack. Nina is at the stove, and there's another woman here now too. She looks about the same age as Nina with a white-blond pixie cut, kind blue eyes, and deep laugh lines that appear when she gives us a big welcoming smile. Ben introduces her as Donna, Caleb's nanny, which makes sense because as soon as the kid sees her, he wriggles out of my arms and runs over so he can bury his face in her side.

Ben warns her that he's a bit sweaty, but she doesn't care one bit.

She pats his back affectionately. "Hey there, Caleb. I heard you went to the park!"

"Ray-yin," he answers, pointing back at me, and the woman looks over, nodding in understanding.

I give her a little wave, which she returns, then she looks back down at Caleb.

"*Ohhh*, you went to the park with Daddy and his friend? Bet you had fun. Are you hungry for a little snack? We can't eat too much, Ms. Nina is fixing dinner, but I'll get something to tide you over."

"Apple! Apple!" Caleb begs.

"Please," the woman stresses.

“*Pwease!*” Caleb repeats, replacing the *l* with a *w* and melting my heart for the hundredth time today.

While she heads to the fridge to grab an apple, Ben catches my hand and tugs me back. “Come talk to me for a second in my study. Donna’s got Caleb.”

I follow after him, slightly concerned about how serious he sounds all of a sudden. All day, he’s been so focused on Caleb. We both have, but now that we’re heading down a hallway alone, I’m reminded of last night, and it makes me curious to know what he wants to talk about.

Once we’re in his study, he closes the door behind us and turns to face me.

“I head out of town tomorrow for a few days.”

I nod. “Right. Yes, I knew that.”

“And we haven’t discussed it, but maybe you’ll stay here again tonight and head back to your place in the morning?”

I flush, thinking of spending another night in Ben’s bed. “Yes. I mean, I don’t have a concrete plan in place. I need to look up the bus routes.”

“Bus routes?” he asks, genuinely perplexed.

I smile. “You know, buses are those huge long cars you see driving on the road sometimes? Us poor folk like to take them so we don’t have to walk.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t have you on a bus. In fact, I’m not even convinced you should go back to your place.”

I laugh because what he’s hinting at is absolutely preposterous.

“I have to go back. I have a life, Ben.”

“You could continue your life from here.”

I back up, eyes wide, mouth agape. “Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“Don’t look so shocked.”

“Ben! What in the world are you thinking? We’ve been dating for less than a day! You can’t ask me to move in with you! Absolutely not.”

“Fine. Then we’ll discuss security options and you’ll borrow one of my cars for the time being.”

“No.” I shake my head. “It doesn’t work like that. I can’t just borrow your car. Caltech has horrible parking, and you have to pay insane fees to nab a spot.”

“So then you’ll need a driver.”

At this point, I think he’s completely lost his mind.

“Ben, no car, no driver. I’m a big girl. I know how to get around. I’ll be just fine.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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I'm not fine. Not by a long shot.

My plan starts going downhill on Sunday morning. Not right away though. The beginning of my day is wonderful. Waking up next to Ben a second day in a row is nothing short of fan-*freaking*-tastic. We slept wrapped around one another, touching anywhere we could. His scent clings to me and his hand rubs back and forth across my lower back, just beneath the hem of my shirt, teasing me awake. I smile, but I keep my eyes closed, forcing him to kiss me and draw me out of bed with the promise of coffee and breakfast. I mean, twist my arm, why don't you?

I even get a little more time with Caleb, and I take full advantage, sitting close to him and helping him eat. When I share a bite of my toast with him and he tries to say "Thank you" in his little toddler voice, I can barely suppress the urge to squeeze him in a tight hug.

After breakfast, Donna takes Caleb on a walk, and I help Nina with the dishes even after she tries to shoo me away. When I'm done, it's time for Ben to leave for the airport, so I gather my things in his room while he watches on. I don't know why I feel anxious. I suppose I've come to appreciate



how nice it feels to be in Ben's home, how at peace I feel here. I'm not in a rush to complicate our relationship, but there's no way to escape it. I have to go back to the real world at some point.

"Leave some clothes here," he says, referring to the things Nina ordered for me. "So you'll be more comfortable next time. There's a whole empty closet in there."

He points to his bathroom and I shrug as if to say, *Why not?* But truly, I'm so relieved by his suggestion.

Ben knows I need to go back to my house at Caltech even though he's advised against it. If he had it his way, I'd ride with him to the airport then have his driver drop me at Caltech after. I counter with a better plan: his driver can drop me off at the bus stop right outside of Ben's neighborhood. To me, it's a good compromise. His driver will shorten my commute by twenty minutes, and I'll still get to exert some sense of freedom and normalcy.

Ben hates this plan and lets that be known as he leads me out of the house and into the back seat of his SUV. Up front, a security guard sits beside Ben's driver. The guard turns back to nod at me while Ben finishes explaining why it's better if I just let his driver take me all the way home.

"Nikko agrees."

"Sure do," his security guard says with a big smile.

"You *pay* him—of course he agrees with you."

We start to drive away from the house and Nikko turns to speak into a radio, reporting on where we're headed to someone on the other end.

"Let me see your phone for a minute," Ben says.

I hand it over without a second thought and watch as he programs in his number. He looks up at me pointedly, as if waiting for me to argue. I smile and shake my head, letting him know he won't hear a peep out of me on the subject. Not this time around.

While he has it, he also quickly changes his settings so I have access to his iCloud calendar. Then he shows me how to view it on my end.

“I think it'll be easier for you to stay up to date with where I'm traveling and when I have games.”

I nod, grateful that he thought of it, that way I know what to expect a bit more.

“Just so you know, the next month will be kind of intense for me,” I admit sheepishly. “The spring semester ends in early May, so for the next five weeks, I'll be wrapping up projects, finishing papers, studying for final exams. I also TA for a class...so it can be a lot, especially toward the end of April.”

He nods, mulling it over. “I'll be in the same boat until the NBA season wraps up in May.”

My stomach drops, and he must sense it because he takes my hand as he continues, “My schedule will be intense until then. I'll play a game every two to three days either in LA or on the road. If the season continues like it is, we'll play in the finals as well.”

It's hard not to feel overwhelmed by this news. I mean, what time does that leave for us? When will I see him next?

“Now you see why I asked you to move in,” he says with a sad smile as he squeezes my hand.

I swallow past the emotion tightening my throat.

*Moving in.*

No.

It's too soon. Far too soon.

We'll just have to make do with what we have.

We come to a stop as we wait for the neighborhood gates to slowly swing open. I lament the fact that it's already time for me to leave Ben. The drive was too short. In a moment, I'll get out to wait at my bus stop, and Ben will continue on to the airport. I won't see him for a few days, if then.

I take my phone back from him and stuff it into my bag, prepared to unbuckle my seat belt when I hear Ben curse under his breath. I look up and follow his gaze to see the two photographers parked on the side of the road, right near the stop, their cameras aimed straight at us.

I flinch in shock.

"The windows are tinted," Ben assures me, but I still duck slightly in my seat, overwhelmed by the sudden urge to hide from them. Have they been sitting here for two days? Lurking and hoping we'd show? Or are they always here, waiting for Ben?

"Duncan has also reported a paparazzi helicopter circling overhead. I don't feel comfortable letting you out here, ma'am," Nikko tells me, turning around with an apologetic expression. "Unless it's absolutely necessary."

"It's not," Ben answers quickly on my behalf before turning to me. "Do you have time to ride with me to the airport first, or should I take you back so Duncan can drive you straight to campus?"

I shake my head, suddenly embarrassed for causing a problem. “Whatever’s easier. I don’t mind dropping you off.”

He nods to Nikko, confirming he heard the information, and then Nikko’s radioing someone else, relaying the plan so everyone’s on the same page.

I stare out the window, watching the photographers hurriedly snap photos as we drive out of the neighborhood. I wince with every flash.

“It’s not something anyone should have to deal with,” Ben says, and his tone momentarily distracts me from the scene outside. When I refocus my attention on him, I’m surprised to see how angry he is. Tense shoulders, tight fist, furrowed brow. The tension radiating off him warns me to keep my distance, but I ignore it and lean closer, trying to get him to look at me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t understand before. I’m sorry I fought you about the driver.”

His brown eyes flit to me, and I see the storm brewing in them.

“Don’t you dare apologize. This is my problem, and I’m dumping it on you.”

I rear back at his harsh tone, and he closes his eyes and exhales forcefully, rubbing his forehead back and forth above his eyebrows as if trying to dispel some of the frustration there.

When he looks at me again, his expression has gentled. “I didn’t mean to snap. I’m just uncomfortable with this situation, and I wish I weren’t about to leave town. I’d rather you didn’t have to fend for yourself right now.”

“So tell me how I can help,” I say hurriedly, wanting to be part of fixing all this. I can’t help but feel partially responsible. “I’ll use a driver if you’d like. I’ll hole up like a bookworm in my office at Caltech if that would make things easier.” I try on a weak smile, hoping to lighten his mood. “I’m good at doing that anyway.”

“I’m going to call my lawyer and have him review Caltech campus trespassing policy. For now, after you arrive home, I’d like Nikko to stay nearby until we have a better grip on the situation. You two can exchange numbers, and if you’re willing, it would be much easier if you let him know your plans—where you want to go and when—so he can better keep you safe.”

I’m starting to get overwhelmed again all of a sudden.

I have to let Nikko know wherever I plan to go? *Always?*

What if I just want to go for a walk? Can I even do that anymore?

My throat is tightening, and now it’s my turn to be soothed as Ben tugs me against him and winds his hand up around my neck, behind my hair, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “We’ll figure it out. Don’t let this ruin the last few days.”

I keep quiet and he turns his attention to his phone, presumably so he can contact his lawyer. The rest of our ride together is spent working out logistics.

At the private airport, Ben’s driver and Nikko both get out of the car. Ben and I have a quick moment of privacy and Ben takes full advantage, turning toward me and cupping my jaw gently. I reach up to hold his wrist in place and suddenly, all the chaos surrounding us quiets. It feels incredibly simple when it’s just us, like this.

“I still can’t believe you’re back in my life,” he says, watching his thumb as it brushes back and forth along my lip. “I’m worried to leave you.”

I frown. “Nothing will happen while you’re gone. I’ll do exactly what you asked of me.”

“It’s not so much that...”

Realization suddenly dawns on me and I smile, tilting my head into his hand so he can feel the weight of my words. “I won’t disappear on you again. You have my phone number this time, and you know right where to find me.”

He doesn’t smile, and I sense then just how much the last year and a half affected him. It’s hard to imagine he was as tormented as I was, but I see it now.

At a loss for how to comfort him, I lean forward and kiss him with slow tenderness. Ben’s hand weaves into my hair as his tongue slides into my mouth. My stomach quivers as desire blazes through me. I long for more. Closer. Deeper. His hands on me everywhere. Knuckles rap lightly on the window behind Ben and we break apart, blushing like school kids.

“Duty calls,” he says with a lopsided smile as he leans back, slowly untangling his hand from my hair.

I nod, and he turns to get out. Just before he closes the door behind him, he leans back in and steals one more kiss. “I’ll text you when I land.”

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The ride to Caltech is quiet without Ben. The driver meets my eyes in the rearview mirror and smiles kindly. I lean forward a little.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name before.”

“Hermann,” he says with a reverent dip of his head.

“Hermann,” I repeat with a smile. “It’s nice to meet you.”

After our introduction, we lapse back into silence. Truthfully, I’m slightly uncomfortable with this entire setup. I’ve never had a driver before. I’m not used to being waited on. I’m the one who’s always *done* the waiting, and now I have to adjust to the idea of sitting quietly in the back seat of a sleek SUV as these two men escort me around Los Angeles.

When we hit bumper-to-bumper traffic and slow down to a standstill, I grimace and fidget in my seat, wishing I could just get out and walk the rest of the way.

“I’m sorry y’all are having to take me all the way out to Pasadena.”

I will the cars in front of us to magically disappear off the road. You’d think the highway would be clear on a Sunday morning, but this is Los Angeles, the traffic capital of the country.

“It’s our job,” Nikko assures me. “We’re happy to do it.”

I nod and look back to Hermann to find him studying me in the rearview mirror. “You prefer the quiet?”

I laugh awkwardly. “Not really.”

“I could put some music on?”

“Yes. Whatever you’d like. I don’t have a preference.”

He nods and flips on the radio to an easy-listening station that seems to play all the hits from the 90s. Nikko bobs his head along with the song, and I force myself to unclasp my hands in my lap and relax. Hopefully Nikko was being honest

in saying he's happy to help. I'm sure there are worse people he could be tasked with following around, and I've already made the decision to make his life as easy as possible. In fact, once we arrive at the Caltech campus and Nikko's confirmed I'm safe to head into the house I share with the other grad students, I gather my things and decide to head straight to the Cahill Center, promising Nikko I'll stay there the rest of the day.

"You're welcome to explore. I promise I won't go anywhere. In fact, over on South Lake Avenue there's a little place I love to go when I have money to splurge. It's called Corner Bakery and it has the best croissants you'll get outside of Paris, or so I imagine. I've never been. Anyway, it's not a far walk from where I'll be."

He smiles down at me with a touch of pity, as if he wants to pat me on the head and call me cute.

"I don't think you understand my job with Mr. Castillo."

My shoulders sag. "Apparently not. Will you have to stay right by the building the whole time I'm in there?"

He squares his shoulders and nods. "Until you're ready to go home or someone comes to replace me. This situation is new, and we'd rather be overly cautious."

"God, I'm sorry. Whatever Ben pays you, I'll ask him to double it."

He barks out a laugh.

"Don't worry about it. I do just fine," he adds with a wink.

Since there's (thankfully) no press waiting for me back at my house, Nikko doesn't have an issue walking with me to the Cahill Center. Hermann heads back to Ben's house, but not



before he gives me his number and tells me to call any time, day or night, if I need a ride.

The short walk is remarkably normal with Nikko by my side. I try to get to know him a little better, and he's not shy about gloating about his wife and kids.

“My two boys are both on club teams for baseball. My older one has quite the arm on him.”

I love how much he stands out among the students we pass. As one of the most prestigious math and science research institutes in the country, Caltech isn't teeming with buff dudes in custom black suits. *Shocker*, I know.

Lanky boys in glasses are a dime a dozen, though, and they look up at Nikko as they pass him by as if he's a member of an alien species they want to study.

Since Nikko's never been on this campus, I give him a little tour as we go along, pointing out my favorite buildings, all of which blend with the traditional Spanish mission architecture of Southern California. That is, until we reach the Cahill Center with its futuristic burnt umber panels and angular facade.

It's modern from start to finish, and there's not a single detail the architects didn't consider. For example, I'm brimming over with excitement to tell Nikko that the address number for the building is 1216, which, in angstroms, is the wavelength of ultraviolet light emitted by hydrogen atoms. Unsurprisingly, he isn't as tickled about this as I was when I first learned that tidbit. I also tell him the view from the lobby up to the skylight on the third floor is supposed to mimic the experience of peering up through a telescope, which is neat considering it's the astronomy and astrophysics building. Again, I get crickets.

I laugh and put poor Nikko out of his misery.

“I’ll be in there,” I say, pointing to the door. “You know how to reach me if you need anything?”

He nods and sends me on my way. The second I step inside and am wrapped in that familiar scent associated with academic buildings (cleaning products, mostly), I feel at ease. This is my happy place, and there’s nowhere I’d rather be after the hectic weekend I’ve had.

I head straight to my shared office and close the door behind me, turning to assess the wreckage that exists when four people work in such a confined space. Just like with our room at the house, Kayla treats her desk here like it’s a garbage receptacle. It gives me anxiety just looking at it. How does she find anything in all that mess?

At least it looks as if Julia and Ryan tidied up their areas before they left for spring break, so there’s that. I push all their chairs out of the way and relish the fact that I can swivel wherever I damn well please until they’re back at the end of the week.

I unload my book bag and my laptop, set up shop, and start to chip away at all the tasks I want to get done today.

Much later, my phone buzzes, and I blink as I turn away from my computer, rubbing my tired eyes. I was reading about Caltech’s PhD program on an online astronomy forum. The plan is for me to apply later this year so I can begin immediately upon finishing my master’s degree. Professor Olmsted has made it clear I’ll be admitted to the program should I choose to apply and said she would be happy to serve as my thesis adviser. It’s just hard to believe I’m so close to that goal. Little Raelynn Birdie from Pine Hill, Texas...ha. *That’s Dr. Raelynn Birdie to you, bucko.*

My phone buzzes again and I look down to read the text I received a minute ago. I feel a jolt of excitement once I see it's from Ben. I read it while I wear a dopey smile, glad no one can see me.

**BEN:** Nikko told me you haven't left your office all day. Have you eaten?

**RAELYNN:** I went to the vending machine earlier. Nothing beats a slightly stale Nature Valley bar.

**BEN:** Birdie...

I laugh.

**RAELYNN:** I'm a lowly grad student! We're perpetually starving! That's the law.

**BEN:** Not you. I'll have Nikko pick you up something to eat. What sounds good?

**RAELYNN:** I'm fine. Promise. I can just eat when I get home.

**BEN:** Throw me a bone, please. I'm across the country and I left you in the middle of a mess. The least I can do is treat you to dinner from afar.

I sigh and think for a minute. If I could eat anything...

**RAELYNN:** Italian. Any kind of pasta! And maybe some bread too? I can just text Nikko myself?

**BEN:** I'll let him know. You'll go home and get some rest after you eat, won't you?

**RAELYNN:** No promises. I usually share my tiny office with three other people and for once, it's all mine. I'm enjoying the peace and quiet.

My phone buzzes in my hand with an incoming call from Ben, and for some insane reason, my heart rate leaps.

I answer it with a tentative, "Hello?"

"Do I need to fly back to California to ensure you get some rest? It's late here in New York. I should already be asleep, but I'm worried about you."

"You shouldn't be. I do this sort of thing all the time. Why do you think my posture sucks so badly? I'm perpetually hunched over my computer."

"I thought you said you were ahead on your work."

"I am. But there's always something more I can be doing."

"You're on spring break, aren't you?"

"Yes..."

"I get home on Thursday and I have the day off Friday, so you'll stay at my place."

I smile and lean back in my chair. "I'm not sure there was a question in there. See, it should have sounded something like '*Birdie, will you please sleep at my house on Thursday night because I can't stand the thought of being without you?*'"

"Thursday, Birdie."

I blush. "Thursday."

I'm embarrassed to admit I've never attempted to watch an NBA game on TV. I don't even *own* a TV. Back at my house the next day, I set up my laptop on my bed and watch Ben's game against the Knicks on ESPN.com, rooting for a miniature Ben as he bounces across my screen. It's a tough game compared to the other two I've watched. Come halftime, Los Angeles is down by six and I'm picking at my nails incessantly, worried about what will happen if Ben loses.

I shouldn't have worried about it. LA dominates the second half, and they come out on top. Before I close my laptop after the final buzzer, I snap a selfie of my setup and text it to Ben.

**RAELYNN:** Watched you play tonight.

The next day, he texts me when I'm in the research lab.

**BEN:** I'm flying to Oklahoma City tonight with the team. We have tomorrow off. Want to see Oklahoma?

**RAELYNN:** Ben! No! I'm busy! I'll see you Thursday... you can wait that long.

**BEN:** Not sure I can.

I contemplate the idea. It's insane, right? I can't just go to Oklahoma for Ben. I need to be here. Though it is spring break and barely anyone else is on campus right now...

Before I can overthink it, I text him back.

**RAELYNN:** If you're serious...

# Chapter Thirty-Three

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I look down at my shaking hands and chuckle. I've been in some stressful situations. I've played in the NBA finals *and* the Olympic finals, I've walked out into a stadium filled with tens of thousands of screaming people, I've stood at the free-throw line carrying the hopes of an entire city on my shoulders, and I can't remember the last time my hands shook like this. I clench and release my fists before I reach down into my pocket to grab my hotel keycard.

I scan it across the sensor then push the door open, my eyes immediately skipping over all the hotel's finery in search of the most beautiful thing in the room. At the edge of the bed, with her knees tucked up against her chest, Raelynn sits in her pajamas: a flimsy pale blue tank top and matching shorts. She beams when she sees me, unfolding her long legs and letting them dangle off the side of the bed. She tucks her hands up under her thighs, kicking her legs back and forth as I step inside the suite and let the door close with a heavy thud behind me.

I wasn't actually sure I'd find her here in my room, waiting for me. She's left me wanting all day. I invited her to Oklahoma, had my assistant coordinate everything with security so she wouldn't have to worry about any trouble. If

they hadn't updated me about her whereabouts, I would still think she was in California. She's been ignoring my texts all day. Not a peep.

"*Surprise,*" she says with a cheeky smile.

I set my keycard down on the table in the foyer then slide off my shoes.

"You were supposed to let me know when you left for the airport."

"Yes, but where's the fun in that?"

I arch a brow then reach up and grab the neck of my sweaty shirt. We were just down in the hotel gym, weight training after watching film for our game against OKC tomorrow, and I could use a shower, but it's not my first priority at the moment.

"I had to get updates about you from my team," I add, sounding gruffer than I intend to as I walk toward her, dropping my shirt on the floor on the way.

She scoots gently toward the middle of the bed until I reach her, wrap my hands around her ankles, and tug her down, toward the belly of the beast.

Her eyes widen.

"You're not mad, are you? I wanted to surprise you. Build the suspense."

I narrow my eyes. "Consider it built."

I stare at her elegant neck as she forces a swallow.

"Don't be upset with me," she says quietly, worry marring her face as she lifts her hands to press them gently against my chest.



I lean down until her freckles blur and I can make out every intricate shade of blue in her eyes. “I couldn’t focus when we were in our team meeting. I doubt I soaked in five minutes of the footage we were supposed to be watching. *You* are distracting.”

She takes the edge of her bottom lip in her mouth before I reach up to tug it free.

“You could have kept me in Los Angeles,” she points out, her focus solely on my mouth.

“That wouldn’t have helped,” I admit, leaning down until I can brush my nose against hers playfully.

“So then get me out of your system. I won’t distract you then.”

I laugh at the insane idea. She thinks it’s that easy? Thinks I could quench this thirst I have for her? What a sweet, naive thought.

I lean in to kiss her and show her why that won’t work.

*Do you see now, Raelynn?*

*Do you understand what’s happening?*

I want to take things further. I want to capture the hem of her tank top between my fingers and tug it up and over her head. Her need is telegraphed across her body, from the arch of her back to the breathless way she whispers my name between kisses.

I thought about putting us out of our misery tonight—it’s the only thing I’ve thought about all day—but now I think I’ll hold off a little longer. Give her a dose of her own medicine.

When I pull back and break the kiss, Raelynn sways toward me, blinking her eyes open.

“You’re not really mad, are you?”

I smile and step back. She slides off the bed and follows me, her hands sliding up my chest and looping around my neck.

“Don’t be,” she says, rising up onto her toes so she can press a kiss to my neck. I can’t suppress a low rumble at the feel of her lips on my skin.

“I’m sweaty,” I warn her.

“Like I care.”

She flattens her body against mine, and I feel every decadent curve. The fact that she’s not wearing a bra threatens my self-restraint. I can’t help but drag my hands up her sides, letting my thumbs run over the edges of her breasts, once, twice, then I step back.

“I need to shower.”

“You’re cruel,” she teases with a halfhearted frown. “I thought you brought me to Oklahoma to seduce me.”

I laugh. “I brought you here because I missed you.”

She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest. “How very *noble* of you.”

I reach out for her, but she steps back, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

“You know what? I think *I* need a shower too, actually. That was a long flight from LA.”

“Yeah? How’d you like your first-class seat?”

Her eyebrows tug together in annoyance. “That wasn’t necessary.”

I grin and shrug as if to say, *Get used to it.*

She hums, back to playing her little game as she saunters past me toward the bathroom, lifting her tank top up and off her head then dangling it on her finger tauntingly before letting it slip and puddle on the ground. Her naked back momentarily steals my good sense. I've never considered myself a back man, but there isn't a single part of Raelynn that doesn't turn me on. I take in the curve of her feminine shoulders, the smooth skin along the slope of her spine. She doesn't peer back at me as she walks into the bathroom to turn on the water for the shower, but I follow right behind her, watching as she confidently steps out of her pajama shorts and panties, no concern regarding whether I'm watching her or not. She knows I am.

It's the first time I've seen her naked in a year and a half, and her beauty arrests me. Raelynn is pure sunshine, and looking at her like this feels blinding. I momentarily pause as I take in her slight frame, trying to comprehend how someone so small could have such a strong grip on me. I would crawl on my hands and knees for her and beg if she demanded it, and the realization doesn't come with a sense of foreboding or shame. It's nourishing—the idea that I can love like this after everything I've been through. That I can want someone with everything inside me.

You couldn't possibly love her so soon, says the world.

*Fuck the world.*

I lean against the doorframe of the bathroom, lazily watching as she steps into the shower and turns toward me, happy to put on a show.

It's a death by a thousand cuts to keep my distance as she puts her hands on her body, soaping up her arms and legs, wrapping her hands around her neck then dragging them along

her naked stomach. When she continues lower, past her navel, I stop breathing altogether, watching carefully as she slips her hand between her legs. It's only for a moment, so fleeting I would have missed it had I blinked.

I'm rock hard and nearly panting.

The tilt of her smile tells me she knows full well what she's doing to me.

She squeezes more soap onto her hand and lathers up her chest, between her breasts. The water drips down her body in tempting rivulets and I'm moving before I'm conscious of it, whipping open the shower door and crowding her space until I'm the one in the spray of water. Her back hits tile as I bend down to kiss her just above her collarbone.

"You're a minx."

She laughs, but she doesn't reach out to touch me. She keeps her palms flat against the shower wall, lifting her chin to give me better access. I pay careful attention as I bend down to kiss her breast. I watch her eyelids flutter as I take the tip between my lips and then, carefully, *bite*.

Her stomach visibly clenches as a shiver runs up her spine, and I smile as I kiss my way to her other breast, drawing it out until she's a writhing mess.

"*Please*," she whispers, lifting her hand to wind it through my hair and tug. Hard.

I keep my mouth on her breast as my hand settles on her thigh. I knead and squeeze, digging my fingers in for a second before I stand back up and twist her around so her cheek is flush with the cold tile wall. I press up behind her, my sopping wet athletic shorts a barrier between us as I brush against her. For a moment, I stay there, letting my pulse slow as my eyes

squeeze shut. She arches her back, rubbing against me. My wet hand dips down between her legs, parting her so I can sink one long finger inside.

Her head drops back as she moans, and I smile wickedly as I play with her.

The first orgasm comes so easily it almost feels like I'm cheating. I want her to have another. This isn't just for her; it's satisfying for me too. If I had it my way, we'd never leave this shower.

I press my middle finger inside her and swirl my thumb. She's so sensitive she can't stay still. She rises up onto her toes and wiggles her hips, grinding against me and making me see stars. I need relief too. I want it so badly, but I'm too focused on the way it feels to slide my finger in and out of her, reveling in that tight wet heat.

"I'm...*I'm*," she repeats before seemingly losing the ability to form coherent thoughts. I watch as a second orgasm shatters her. Her fingers claw at the shower wall, her little sounds of ecstasy almost making me cum. I don't stop until I know she's finished and then some, but even then, there's no reprieve for us. When Raelynn turns around, her blue eyes filled with hunger, she scrapes her nails down my stomach and yanks on the waistband of my shorts until she has me in her hand.

*God.*

She twists and pumps her hand down my length impatiently. It's like she's angry with me, but I know she's not. I know it's something else entirely—this frenzied rush for more that's mirrored inside both of us.

The tables turn as she slips down to her knees to take me in her mouth. All those sounds she was making a moment ago fall from my lips now as I fight the urge to close my eyes and just feel. I want to watch her though. I want to burn this image into my brain forever.

“Little Bird,” I whisper, gathering up her hair so I can see her whole face, her sunken cheeks as she sucks me deeper into her mouth, her water-coated lips, the clustered dark lashes that frame her crystal blue eyes.

This won't last long.

The combination of her fist and mouth are enough to rip me apart.

I lean one hand on the wall for support as she speeds up even more, and then I'm coming past her lips, spilling into her mouth as she swallows.

*Relief.*

I haul her up off the floor of the shower and rain kisses across her face until she's laughing, the sound echoing off the tile and reverberating through me.

We wash off together, sharing private smiles whenever our gazes meet. Her cheeks are a rosy shade of pink as if she can't quite believe what we just did. I finish up first and step out, wrapping a towel around my waist and grabbing one of the hotel's oversized white robes for her. She slips into it then pads out to the table by the bed, flipping through the room service menu.

“Are you hungry?” she asks, peering at me over her shoulder as I dry off and dress.

“Starved. Order whatever you want.”

Half an hour later, we sit on the bed, watching a random HGTV show about flipping houses while we eat our dinner. We stay up way too late arguing about the designer's choices and then Raelynn falls asleep on her pillow, her plate of half-finished French fries still sitting beside her. I smile and move them aside, drawing back the blankets to cover her up before I scoot in beside her.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

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“I didn’t know you’d be here!”

I follow the familiar voice to see Eva waltz into the players’ private box inside Oklahoma City’s stadium, beaming at me. I’m relieved to see her too. There’re less people here than there were in the box back in Los Angeles, probably because that was a home game versus away. Before Eva showed up, it was just me and a few older women who seemed polite but largely uninterested in me.

“I flew out last minute,” I explain.

“I’m so glad I won’t have to sit through this game alone,” she says, taking the seat beside me and trying to get comfortable, which is easier said than done considering she’s wearing a dark purple bodycon dress with coordinating sky-high heels. The purse she sets on the coffee table is a custom Hermès painted to coordinate with her boyfriend’s basketball number.

I’m thoroughly impressed. She looks like she owns the place. Meanwhile, I look like a regular ol’ fan who found her way into this private suite by accident. I’m rocking a jersey (Ben’s, of course) I bought in the gift shop. I purposely got it a

few sizes up so I could wear it as a dress with my cowboy boots.

“I would look like a fool if I tried to pull that off,” Eva tells me, waving her hand over my outfit. “But somehow it totally works on you.”

I smile in thanks before asking if she always travels with Brent.

She shrugs. “When I can. It keeps him honest.”

I frown, more than slightly taken aback by her answer. “Are you really that worried he’ll stray?”

She levels me with a no-nonsense, nearly bored stare. “If you knew his track record—hell, the track record of *most* guys on this team—you’d do the same.”

The way she talks, it sounds as if she’s discussing something as simple as the weather, not the dynamics of her relationship.

I lower my voice as I ask, “Has he cheated on you before?”

“Twice.” She shrugs. “That I know of.” My jaw drops, and she laughs. “It’s the nature of the game, babe. You better learn quick if you expect to be around a while. These guys don’t have to go out and seek women. Women come to *them*. You should see the number of thirsty DMs Brent gets every day. The pictures these women send, *Jesus*.”

“That’s no excuse,” I say sternly.

She smirks. “I love the perspective, I really do. It’s like you’ve never heard of a professional athlete cheating on his girlfriend before. I mean, it’s the oldest story in the book. I’ve come to terms with it to some degree. Brent treats me well, he spoils me, and we have fun together. I know the score.”

My stomach twists into a knot. This whole conversation is making me uncomfortable. Surely Ben doesn't expect this sort of arrangement? We haven't outright discussed it, but he has to know I want a monogamous relationship. Right?

I try to think back to what I know about his marriage with Shelby. I know *she* cheated, but no one's ever mentioned anything about Ben. He was faithful to her, right? God, I hope so.

Eva leans over and tries to get me to meet her gaze, but I keep my attention down on the court where the guys are warming up, careful to keep my worries hidden as much as possible.

"Listen, I feel bad. I don't know Ben well. He's never been a player, not like Anthony and Brent. I wouldn't worry about it."

Yeah, unfortunately, that's impossible. My conversation with Eva sticks with me long after the game ends and I head back to the hotel. Ben has to stay and do postgame press, and he takes longer than I thought he would. I try to distract myself by doing some grading for school, but after an hour, I can barely keep my eyes open. I give up the battle and get ready for bed.

I will Ben to walk through the hotel door so he can lean down and kiss me and put an end to my strange mood. But by the time I close my eyes, I'm still in bed alone.

When I stir in the middle of the night, I blink my eyes open and turn to see Ben's there, sound asleep beside me. I know I won't be able to go back to sleep until I use the bathroom, so I scurry quietly there and back, careful not to wake him as I slip back into bed. I can only imagine how exhausted he is. He makes his job look so effortless on the

court, but I know it's not. It takes a toll on him, and I see it in the soft bruise forming just below his ribs. I want to reach out and skim my finger across it gently, kiss and make it better, but I know I'd wake him up. I settle beside him, trying to be as light as a feather as I lay my head back down on my pillow.

I turn my head to the side and watch him as he sleeps, studying the rise and fall of his chest in the soft light spilling out of the bathroom.

With his sharp features in repose, he almost looks innocent. I want to believe he's nothing like Brent and the others. I want to believe he'll protect me and my heart at all costs.

He will, won't he?

---

Ben and I are inseparable over the next two days together. We fly back to Los Angeles from Oklahoma City and spend his day off on Friday with Caleb at the house.

I try in vain to get a little bit of work done in the early afternoon. That is, until a little toddler fist pounds on the door of Ben's study.

“Ray-yin. *RAY-YIN*. In der?”

I stifle a laugh as I hear Ben whisper to Caleb that I'm working, and then Caleb's voice fades down the hall as Ben carries him away. Only a few minutes later, Caleb is back, knocking.

“Hey-yooo?” he asks, pushing his mouth up to the other side of the door and whispering my name like he's trying to keep Ben from finding him again.

“Caleb!” Ben says from down the hall.

The child squeals with delight at being caught, and I hear the sound of his little feet pitter-pattering down the hall as he takes off running.

After that, I close my laptop and decide the odds of me actually getting any work done while Caleb is in the house are slim to none. I might as well embrace it. We cuddle on the couch with Caleb sandwiched between us and watch *Cars*. I’d never seen it before, but now I understand why Caleb’s so obsessed with Lightning McQueen.

Ben gives Nina and Donna the evening off, and I make the boys dinner. Nothing fancy, just a pasta dish Nan used to make for me, a veggie-filled fettuccini alfredo that’s a big hit with Ben because it’s delicious (if I do say so myself) and because it tricks Caleb into eating a lot of vegetables he’d normally sneer at. When he’s done, Caleb licks his plate clean then looks at us, giggling as he points to the sauce on his nose.

I peruse Caleb’s shelves at bedtime and find a board book that’s a rudimentary introduction to outer space. *Adorable*.

“He likes that one,” Ben tells me.

When Caleb sees it, he claps excitedly.

I sit on his bed and he crawls closer until he’s pressed right up against me. I read it to him twice at his insistence, then he opens his chubby little arms for me and I lean in to hug him.

“Night, Caleb.”

“Nigh, Ray-yin.”

I leave to give Ben a moment alone with his son, and when I walk back into the living room, I see Ben’s phone vibrate on the coffee table. It’s not an uncommon occurrence. After five

minutes of being around him, anyone would realize there's always someone trying to get in contact with him, no matter what time of day it is. Normally, he's good about setting boundaries though.

I ignore it and take a seat on the couch. His phone vibrates again with another incoming text and then a phone call.

I don't mean to look at the name on the screen. The fact is, it's a vibrating phone and it's drawing my attention, and now I see that "Lydia" is trying to get in contact with him and it's not my fault, truly.

I force my gaze up to the ceiling as self-loathing immediately turns my happy mood into a sour one. *What am I doing?* I either trust Ben or I don't. I can't snoop on his phone! I can't assume the worst of him!

I don't recognize this version of myself.

I hate that I'm doubting Ben at all. I hate that I've let my chat with Eva weasel into my head and grow roots.

When Ben walks out of Caleb's room and finds me on the couch, he stops and frowns when he sees my expression.

I'm sitting, gaze still on the ceiling, slumped back in shame.

"Birdie? What's wrong?"

I cover my eyes with my hand so I don't have to look at him as I come clean.

"I snooped on your phone by accident and saw someone named Lydia trying to contact you and I know it's horrible—what I did—but you'd tell me if you were seeing other women too, right? I know we didn't set parameters on our relationship, but I'm absolutely *not* willing to share you with

other women. So whoever Lydia is...I don't know, you need to send her packing."

For a good long while, he doesn't say jack diddly. I'm forced to peer at him from between my split fingers and am shocked to see he's on the brink of laughter. He glances back and forth between me and his phone on the coffee table, clearly trying to wrap his head around all I've just said.

"Lydia?"

I nod.

His grin spreads wider. "That's my manager's assistant. She was probably calling to hound me about a contract I was meant to sign earlier this afternoon when we were watching *Cars*."

My relief is short-lived. Shame overrides every single emotion.

"You really worked yourself up there," he notes, bending down to pry my hand away from my face.

I squeeze my eyes closed.

"Birdie, look at me, will you?"

"I'd rather not. I'm waiting to die of embarrassment. It should happen any moment now."

"What made you think I was seeing other women?"

I finally peel my eyes open to give him the truth. I suppose he's owed that much after fielding my wild accusations. "Well...not to throw her under the bus, because I really don't think she meant anything by it, but Eva and I were talking at your game in Oklahoma and she mentioned something about Brent..."

He sighs, seeming to follow where I'm going. "Brent is notoriously terrible at keeping his dick in his pants. The guy's great on the court but an idiot when it comes to relationships."

"Well she made it sound like it's not just Brent, like *all* professional athletes have a hard time remaining faithful with all the options they have before them. It's a veritable buffet of buxom blondes."

"Well I only have eyes for one buxom blonde," he teases, making me blush good and red.

He sits down on the couch beside me and tugs me close, wrapping his arms around my middle and squeezing me like a burrito when I don't give in and cuddle him back.

"I've never cheated on any girlfriend except for in first grade when I kissed Kimberly Mathers on the playground after I agreed to go steady with Lisa Smith."

"See? You're bad to the bone, Ben. A heartbreaker through and through."

He laughs and nuzzles his nose against my neck, trying to get me to wrap my arms around him. Eventually, he grows impatient and tugs me up onto his lap. I let him position me against his chest as we recline on his couch. He glides a hand up and down my back, gently reassuring me with his touch.

We stay like that for a bit as my cheek presses against his chest. I can hear the steady beat of his heart, and it soothes me. My finger draws circles on his shirt, just below his collarbone. We're quiet for so long I almost jump when he speaks again.

"You know this isn't some casual fling I'd toss away for a chance at a one-night stand." His expression grows deeply serious as he cups my cheek and tilts it so his brown eyes can



burrow into my soul as he smiles timidly and admits softly, “I love you, Birdie.”

His admission strikes through me. My lips part in shock.

*Love?*

Nan is the last person who told me she loved me, well before her disease took hold, before I left for California. I never took the word for granted. Growing up, there wasn't enough love surrounding me, so when Nan passed it hurt all the more.

Does Ben realize that?

Does he realize I haven't said “I love you” to someone in so long I can't find my voice? It's so deeply buried under emotion that I can't draw upon it. Instead, I arch up and kiss him on the lips, trailing my mouth down his chin and jaw then lower along his neck. I grow bolder and sit up straighter on him, settling myself in the center of his lap as my kisses grow wild and abandoned. His love is freeing, and I want to show him that.

He realizes before I do that we can't continue kissing out in the living room where anyone could walk by. He stands and lifts me up, carrying me to his bedroom as my legs wrap around his waist. His hands grip and knead my backside and I kiss him in a frenzy, not caring if we bump into corners or walls. What's a little bruise in the name of love?

He laughs at my relentless need, tumbling quickly toward the bed and sitting down on the edge so I stay on his lap. Hungrily, he grabs my shirt and tugs it up and over my head. It hits the floor and he leans in, kissing between my breasts, just over my heart. He stills for a moment, breathing me in, and I rest my hands on his shoulders as my heart drums against his

mouth. It's excruciating to slow down, but I let him stay there as his finger trails around my bra cup, eliciting goose bumps from my head to my toes.

Gently, he tugs the material down, baring me for his lips.

I squeeze my eyes closed as he rolls his tongue over my breast, taking the weight of his hand before moving to the other side and tugging my other bra cup down as well. He looks hypnotized, and it emboldens me enough to reach back and unclasp my bra. The silky straps fall down my arms and Ben finishes the rest of the job for me, tugging it off and dropping it to the floor behind my back. In a flash, his mouth returns, hungry as he licks and kisses and works me up. My hips keep moving and it feels so torturous. Every time he elicits a moan from me, I want to do the same for him. I want to share this madness.

My hand slides down between our bodies, first underneath his shirt, and then lower, beneath the hem of his pants. His zipper comes undone just enough to let me slide my hand into his boxer briefs. He's hard as steel and so smooth I can't resist the first few strokes. I lose track of my objective. I just want to feel him, remind myself of how luxurious it is to have him in my hand, at my mercy.

*Love*, I remind myself. This is in the name of love.

My name is a whisper on his lips as I guide my hand up and down, pumping. His mouth moves from one breast to the other, and then my hand squeezes tighter and he's suddenly at his limit.

He lifts me up, twists around, and drops me on the bed with a soft plop.

His eyes glide over my body like a feather, making me shiver. For agonizing seconds, he only looks, stealing pieces of me with his gaze, plucking my heart right out of my body.

When his eyes land on my navel, he reaches out to touch me like he can't help himself. He hovers over me with a wicked gleam in his eyes as he bends slowly, his mouth kissing down my belly until he reaches the waistband of my yoga pants. He makes quick work of them, along with my panties, dropping them both on top of my bra.

“More?” he asks, his lips skimming my hip bone.

I arch off the bed, hoping he'll do that again.

“*Birdie?*” he demands again.

I fist my hands in his hair and nod over and over again, and still, it's not enough. He wants me to say it. His brown eyes look up at me with piercing need.

“Yes.”

He bends his elbows and falls down on me like I'm the source of long-awaited solace after a hard day, the dessert at the end of a meal. His cheek rests against my navel and I squeeze my eyes closed, trying not to cry, willing myself to keep it together long enough to see this through without the embarrassment of tears.

He kisses me and drags his hand down lower, gripping my thighs and spreading me. He kisses me again and shifts lower. It's all so smooth—the way his hand slides between my thighs, the way his mouth follows. The combination of both is soul-searing. I want to cry out, but I clamp my lips together and keep my eyes closed. He shifts until his shoulders are sandwiched between my thighs, and he settles into place as if he intends to be there a while.

I arch up off the bed when his finger circles and then presses into me, followed by a second one. He pumps in and out, and I peek my eyes open to see his attention caught on my parted legs before he leans in and tastes me.

My mouth drops open on a silent moan. Long strokes of his tongue are enough to undo me in seconds, but I stave it off, shifting, fighting, arching, rocking—I want the blissful ending and yet I’m running from it, wanting so much more of this, desperate for it to last forever. He wins though; his finger curls inside me and an orgasm races through me so suddenly I cry out.

He’s relentless as he coaxes out every last moan, and when he rises up to rip his shirt off his head and retrieve a condom from his bedside drawer, I’m nothing more than a mass of useless limbs. He smiles down at me, proud, *clearly*.

I let him rearrange us higher on the bed, grateful he can do the heavy lifting because I just...can’t. He unzips his pants and tugs them down. He rips the condom open and slides it on while I watch with rapt attention. His eyes capture mine. He wants further consent and I nod, giving it to him eagerly. I’d beg if he wanted. I’d plead and cry and demand he let me feel this heaven on earth. There’s nothing like it, I’m reminded, as he settles himself between my legs and teases me with a few strokes before gently pushing his length in the first inch. His hand splits my legs farther, and he slides in a little more.

I clamp down out of impulse, and he groans.

“Sorry!”

He laughs and shakes his head, apparently at a loss for words. I don’t think my apology was necessary.

He falls down to one elbow, kissing my cheek and neck as he pushes in, edging in farther and farther until he can't go any more, until I feel like I'm so full it's borderline painful.

"Relax," he whispers, flattening his finger over my eyebrows, and I realize I've been nervously bracing myself.

I smile, wrap my arms around his neck, and kiss him like crazy, all over his face and lips and neck. I want to tell him how insane he makes me feel, how much I've longed for this moment ever since he walked out of my life.

"*God*, I missed you," he says, sounding agonized.

I finally lose the battle with my tears, wishing I could conceal them, wishing I wasn't so intimately touched by our lovemaking. It's just so unbearably good, his naked chest on mine, his hands on my skin.

*Let's move to Mexico.*

*Let's leave our lives.*

*Let's get married, have children, get matching tattoos.*

He could suggest anything right now and I would be ready and willing.

And then he starts to rock in and out of me, creating a rhythm, dragging his hands down my body, and when he touches between my parted legs, I arch off the bed and dig my nails into his shoulders. I come again and then he turns us around and lies back, sits me up on top of him, and watches as I start to roll my hips back and forth for him. He looks lost in the sight of us together. His brown eyes are soft and warm as they skim over my body. His hands grip my waist as he holds me down, stilling me as his body jerks and his fingers bite into my skin. I feel it when he lets go, watching with awe, soaking

up the power that comes from having him underneath me like this, absolutely enraptured.

When he finishes and quiets, I fall down and lie on his chest, catching my breath and staring off at the balcony doors, letting my gaze go unfocused and hazy on the night sky. Tiny balls of light dance in my vision—stars, I realize—as Ben’s chest rises and falls, moving my head along with it. He’s still inside me. A bond that feels utterly unbreakable. A perverse part of me wants to stay here forever, keep him underneath me always. But my eyelids get heavy and start to close. Ben stirs a few minutes later, and we begrudgingly rise to rejoin the world.

I grow embarrassed and self-conscious once we extricate ourselves and stand. My nakedness feels almost obscene now, every freckle and dimple on display. I peer up and Ben is staring. My blush doubles down and he walks over to me, grabs my hand, and tugs me into the bathroom so he can run a hot shower. We step in together without speaking, soap ourselves and each other. He has to bend down so much for me to reach the top of his head, I can’t help but laugh.

When we’re done, we dry off and change. Inside the closet where I’ve stored a few items, I see that Nina’s added even more. There are a few comfy sets of pajamas and plenty of panties and bras to choose from. I make a mental note to thank her, again.

The next day, Ben has a game, and I finally drag myself back to the Caltech campus. It’s the Saturday before classes resume after spring break, and I can no longer put off the inevitable. I have nearly fifty unread emails that are waiting for responses, not to mention my friends are all back in town. Kayla greets me when I walk into our room with a huge smile.

“Someone had a very good, very sex-filled spring break,” she says, stopping me dead in my tracks.

How does she know? Were we not as careful as we thought with the paparazzi?

My confused expression makes her roll her eyes. “*Me*. I had a sex-filled spring break,” she says before unfurling a huge gloating smile. “Not only did I see Daniel AKA Mr. Break My Heart Senior Year of High School, but he was looking fine as shit. One thing led to another, as it always does when I’m wearing that Revolve dress, and well...let’s just say the boy is begging for a relationship.”

By this point, she’s inspecting her fingernails as if the entire topic bores her.

“And? Are you going to do it?”

She looks offended. “Absolutely not.”

I laugh and she looks up, shooting me a playful wink before turning back to finish unpacking her bag. And by unpacking, I mean dumping out the contents onto her bed in one big heap.

“Anyway, what did you do? Tell me you didn’t languish away in Cahill. So help me god, if you—”

The door to our room slams open suddenly, and I leap back as Julia and Ryan come to a screeching halt, catching their breaths as if they ran all the way here.

“You!” Julia shouts, pointing at me before bending over and holding her knees.

She nudges Ryan as if to get him to continue whatever she was about to say, but he can barely function either. He stands and sucks in air, waving his hand in circles.

“You and—” he manages.

“*Ben*,” Julia finishes.

“What in the hell is wrong with you two?” Kayla asks with a snappy tone. “Are you on drugs? I specifically told you not to leave me out if you were ever going to try something and *now* look at you, high as kites. What was it? Mushrooms? A little molly? Did someone bring pot brownies into the computer lab again and leave them for unsuspecting freshmen?”

“Ben Castillo!” Ryan shouts, having finally gathered the strength to speak.

Kayla looks at me for an explanation. “What is wrong with them?”

At this point, I should take pity on everyone and explain the situation, but I’d rather see how far Julia and Ryan are willing to take this.

Julia stands and points at me, shouting in one go, “You and Ben Castillo are dating!”

Kayla screams at the top of her lungs. It’s ear-piercing and glass-shattering and it seems to go on for a solid minute.

“WHAT?!”

The remainder of my afternoon is spent filling them in on everything I’ve been withholding. They sit on the edge of my bed, listening, mostly mute except for the occasional “Wait a minute” or “How did you two meet again?” or “Just how big are we talking?” (That comes from Kayla, of course.)

By the end of my explanation, Kayla still thinks we’re all trying to pull some big prank on her, which is understandable



given how extremely unlikely it is that I would be dating a professional athlete.

“FaceTime him right now,” she says, pointing at my phone. “If you’re really dating him then FaceTime him right now.”

I laugh and reach for my phone. “Okay, but he has a game later so there’s no telling what he’ll be doing right now.”

I scroll to his name in my contact list and press the FaceTime button. It starts to ring and we sit patiently for a few seconds. I highly doubt he’ll answer. He’s undoubtedly busy, but then low and behold, the video call connects and Ben’s handsome face fills the screen.

Before he can even say hi though, Anthony ducks into the frame. “Sorry Birdie, Benny-boy is in the locker room right now—you two can’t have phone sex.”

Kayla’s scream fills the room again as she flies off the bed. “THIS IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING! I AM *LOSING* MY SHIT!”

I look down at Ben, who’s smiling good-naturedly despite looking thoroughly confused.

I wink. “Call me after your game?”

He nods.

“Good luck.”

“Love you.”

It’s Anthony’s turn to shout in the background. “I knew it! I fucking *KNEW IT*.”

Then the call cuts off and three sets of eyes blink at me in shock.

I have a feeling this will take some getting used to for them, understandably. *I'm* still getting used to it.

“Y’all look like you might pass out,” I tease.

Kayla closes her gaping mouth, narrows her eyes, and crosses her arms as if preparing for a proper interrogation. “Okay. Right. Start again from the beginning, and don’t leave anything out. You met him at a gas station? Like...what? *How?* Do I need to go hang out at QuikTrip all day so I can meet a professional athlete too?”

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Later that night, when I’m in bed, Ben calls.

Kayla is lying flat on her bed, watching an episode of *Outlander* with her headphones in, but she must hear my phone vibrate because she immediately pauses her show and looks my way.

“Is that him?”

I nod, biting back a huge smile as I answer it. “Hello?”

“Hey.”

His voice sends tingles down my spine.

“Are you heading home?” I ask.

“Yeah. I’m in the car now, didn’t have to stay long after my game. Should I have Hermann swing by and pick you up so I can take you home with me?”

I flush. “*Ben*. I need to get some things done in the morning before classes start again on Monday.”

“You can use my study.”

I laugh. “Remember how well that worked last time?”

“Caleb is with Shelby tomorrow. I wouldn’t disturb you.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

He chuckles as if even he knows I’m right.

My phone buzzes suddenly, and I pull it away from my ear to check the text.

“Leanna just texted me,” I tell Ben, reading it aloud. “She’s bummed I wasn’t at the game and wondering if I want to go out to dinner with Eva and her for a girls’ night tomorrow.”

Kayla—who’s been listening to my conversation the entire time—interjects. “You are not going without me. You don’t get to start dating a celebrity and just up and ditch your old boring friends. I will *also* be coming to this dinner tomorrow night, and so will Julia because it’s her birthday Monday and we need to get her drunk. So tell your fancy friend you’d love to go to girls’ night and you’ll be bringing two tagalongs.”

Ben, who’s heard Kayla’s entire spiel, laughs and says, “Sounds like you’re going out tomorrow.”

“Is that okay?”

“You don’t need my permission, but I’d like you to take Nikko, and Hermann can drive you and your friends.”

“Okay.”

We’re quiet for a moment, and I’m suddenly filled with a sense of longing. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too. The offer to pick you up still stands.”

I bite back a smile. “You’re relentless.”

“Hi. *Yoo-hoo*. Some of us are trying to watch Scottish hotties in peace, so if you two could wrap up your lovey-dovey phone call, that’d be great.”

I laugh. “Guess I have to go.”

“Call me tomorrow when you have time?” he asks.

“Of course.”

“Night, Birdie. Love you.”

My mouth opens and I almost say it back. I love him. I do. It’s just been so long since I’ve said the words out loud to someone. I can’t quite do it.

“Night, Ben.”

---

Eva has been put in charge of our dinner location, which is mildly distressing. She texts me in the early afternoon on Sunday with suggested attire, and her directive is as follows: “Wear something that shows a little skin. NO FLATS. NO MAXI DRESSES. I WILL CUT YOUR DRESS IF IT GOES PAST YOUR KNEES.”

When I show this text to Kayla, she gives it a wholehearted round of applause. “Okay, yes. I don’t know who Eva is, but I can already tell she and I are going to be friends.”

And she’s right.

Kayla and Eva hit it off almost immediately when I make introductions in the foyer of the restaurant later that night. It starts with mutual compliments about their respective outfits. Out of the five of us, they’re the two most provocatively

dressed. Kayla swoons over Eva's two-piece outfit that bares a good bit of her midriff.

"Can we please become friends so I can borrow that from you?"

Eva grins. "Of course. And I love that skirt."

"Really? I've had it since high school."

"It's a classic."

Meanwhile, Leanna and Julia are chatting, albeit much more quietly. I'm glad to see everyone getting along so well as the hostess leads us back toward our table.

I should have known better than to trust Eva to pick a quiet bistro for us to sit and sip wine and eat a casual dinner. To be fair, the restaurant's location in West Hollywood should have tipped me off. The demure entry gives way rather quickly to a full-fledged club. It's early, only a little past eight PM, but the place is already packed with people dancing and drinking. There're cocktail tables strewn around the room and some booths located on the outer edges. That's where we're led by the hostess, to a secluded booth in the back where a security guard is already posted. Not that it matters. Nikko is with us. When we make it to the table, he nods to the other guard and they stand like sentries, blocking clubgoers from getting to us.

"I thought we were going to eat dinner," Leanna shouts over the music.

"We are!" Eva insists, holding up a menu. "Look, they have appetizers! Now, what does everyone want to drink?"

"I have an early class tomorrow," Julia says, looking to me for help.

“No. Boo. No talk about school!” Kayla argues. “I know for a fact you don’t have to be on campus until nine AM. Now buck up, because it’s your birthday tomorrow and we’re celebrating big.”

“With what money?” I point out, trying to bring Kayla back to reality. The drink prices in this place are outrageous. Between the three of us, we’d be able to afford exactly half of a mojito.

“Did I not already say? Drinks are on me.” Eva beams.

A voice clears behind us and we turn to look at Nikko. “Tonight’s tab has already been taken care of,” he says simply, not going into further detail.

“I knew I loved Ben!” Kayla says, flagging down a passing waiter. “Yes, hi. My friends and I would all like to take a shot, please, and you know what? You can just keep ’em coming.”

“Yes!” Eva echoes, high-fiving Kayla.

I lock eyes with a worried Leanna from across the table, and I shrug. “One shot won’t hurt us.”

Oh how I was wrong.

Four hours later, I lie in the back seat of Hermann’s car, threatening death.

“I really am going to puke.”

“Please don’t,” Nikko says from the front seat.

“It’s not like I can help it.”

“We’ll be home soon.”

“It feels like it’s taking forever. Where’s Kayla again?”

It doesn’t seem fair that I’m taking up the whole back seat. Surely I need to make room for the others.

“Leanna’s driver took Kayla and Julia back home.”

Oh right. I remember that now.

“And why didn’t I ride with them?” I ask, massaging my temples.

“We already went through this.”

Did we?

My head is a little fuzzy. It’s been that way for a while, ever since Eva made me down that fancy drink that looked innocent enough but might as well have been straight vodka.

“I don’t usually drink this much. Or at all really.”

“So you’ve mentioned.”

The car comes to a sudden halt, and I nearly tumble off the back seat.

“Whoa, hey. Warn a girl next ti—”

My words are cut off when the back door opens and I peer up to see Ben’s upside-down face smiling down at me.

“Ben!”

“Hi.”

“To what do I owe this pleasure?”

He smiles and nods to the guys up front. “Thanks for bringing her home safely.”

“It was no trouble,” Hermann says.

“You should be really proud of me.” I smile. “I didn’t throw up once.”

One of Ben’s eyebrows rises teasingly. “What an achievement.”

Then he leans in and gathers me up off the seat so he can lift me out of the car and carry me inside.

“Look at me, not even protesting. I like you carrying me. It turns me on.”

Nikko chuckles behind us then tries to cover it up with a cough.

“Night, guys,” he calls back to them. “Get some sleep. I’ll see you both in the morning.”

“Good night, Mr. Castillo.”

Ben carries me in through the front door of his house while I wax poetic about how handsome he is. I describe in great detail my favorite things about him.

“Your lips are so hot. They’re so full I just want to bite them. And your hair. I mean it’s just *so* sexy. Here, let me feel it.”

He tries to suppress his laughter, but he doesn’t succeed.

“Just how much did you have to drink?”

“I don’t know. Ask Kayla and Eva. They’re wicked. The two of them should never be left alone together. I worry for humanity.”

“I think humanity will be just fine. C’mon, let’s get you changed.” He carries me down the hall toward his room.

“Okay, but I have things I need to remember. What were they? *Oh!* I have to be on campus tomorrow. I have a seminar in the morning, but I can’t remember what time.”

“I’ll set your alarm for 6:30. That should be early enough.”

“Oh good. And what time is it now?”

“A little past midnight.”



I do some quick calculations in my head, and it feels like I'm trying to solve a Newtonian equation. "So that gives us roughly six hours to have sex. Right, let's get started."

I'm pawing at his shirt, trying to rip it off, but the task seems suddenly too difficult, especially without his cooperation.

"Birdie, we're going to sleep."

I jut out my bottom lip, hoping that will do the trick. "Why can't you just take advantage of me like I'm asking you to?"

He laughs again, shaking his head at me. I think he's really had enough of my drunkenness. I lean up to kiss his cheek.

"You're sweet to take care of me. I thought I was going home."

"I asked Nikko to bring you here, just in case you weren't feeling well."

"You'll take care of me?"

"Of course."

I nuzzle into his neck and close my eyes, suddenly so sleepy and warm now that I'm here and safe with him.

Once we're in his room, he helps me change and brush my teeth before leading me to bed. He draws back the blankets and tucks me in beside him.

"If you feel sick during the night, I put a trash can beside you just in case. And I'll stay up for a bit too."

I snuggle in beside him, wrap my arm around his middle, and close my eyes. "Thank you, but I don't feel sick anymore. Not now that I'm here."

His arm tightens around me and I can sense that he's looking down and watching me, but I'm too tired to peel my eyes open. I feel his knuckle trace reverently along my cheek, and I smile.

“You know I love you, Birdie?”

I keep my eyes closed, starting to drift off as I hum with happiness. “Yes,” I answer quietly. “And maybe I'll be too shy to tell you in the morning...but I love you too, Ben. I love you so much. You know what? I just had the best idea. I want to marry you. Will you marry me?”

I keep right on rambling until my drunken slumber finally overtakes me. I don't hear his reply, but that's okay because I wouldn't have remembered it anyway.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

---

The next few weeks pass in the blink of an eye.

We're busier than ever with the end of Raelynn's spring semester and my NBA season. Through the madness, we carve out time for ourselves as best we can. Raelynn stays at my house more and more, and each time she's here, she leaves a few additional things behind. It's a gradual transition and nothing's official, but it might as well be. Even though she's still paying rent at her place, more often than not, she's at home when I get back from practice or a game. She's adapted to having Hermann drive her to and from the Caltech campus, and her friends are over here a lot with her too, studying or hanging out. Nina loves it. She loves cooking for a full table, and Caleb is in heaven too. He thinks everyone comes over just to play with him. He talks about his "fwiends" all the time.

When we can, we go out with Trey and Leanna on double dates, or we have them over to the house for dinner. Amara and Caleb are getting close to an age where they can actually play together, so it's fun to have everyone over.

We're up against the Golden State Warriors in the NBA finals, and it ends up being a seven-game neck-and-neck

series. We play the final game in Los Angeles, inside a packed Staples Center, and we come out on top by two points. Anthony makes the game-winning basket, and the guy hasn't shut up about it since. Raelynn was there watching with Caleb, up in the private box, celebrating as confetti rained down from the rafters.

The next day, to celebrate the end of the season and the championship win, we have everyone over for a Texas-style backyard BBQ. It was Raelynn's idea and she's gone all out planning it. She's covered the outdoor table with a red and white checkered tablecloth and clustered mason jars overflowing with daisies in the center. There are hay bales and big buckets filled with sunflowers and cornhole and ring toss, a bounce house and tractor rides. Around noon, we get a call about a guy who's at the neighborhood gate, saying here's here to set up pony rides, and Raelynn blushes sheepishly. "Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

We let them in, and Amara and Caleb squeal with happiness when they see the ponies being led into my backyard.

Raelynn sidles up to me, looking like a Southern belle in her white tank top, jean shorts, and little red bandana tied around her neck.

"Is this okay?" she asks. "I feel like I kinda went overboard. I mean, to be fair, you gave me free rein, and that mistake is on you, frankly."

I lean down to kiss her. "It's perfect. Caleb's going to be talking about those ponies for the next year."

I suggested we get the party catered, but Raelynn had other plans. Trey and I man the grill, churning out hamburgers and hot dogs. Raelynn has been busy in the kitchen all day, making

Nan's potato salad and deviled eggs with the help of Nina and Julia. On a side table, there's pecan pie and Texas sheet cake and some homemade sugar cookies. Caleb's been trying to steal the plate of cookies all day. Raelynn finally broke one in half and shared it with him, promising more after he ate a good dinner.

Through all of this, Kayla and Anthony are, unsurprisingly, nowhere to be found, and I worry for the sake of my guest bedroom. I might have to burn the sheets by the time they're done in there. Maybe gut the whole damn room if I'm honest.

Just when all the hard work is finished, when the meat's been grilled and iced teas have been set at everyone's spot at the table, Anthony strolls out of my house looking like the cat that caught the canary.

"So, when are we eatin'?"

"Whenever you start helping," I toss back as Kayla stumbles out of the house after him, wearing a sly grin.

Raelynn's right on their heels, bringing out a platter of appetizers for the table. "You two could at least look a little more sheepish than that. This is a *family* barbecue."

"Hey, I have no idea what you're talking about," Kayla says, holding up her hands in innocence. "Anthony and I were just inside talking."

"Okay, well you two were *talking* for the better part of an hour."

Kayla winks at Raelynn. "What can I say...Anthony's a real *talker*."

"*Talk talk talk*," Caleb parrots, making us all laugh.

I'm not sure how Kayla and Anthony came to be. They met a month back, when we were all at dinner, and I swear to god, within five minutes of meeting, they were making out at the table.

I've asked Raelynn and Anthony about it.

Anthony says he's in love. Raelynn says Kayla won't stop talking about him either.

At the end of dinner, when everyone's relaxed and picking at their desserts and the sun's gone mostly down, coloring the sky orange and pink, I nudge Raelynn with my shoulder.

"Hey, walk with me for a second?"

When she smiles and nods, I take her hand and we circle around the side yard, hidden from the group as we walk toward the trees that line the perimeter of the property.

"You can lure me away from cornhole if you want," she teases, "but you know you still owe me a rematch. You might be a big NBA superstar with a handful of championship rings, but I'll have you know I'm the reigning third grade cornhole champion at Barbara Bush Elementary School."

She talks like she's some bigshot, and I can't help but smile before leaning down to steal a kiss.

"I'll gladly give you a rematch if you want it," I say, keeping my voice low as I draw back. "But I don't think it'll work out well for you."

She scowls and pokes me in the side. "We'll just see about that."

With a chuckle, I tug her toward me, throwing her off balance for a second so I have to loop my arm around her waist and right her as we keep walking. She slides her hand

into the back pocket of my jeans and asks me if I noticed Ryan and Julia flirting by the pool. I didn't, because I have other things on my mind.

“They're in love, I know it. I had to run up to our office the other day to grab my laptop, and I swear they were kissing before I opened the door. They jumped apart, looking guilty and everything.” Raelynn shakes her head before switching topics altogether. “Do you think there's enough dessert for everyone?”

She keeps right on rambling about the fact that we don't have a berry pie. She worries not everyone likes pecan pie, and I just listen and smile. With everything she had going on today, the ponies and sheet cakes and daisy centerpieces, she didn't notice the extra cars in the driveway or the people bustling around back here, hanging a few hundred glass globe votives from the branches of an eighty-year-old oak tree.

The tree is hidden until we turn the corner around the side of the house and the quiet scene I planned comes into view. Up ahead, a couple dozen yards, hundreds of twinkling lights sway in the breeze beneath the tree's canopy.

Raelynn comes to a sudden halt, drawing back.

Her jaw hangs in shock as she blinks, trying and failing to comprehend what she's looking at.

“What is this?” she asks, turning to me, her eyes shiny with emotion. “*Ben Castillo*, you tell me right now—*what is this?*”

I grin and tug her along, not saying a word as her hand flies up to cover her mouth.

The sun hangs low in the sky as we dip beneath the tree and stop beside a small wooden bench Caleb and I have been



building slowly over the last few weeks. It's nothing too intricate. I know my talent lies on the basketball court, but it's sturdy, and on the seat, right in the middle, we carved two letters that are only just legible.

## **B + R**

Raelynn looks down at it and gasps in shock, though I'm not sure if it's at the sight of my handiwork or the black velvet ring box sitting beside our initials.

I reach down for it as she takes a step back, tears swimming in her eyes.

"Little Bird," I whisper, trying to give her the chance to recover from her shock before I continue.

I tilt my head and smile, holding up the ring box.

She shakes her head in disbelief, over and over again, convinced this can't be real.

I open it to show her what's inside.

The ring consists of a cluster of stones with an oval diamond wedged in the center. Round sapphires and blue topaz and smaller diamonds surround it, pressed together like a constellation from the night sky.

"I wanted to give you your beloved stars."

Tears slide down her cheeks as she stares down at the ring. I draw it out of the box and hold it up as I bend down to one knee. Looking up at her, backlit by hundreds of flickering lanterns, my chest squeezes tight, and for a moment, I can't speak.

I extend a hand, palm up, and slowly, shaking, she lifts hers for me to take.

“Raelynn Birdie...I love you,” I say, voice quiet and earnest.

“I love you too,” she says quickly, freely, as if she can’t contain the words a moment longer. “I love you,” she repeats, and even as she tries to stifle it, a quiet sob slips out.

I rub my thumb across her knuckles, trying in vain to still my wild racing heart.

“Will you marry me?”

Without hesitation, she flings herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and burying her face against my chest. Sobs rack through her as I stand and lift us and squeeze her close, holding her against me as our hearts threaten to burst. She shakes in my arms, crying, nodding, and repeating “Yes” into my shirt.

“I promise to always love you,” I whisper as tears burn down my cheeks. “We’ll be a family. You and me and Caleb and our children.”

I hold her like that for a good long while, until her crying softens and a light laugh escapes her. I set her down and she steps back so I can slide the ring onto her finger. It’s a perfect fit thanks to Kayla’s help.

She looks down and studies it, twisting it beneath the twinkle lights so it glistens and glows. She tells me it’s beautiful before arching up to plant a kiss on my lips.

It’s then that a chorus of shouts ring out, and we break apart and turn to see our friends gathered back toward the house, whooping and hollering, just as planned. They were all in on my proposal plans, even Caleb.

They hold up glasses of champagne in celebration, and Caleb comes running for us. He’s too young to fully

understand what's happening, but I know how much he's come to love Raelynn and how much she loves him in return. Over breakfast the other morning, she told me she'd learned the French word for stepson is *beau-fils*, which translates to beautiful son. She smiled at that, thinking it was a much sweeter way of describing her feelings for Caleb.

"Ray-yin!" he shouts, running toward her. "Mar-ry Daddy," he singsongs in his toddler voice.

He thinks this is all some fantastic game and starts to point up to all the hanging votives.

"Lights!" he shouts.

"Yes, lights. Daddy hung those for me," Raelynn says, reaching down to ruffle his curls.

Caleb jumps around underneath them, clapping his hands as if trying to catch the lights.

"C'mon you two!" Kayla calls. "We have celebrating to do!"

"I already poured shots!" Anthony adds.

We walk over to join the group with Caleb between us, and everyone rushes in to congratulate us. Raelynn's friends all pull her into tight hugs. Leanna, Kayla, Julia, and Eva take turns oohing and aahing over her ring.

"He did good, right?" Kayla proclaims proudly. "I convinced him to go bigger. Why half-ass it, you know? Give the girl a *diamond* with a capital D."

The guys congratulate me too. Well...Trey and Ryan do. Anthony, on the other hand, starts offering me his deepest condolences as if he isn't about to follow right in my

footsteps. I'm calling it now—this time next year, he'll be walking down the aisle to Kayla. No doubt about it.

"I call dibs on maid of honor!" Kayla shouts to the group.

"That's not how it works!" Julia protests.

"Exactly," Leanna adds calmly, as if the whole argument is beneath her. Then she unfurls a devious smile. "Besides, everyone knows it'll be *me*."

Through the laughter and chaos, Raelynn looks over to me and smiles. She thinks the surprises are over, but in an hour, after we tuck Caleb into bed and leave him in the care of Nina and Donna, I'll roll out the two suitcases Nina helped me pack in secret yesterday afternoon. Hermann will be waiting out front to drive us to the airport. We have first-class seats on an overnight flight to Tromsø, Norway. I'm taking Raelynn to see the Northern Lights as an engagement present, and I can't wait to see her reaction when she finds out.

"I love you," she mouths.

"I love you too."

Caleb—who's been eating up all the attention from everyone—fights through the crowd to get to Raelynn and tugs on her leg so she'll pick him up. He drops his head to her shoulder, sucking his thumb into his mouth, a little intimidated by the crowd of people. My chest tightens as I watch them together. It's hard to believe how lucky I am.

"Okay, now that we've all seen the huge ring and congratulated the lovebirds, who's ready for a shot?! Leanna?" Kayla asks, nudging her with her elbow.

Leanna snorts. "No way! I have to go put Amara down in a second."

Kayla groans. “Ryan?”

“No way.”

“Okay fine—Caleb?”

“*No!*” we all shout.

She throws her hands in the air. “Guys, I was *kidding!*”

# Epilogue

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**E**arly on a Saturday morning, while the rest of the neighborhood sleeps, our family of six heads to the park. Ben and I stroll slowly, sipping our now-lukewarm coffee while our four kids scoot, bike, and toddle along on the sidewalk in front of us. Caleb, who's nearly seven, leads the pack, pedaling his bike to and fro, doing circles around us and teasing about what "slowpokes" we are. Levi and Hayden, who are five and three, try their hardest to keep up with Caleb on their scooters, wanting to be as fast and cool and awesome as their older brother. Our youngest, a little girl with blonde ringlet curls, is barely a year old and holds Ben's hand as she walks, still trying to get the hang of it. We named her Millie, after Nan.

She stumbles a little bit as she walks, but Ben keeps a strong hold on her so she can keep right on going. Even still, Levi jumps off his scooter and comes running to check on her. With three older brothers, Millie is never in need of a hero.

The boys begged and begged me for a baby sister, and I would laugh and tell them I had my hands full already. Three boys have a way of keeping you on your toes at *all* times, but in the end, they got their wish. One last surprise pregnancy and here we are, a family of six.

Ben still plays in the NBA, but he and I have discussed this being his final season. He's accomplished all he's wanted to with the league, and he hates having to miss so much time with our family while he's out on the road. Before Caleb was in school, we'd travel as much as we could with him, but those years were hard. Levi and Hayden were both so little, and Caleb too. Donna would travel with me—we've become so close because of it—and I was happy to do it until Caleb needed to be in school every day and I got pregnant with Millie. My last pregnancy made me sick as a dog from the time I was six weeks to the night I delivered. Travel wasn't possible unless it was merely from my bed to the toilet.

"I'm going to call Coach today," Ben says as we round the corner and see the park up ahead.

"Oh yeah?"

"To talk about the upcoming season."

Millie turns and buries her head in my legs. I pass my coffee off to Ben and swing her up into my arms.

"Just about the schedule?" I'm confused about why he's telling me he has a call with Coach. They talk all the time. At this point, Ben's played for him for over a decade, and they're good friends.

"I'm not going back."

I stutter-step and my gaze flies up to him. "What do you mean you're not going back?"

He smiles, and even though it carries a note of sadness, especially near his eyes, he mostly looks relieved.

"I can't leave you and the kids again. Not like last season. I've been wavering back and forth, but it's just too hard."



“But basketball is your life.”

He tilts his head, aiming a glare at me that screams, *Are you kidding?*

“You and the kids are my life.”

It’s impossible to keep my chest from filling with hope.

“Are you sure?”

I don’t want to get used to the idea if his mind isn’t completely made up. The last few years have been too hard. I had Millie and a few short weeks later, Ben was back on the road for basketball. I wouldn’t have survived without Donna and Nina.

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“But what are you going to do?”

He shrugs. “I’ve been thinking about coaching. But honestly, for right now, all I care about is being with you guys. School drop-off, tee-ball practice, all of it. I can’t do that while I’m traveling half the year.”

I’m embarrassed that I’m crying. The tears sprang up on me so suddenly I can’t possibly hide them from him. This decision has weighed so heavily on me, and I’ve tried to be a team player. I haven’t burdened Ben with my complaints, and even now, I try my best to encourage him even at the expense of my own happiness.

“You could do the final year? The fans will be so upset to lose you.”

He frowns, almost angrily, as he sees the tears swimming in my eyes. Does he realize how much I’ve kept from him?

“I’ve given this city enough of me.”

I nod, understanding.

“This will free us up a lot. Especially you.” His gaze holds me captive as he continues, “You’ll be able to take that part-time position with Professor Olmsted.”

My mouth drops. “How did you—”

“I saw the email you printed out. On our desk. Were you going to tell me about it?” he asks, sounding sad more than accusing.

I look away and shake my head.

I didn’t want to bring it up because I was never going to actually go through with it. Not this year. We were going to prioritize Ben’s last season with the team, and my dreams were going to have to wait a little longer. I hate that I had to step back from my work after I finished my PhD, but I had no other choice. With all the traveling, there was no way for me to maintain a position at Caltech, not to mention all my back-to-back pregnancies. We’ve been busy building our family, and I was okay with that. *More* than okay. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than with my family.

But still, I printed out that email because it was the only thing I could do with it. I wanted to ensure it was real, that I was still a human with interests and pursuits outside of my role as a mom and wife. That my identity as a woman of science still existed, at least on that thin piece of paper.

I shake my head. “It’s silly. I know we’ve got our hands full as it is.”

“Birdie...”

The park comes into view up ahead, and the boys ditch their bikes and scooters to run for the playground. Millie squirms and I let her down on the grass so she can toddle after

them. Ben and I keep walking until we're close enough to keep an eye out as they play together, but far enough away to continue our conversation.

"I've already talked it over with Donna," Ben says. "With the boys in daycare and Caleb in school, that only leaves Millie. Donna and I can watch her in the mornings while you're at Caltech. You'd be back before she woke up from her afternoon nap. That's nothing."

God, is this really possible?

Could I?

"Do you miss your work?" he asks, trying to goad me into speaking.

*Of course.*

I swallow down my guilt. I have so much; I shouldn't need anything else.

He passes me my coffee and we're quiet for a bit while we watch the kids play. Caleb helps Millie go up the stairs, and Hayden is clapping his hands and cheering her on at the top.

When Ben speaks up again, I'm surprised to realize we've been thinking about the same thing.

"Do you remember the night I confronted you about you leaving Caltech to move home to Pine Hill?"

I nod mutely.

"You remember how pissed I was?" he asks with a soft chuckle.

"I seem to remember doing a good bit of yelling too," I tease.

“True. You’ve always been stubborn, but I’ll say to you now what I said to you then.” He reaches out to take my hand, forcing me to look over at him. “Let me help you,” he implores, his voice low and tempting.

Emotion tightens my throat, and all I can do is nod, over and over as he pulls me into a tight hug.

“We’ll plan it with Donna when we get home. We’ll iron out the details and you’ll take the position, Birdie.”

“I’ll take the position,” I affirm, nodding.

He kisses my hair. “Good. Now let’s go show these kids how to race down that slide.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You’re going to get stuck again! Remember last time? I thought we were going to have to get the fire department down here to cut you free.”

“Sure, sure. Keep making up excuses. You know I’m going to beat you.”

I casually set down my coffee on the grass and then, without warning, start running toward the slide to beat him there. In seconds, he’s on me, picking me up and whirling me around while I break out into laughter. The kids all come running, laughing and playing along.

*“Put Mommy down!”*

*“Don’t hurt Mommy!”*

Levi pummels Ben’s thighs with his little fists. “Let her go!”

Ben laughs and squeezes me tighter.

“I’m not hurting her. Don’t you guys realize? Your mommy has me wrapped around her finger. Always has...” He

sets me down and turns me so he can look me square in the eyes as he finishes, "Always will."

I hope you loved Ben and Birdie! Continue reading for a sample of my *USA Today* Bestseller and Amazon #1 bestselling sports romance **SCORING WILDER!**

## SYNOPSIS

**What started out as a joke— seduce Coach Wilder—soon became a goal she had to score.**

With Olympic tryouts on the horizon, the last thing nineteen-year-old Kinsley Bryant needs to add to her plate is Liam Wilder. He's a professional soccer player, America's favorite bad-boy, and has all the qualities of a skilled panty-dropper.

- A face that makes girls weep – check.
- Abs that can shred Parmesan cheese (the expensive kind) – check.
- Enough confidence to shift the earth's gravitational pull – double check.

Not to mention Liam is strictly off limits. Forbidden. Her coaches have made that perfectly clear. (i.e. “Score with Coach Wilder anywhere other than the field and you'll be cut from the team faster than you can count his tattoos.”) But that just makes him all the more enticing...Besides, Kinsley's already counted the visible ones, and she is not one to leave a project unfinished.

Kinsley tries to play the game her way as they navigate through forbidden territory, but Liam is determined to teach her a whole new definition for the term “team bonding.”

# SCORING WILDER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**R.S. GREY**

## Chapter 1

---

Cheat on me once, shame on him. Cheat on me twice... what the actual fuck is going on? How in the world have I managed to find my last *two* boyfriends cheating on me? No, not *together*. Although, that would have been much more poetic, and at least they could have included me or something.

The reality was much worse.

“Wow. What a treat to walk in on,” I noted harshly as I stood in the doorway of Josh’s bedroom. Josh and the nameless bimbo screamed and jumped apart on his bed, causing his navy sheets to tumble to the ground. His brown eyes found mine, and for one brief second, I mourned the loss of his warm gaze, but then my field of vision widened and I was slapped with the sad scene before me.

My boyfriend of four months was cheating on me. No, scratch that. *My friend of four years, turned boyfriend of four months*, was cheating on me.

“Oh, no. Please, don’t stop on my account. I’m only his *girlfriend*,” I hissed at the girl, trying to calm my temper. I was known to be feisty on a good day, so that was hardly brushing the surface for me.



Josh's dark brown hair was ruffled from the girl's hands. His sharp features were pitiful, but still handsome. I barely glanced in the girl's direction. Platinum blonde hair was the only feature I noticed. Probably because it was bright enough to burn through my corneas. First, she steals my boyfriend, and then she renders me visionless. Just great.

Is my judgment of character so misaligned that I can't spot the good guys from the bad? No. It's just the fact that I happen to go for guys that can't keep tramps out of their pants. You know the type: young and insanely good-looking.

"Kinsley! It's not—"

"What it looks like," I finished for him. "Wow, Josh. You know Trey said the same thing, but he didn't have that look of anguish you've got going on right now. Seriously, good work." I applauded him with a hard stare. My claps rang out around the room, and I realized then that it was time for me to leave.

It was a different guy, a different girl, but there was that same twisting sensation in my gut like I was about to keel over on the spot. I spun around and flipped them both the bird before heading back toward the living room to grab my purse.

I heard shuffling and awkward grunts behind me, but I didn't turn around.

"Josh, where are you going? Let her go, we aren't done!" Oh good, she hadn't had her orgasm yet. Maybe my timing wasn't all that bad.

"Kinsley! Wait!" Josh yelled behind me. Did he think we were in the middle of a telenovela?

"Josh, it's over. Don't bother," I said as I threw my purse over my shoulder.

His hand reached out to clasp mine, and I had to actively fight the urge to punch his dick off. Seriously, is it that hard to stay faithful? Are men physically incapable?

“Kinsley! I love you. I love you!” He spun me around, holding the bed sheet up with his right hand and clasping my arm with the other. His eyes were wild, and for a brief moment, I believed him.

Oh god. He did it. *He went there*. And you know what the sad thing is? I don’t even think he was giving me a line. I think the poor schmuck actually thought that he loved me.

“Well, if that’s how you show your love I can’t imagine the elaborate things you do for your parents.”

“Please—hear me out. This meant *nothing*.”

I wasn’t listening. I was already building a wall between us. “Thank you, Josh. Thank you for ruining my capacity to trust so that any guy that comes after you will automatically have the cards stacked against him.”

Josh had stolen another chunk of my heart, my naiveté, my innocence, and smashed it under his perfectly toned body. When I met him I was on my way to feeling jaded to the whole dating process. I’d already been cheated on once by my boyfriend of six months, Trey, who also happened to be the guy that had taken my virginity. (I know, I know. They should make a hallmark card for that experience since it’s so cliché: “Whoops, sorry your high school boyfriend can’t keep it in his pants... here’s a cute puppy wearing a bowtie.”)

But now? Now I was about ten miles past jaded. It was time to trade in my designer dresses for patterned muumuus and house slippers. Maybe I could join a support group for divorcées over fifty. You know, those women that decide they

don't need men to be happy. They'll just knit, take group trips to the Caribbean, and say things like "I always wanted to go out to eat, but *Jeff* insisted I cook for him. I'm going out to eat every night now, damnit!"

Only problem: I'm eighteen. They'd probably think I was trying to be an ironic hipster.

Whatever, I'd figure it out.

Josh kept calling my name as I walked out of his apartment. A huge part of me wanted to trash everything in my path, but he was moving the next day and I didn't think it'd be right to screw over his landlord. Instead, I just flipped my brown hair over my shoulder and relished in the fact that my legs looked killer in my cut-off shorts.

*Keep yelling, Josh, but I'm never turning back.*

## Chapter 2

---

“**H**ell hath no fury like a woman scorned!” I screamed before I downed the fifth shot of the night. The liquor slid over my tongue, but I could hardly taste it anymore. It was my nineteenth birthday, so I was allowed to go a little wild. Not to mention, it was two weeks since I’d walked in on Josh cheating on me, and I was just entering the height of the “guys-can-go-fuck-themselves” phase. Next would be the “guys-can-seriously-go-fuck-themselves” phase, the crucial final step in the cheated-on grieving process.

“I dunno, Kinsley. Tequila ‘hath’ a pretty wicked fury.” Emily frowned as she took the shot glass out of my hand and replaced it with a glass of water. I’d only known Emily for a few days, but I could already tell we’d have a symbiotic relationship. She was the epitome of the shy girl-next-door, and I was the complete opposite.

Emily and I were two out of five freshmen members of the University of Los Angeles women’s soccer team. It was the beginning of June and training camp would start bright and early the next morning. I knew I was playing with fire by getting drunk the night before, but the veteran girls assured me that I’d be fine. They said the first day was mostly about technical things; basically lots of speeches and meetings about

what the program expected out of us. The real practicing didn't usually start until the second day.

I peered over at Emily and closed one eye so that I would only see one of her. She was pretty with medium-length red hair that was light enough to where I felt like calling her Peach for the rest of the night.

“Em, you're so pretty. Have I told you that you're so pretty? Cause you're so pretty.”

She blushed and I made a mental note to get the girl some confidence. Lord knows I had enough for the two of us combined. You'd think having been cheated on twice would ruin that, but it would take a lot more than two dumb guys to undo the amount of leery gazes and unsolicited charm that had been laid on me my whole life.

I took Emily's hand and pulled her to the restroom down the hall. We were about to leave for a house party and I wanted to make sure I hadn't boozed off all of my makeup. Thankfully it wasn't hard to keep on mascara and lip gloss.

“Do you think this is a smart idea? Going to this party before our first practice?” Emily asked, eyeing me in the spotless mirror.

I puckered my lips and wagged my finger like I was about to set her straight. “We'll be fine, and who cares? It's my BIRTHDAY!” I squealed so loudly that Emily scrunched her nose in distaste. God, we were so different. I wondered if our budding friendship would last the summer. She was a small town girl from the Midwest whereas I was born and raised in the LA soccer world.

“Okay. We'll go and have fun and get back in time to get some sleep before practice,” Emily said, nodding her head in

agreement. I was already corrupting the girl.

“How do you look that good after five shots? Seriously?” Emily asked.

I glanced away from her to eye my appearance. Everything was just as it should have been: heart shaped face, small nose, plump lips, tan skin, and bright blue eyes that looked almost fake against my long mane of dark brown hair.

I was about average height and in great shape from soccer. I had lean, toned arms and legs like a cross-country runner.

“Are you kidding? I’d kill for those little freckles. You look like Little Bo Peep!” I laughed, grabbing her hand and forcing her to spin around in a circle like a prima ballerina. How drunk was I at this point?

Emily laughed and spun around, stumbling over her feet and making me laugh even harder. “What do freckles have to do with Little Bo Peep?”

A thunderous knock sounded at the door before I could answer.

“Let’s go rookies! If we don’t leave now there won’t be any good alcohol left at the party!”

My ears perked up at that. The party was where I needed to be. It was my last hope of having a good birthday. So far it had been a bit depressing. I’d dumped my cheating boyfriend two weeks prior, my parents had ditched me for snow and the Aspen Country Club, and all of my high school friends had moved away for college. I’d bought myself a piece of Italian cream cake and eaten it alone in a cafe, people watching and feeling extremely lonely.

This party was my silver-lining, and I needed to make sure I made the most of it.

“Lead the way, Bo Peep!” I winked and locked elbows with Emily before we left the bathroom.

We walked back into the living room and I surveyed the group of girls that would form my soccer team for the next four years. Most of them I’d met when I was being recruited. They all seemed nice enough and I knew I’d get to know them a lot better once we started training.

The seniors were the only girls that seemed like they might want to cause problems. Tara was the captain of the team and everything about her cried out tyrannical tendencies. Her fellow seniors followed her around like little minions, except less cute. Hopefully I’d end up on Tara’s good side, but past experience told me that was less than likely. I was heavily recruited for the team and had been voted rookie of the year by several soccer magazines prior to my signing on at ULA, which is why her radar was already locked onto me. I was a threat to her well-oiled system, which was made perfectly clear when she’d snubbed me at tryouts in front of everyone a few months prior.

Whatever. If I could survive her, then I’d be fine. I just had to do my job and play excellent soccer, that way she wouldn’t have anything to complain about.

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“Kinsley, Emily, wait for me!” Becca yelled as we pushed our way through the front door. Becca was another rookie on the team. She’d moved into the Rookie house the day before and we’d hardly had any time to hangout, but I could already tell our personalities would blend well together. She was gorgeous; she was only a few inches shorter than me with hazel eyes and bright blonde hair.

I spun around to wait for her as she ran over from the Underclassmen house that was right next door to the Upperclassmen house. We called them the Vet and Rookie houses for short.

“I thought you were ditching us,” I said, reaching out to wrap my arm around her shoulder.

“Nope. I had to run over to the Rookie house to grab something.” She patted her purse with a proud grin.

“Ahhh,” I nodded as we reached the SUV.

The plan was to cram into a single vehicle so that only one person had to be the designated driver. It wasn't the safest form of transportation, but it'd have to work.

“Emily, keep your hands where I can see them,” I joked as I laid across the laps of the three girls in the middle row.

“Ew, Kinsley!” Emily protested, and the entire car cracked up. Just to calm her nerves, I reached down and pulled the hem of my tight dress down so that it covered everything.

“Are you having a good birthday so far, Kinsley?” Tara asked from the passenger seat. Funny how we were piled in the back like sardines, yet somehow she managed to get the front seat all to herself.

“Yeah. It's been really great,” I lied, tacking on a smile to prove how much I was willing to play the game. I really didn't want to be on her bad side.

“Oh really? Sofie saw you eating a piece of cake all by yourself in that cafe near campus.” She shot me a piteous look complete with sad eyes and a small frown. I didn't even glance toward Sofie, the designated driver and co-captain of our team.



“Oh weird...I was there with Leonardo DiCaprio. He must have been in the bathroom when Sofie was spying on me,” I quipped, making everyone in the SUV laugh, except, of course, Sofie and Tara. I knew the “spying on me” comment was a tad aggressive, but what kind of bully picks on someone on their birthday?

“Spying on you? We have better things to do, Bryant,” she scoffed, and then turned back toward the front window. I didn’t mind when teammates called me by my last name but with her, it was almost a little dig, like calling someone “kid” when you’re the same age as they are.

“We’ll sing you happy birthday when we get to the party!” Becca suggested as she supported the middle of my body on top of her lap. Everyone agreed and promised to sing as soon as we arrived. Their support felt good in that moment and I let Tara’s comments roll off my back. It was too early in the season to have an enemy like her.

A popular club mix came on the radio and Tara reached forward to turn it on full blast so that everyone started dancing. Becca gyrated her hips beneath me, making my body bounce up and down. In my inebriated state I couldn’t keep my balance. One quite aggressive dance move knocked me forward so that my cheek collided with the middle console.

“Jesus, Becca—your hips should have their own warning label,” I laughed, holding my hand to my cheek. I could already feel a bruise forming.

“Oh, crap! Sorry, Kinsley, we’ll get some ice at the party,” she giggled and helped pull me back up onto her lap. Even though my cheek was throbbing I couldn’t stop laughing with Becca. Yup, we’d be a dynamic duo in no time.

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When we finally arrived at the house party, we stumbled out of the car and attempted to piece ourselves together. I adjusted my black dress and tried to stand confidently on my heels that were too tall even before taking five shots.

“How does your cheek feel?” Emily asked as we made our way up the modern concrete stairs.

“Now it feels kind of numb from the alcohol, I think... My face hasn’t fallen off, has it?”

Emily laughed and tugged me toward the front door. “No, you just have a big red spot on your cheek.”

Oh perfect, the first time I see Josh since the break-up and I probably look like I got punched in the face. I moaned and tried to shake out my nerves.

I’d never actually been to one of these legendary parties. I’d heard about them, of course. Every year a few of the guys from the professional soccer team in LA, the LA Stars, rent a giant house together. It was a “work hard, play harder” situation. This year, when Josh had been signed to the professional team, he’d moved into the house—which is why I knew he’d be at the party.

The LA Stars were the top soccer team in the US. Last year, five of their team members competed for the US in the World Cup only to lose in the last few minutes to Portugal. Needless to say, they were some of the top athletes in the world, with sponsorships and frequent spots on the talk-show circuit.

When we stepped into the house, my vision was bombarded with a plethora of beautiful people. Groupies, celebrities, soccer stars. It was hard to see through all the dancing bodies, but at least the chances of seeing Josh were pretty slim.

“Don’t go too crazy, girls. Remember that you’re representing our team now,” Tara warned before she and Sofie took off and left us in the entryway.

“This is crazy,” Emily murmured. I looked over to see her gulping down the scene with quick darting glances. I guess it was a lot to process, especially since LA was already an over the top town to begin with.

“Let’s go find some ice for my cheek.” I grabbed her hand and started tugging her through the crowd with Becca in tow.

It was hardly 10:00 P.M. and the party was already in full swing. People were mingling *everywhere*. Girls were wrapped around guys on the couches. Three tables were set up for beer pong in the living room and there was a mass of people crowded around them. I waved to some girls I recognized from club teams. Some of them tried to get us to stop and talk, but I pointed to my cheek and told them I’d be back in a bit.

The entire house was a bachelor pad on crack. Open, modern, and filled with every piece of technology imaginable. It was a maze trying to get through the living room, but finally we maneuvered our way into an expansive kitchen. It didn’t disappoint. With marble countertops and chic black appliances, it fit in perfectly with the rest of the house. The space was less crowded than the other rooms, but there were still at least fifty people between us and the freezer.

“Here, you just stand there and I’ll get you some ice.” Emily gently pushed me to the side against the kitchen counter

so that she could prepare a little ice pack for me with a bunch of paper towels.

My feet were starting to hurt from my four inch heels, so I reached back to prop myself up onto the counter. I should have inspected the spot beforehand because as I hopped up I heard the telltale sound of alcohol bottles tipping over and crashing into the sink.

“Oops!” I giggled, then covered my mouth with my hands.

“You’re a liability,” Becca joked, reaching behind me to right the tipped over bottles.

In my drunken state, I didn’t seem to care. Sitting on the counter definitely beat standing up on my high heels, and from my vantage point I could see over the heads of everyone standing in the kitchen. The amount of plastic surgery in that room could have rivaled a Miss America dressing room. Everywhere I looked I was greeted with fake boobs and nose jobs, but it was LA and these women had their jobs cut out for them if they intended on landing a professional athlete.

“Kinsley, scoot back, you’re about to fall off the counter,” Becca said, pulling me out of my people-watching zone. I hadn’t realized I’d been swaying so heavily.

I scooted back a little bit so that more of my thighs pressed against the cold granite.

“Oh, here! I almost forgot,” she said, reaching down to dig in her purse.

“What is it? What is it?” I clapped my hands together, feeling giddy from the alcohol and party atmosphere. “A vibrator?” I exclaimed loud enough for the few people around us to eye me with suspicious grins. I shot them all a confident smile.

“No, you hussy! It’s a birthday crown. It’s what I had to grab at the Rookie House earlier,” she answered, retrieving a pink, sparkly princess crown out of her purse. It looked like a piece of a costume I’d had as a little girl and I instantly loved it.

“Ooooh. It’s beeuuoteefuulll,” I drawled with wide eyes as she placed it on the top of my head.

Becca started laughing, making me laugh, and eventually I was clutching my stomach. My nineteenth birthday was definitely getting better. Laughing like an insane person sure beat eating cake alone.

“Here, this should help,” Emily said, returning from the freezer and handing me a makeshift icepack with a bemused smile. I’d forgotten my cheek was even injured.

I took the pack and gave her a cheesy grin. “What would I do without you two?!”

“Well you’re about to find out because I have to use the bathroom.”

“I’ll go with you,” Becca said, turning toward Emily. “I should find the other freshman girls and bring them in here. They’re probably wondering where we went.”

“What?” I asked with puppy-dog-eyes. “You’re both leaving me?” I actually felt sad about it.

“Yes, just stay there and keep icing your face. We’ll be right back!” Becca called as she and Emily disappeared through the crowd. What the hell? Now I looked like a big loser sitting by myself with a princess crown and an ice pack. But I’d be damned if I took it off. I was a birthday princess. I even gave a royal wave to anyone that walked by me.

“That crown looks good on you! Want to do a birthday shot?” A dark voice asked. I looked up to find a group of cute guys surrounding me. They looked a bit older and I knew the one speaking to me was on the LA Stars team. If I wasn’t drunk I could have told you his name, but I hardly remembered my name. Kinsley Bryant. Kinsley Bryant.

“Well, since my friends ditched me for the pisser, er... I mean the powder room... I might as well,” I shrugged.

“That’s a good attitude,” the cute one said as he passed me a jell-o shot. I decided I’d call him Oliver until I remembered his actual name. He looked like an Oliver.

“Skim your finger around the rim so that you can loosen the jell-o from the plastic,” he instructed, stepping closer to me.

I shot him an indignant look. “Do I look like an amateur?” I laughed, tipping back the jell-o in one smooth swoosh.

“Mmm, cherry.” I smiled and the guys laughed.

I would have paid more attention to them or asked for another shot, but the moment the words escaped my lips, I looked toward the doorway of the kitchen and my breath caught in my throat.

Liam Wilder.

Sex on steroids rolled in pastry crust. Liam Wilder.

I didn’t think he showed up to things like this. I thought he jaunted around on yachts and baptized babies all day. Babies that would one day grow up to be swimsuit models, thanks to his touch. No, he’s not a priest; he’s just a god in the soccer world. (And also in the real world.)

Jeez, he was good-looking up close. Tall, toned, sexy light brown hair, and a face that made you want to cry a little it was so perfect. He was the star of the LA Stars and the resident bad boy of LA. Seriously. Every week there was news coverage of him leaving a bar with some model or actress. He was young, handsome, and could literally sleep with anyone he wanted. Could you blame the guy for taking advantage of it?

From my vantage point on the counter, I watched him walk into the kitchen with people trailing after him like love-sick puppies. I could get so much done if I had people following me around all day. *“You there, make me lunch, and you, fan me with tiny blades of grass.”* It’s weird that I had no one applying for the job...

His eyes skimmed the crowd until he found his teammate, the one who’d just given me a jell-o shot, and then his eyes looked up and found me. Oh god. I was staring at him as I wore a lopsided birthday crown and held a bag of ice to my face... and it wasn’t like I could do anything about it since he was already heading over toward us.

Could I trick him into thinking the ice pack was an elaborate way to get drunk that all the hipsters were using lately? Like I was absorbing alcohol through my pores? Most likely not...

The guys were talking in front of me, but I didn’t hear a single word. I was watching Liam as he moved, trying to keep my tongue from detaching from my mouth. He had on a black short-sleeve shirt. Tattoos peeked out from beneath the sleeve on his left arm. The inked design traveled down to his forearm, completing the entire package along with his rugged facial hair and piercing grey eyes.

All right, enough.

“Can I have another jell-o shot?” I asked, shaking myself out of my delirious Liam-filled haze.

“You might want to slow down, birthday girl. You zoned out for like five minutes there,” Oliver answered with a sly smile.

“Oliver, c’mon you’re going to deny the birthday girl another shot?” one of his friends chimed in. Ha! I knew his name had been Oliver the entire time.

“Yeah! Listen to him!” I laughed and winked at the new guy.

I didn’t actually want another shot; I just wanted something to do while Liam stepped closer to us. He’d seen me staring at him and he probably thought I was yet another girl in his growing entourage. I mean I would have been, gladly, but he didn’t need to know that.

Oliver moved to go grab another shot just as Liam stepped up to the group.

“Hey Wilder,” everyone cheered, reaching out to do that male-handshake thing while I pretended to be interested in my fingers on my lap. Yup, I still had all ten. That’s good.

“Oh, I didn’t see you there man, you want a shot?” Oliver asked as he returned and handed everyone a small plastic cup.

I looked up just in time to see Liam shift his gaze away from me. He’d been looking at me. His eyes had been glancing in my general direction. I felt hot and sweaty all over, as if I needed to cool my face with one of those paper fans like a 1900s debutant.

“Nah, I’m not drinking tonight. Looks like the birthday girl has had enough though.”



What?

“Excuse me?” I asked with a scowl.

“Are you even legal?” he asked with a bemused smile.

What an arrogant asshole.

I prepped my jell-o shot and slung it back, never taking my eyes off of him. The edge of his mouth perked up, and I knew he enjoyed the fact that I was challenging him.

I held the empty cup out in front of me, and as he motioned to take it, I let it drop to the floor between us. His dark eyes followed the trail of the cup’s descent to the floor and then came back up to my face. When his gaze locked with mine again, a slow smirk uncurled across his lips.

“I think your posse needs you.” I tilted my head to the side and pointed to the gaggle of people waiting for him to see them standing behind him.

He ignored them.

“What happened to your cheek?” he asked, stepping forward and effectively breaking every social code. His teammates had been standing in a circle around me on the counter, so when Liam stepped in front of me, he cut off the circle and pretty much ended the conversation.

The other guys shrugged and laughed, turning to reform their own group and leaving me alone with Liam. I couldn’t decide if that was a good or bad thing, but the shots were starting to multiply in my system, so I couldn’t be held accountable for my actions.

As Liam leaned forward to inspect my cheek, I remembered his question. “It’s kind of a long story, but it involves gyrating hips and a car console.”

He smiled at my answer, but he didn't take his eyes off my cheek. His hand reached up and he gently nudged my chin to the side so he could see the bruise better. I tried to keep my breath under control while he touched my skin.

"It's seriously not that bad. I'm just being a baby and icing it so I don't end up with a swollen cheek tomorrow." I needed him to step back. His cologne was practically hijacking my ovulation cycle and I had to fight the urge to let my face collapse onto his shirt and inhale.

"Ah, yeah, I think you'll survive to see another birthday," he smirked as he crossed his arms.

"Oh good. This one's been pretty lame until now," I murmured, realizing how depressing the statement sounded only after I'd already said it. Where the hell were Emily and Becca anyway? Was the toilet some kind of portal to another dimension?

He tilted his head to the side, his gaze unwavering. "What did you get for your birthday?"

*I'm still holding out that you're actually a steepergram for me.*

"Well," I looked down at my empty hands, "I got this birthday crown?" I said it like it was a question because I wasn't sure that it counted. "My mom always gets me something elaborate, but her package didn't make it here today from Aspen."

*Wow, I really did sound pathetic by that point.*

He nodded with narrowed eyes, but he didn't respond to the comment. He crossed his arms tighter, forcing my gaze down to his sexy tattoos. They stretched across his bicep on either side, but only the ones on his left arm dipped below his

shirt sleeve. It was a tantalizing glimpse, but I wanted to see more. I knew from photos that they drifted up to his chest and back.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” I murmured cheekily, referring to his tattoos, of course.

I was seriously playing with fire, but that’s what happens when I drink too much and the world puts me in front of the sexiest man alive. No, seriously, I think last year People Magazine named him Sexiest Man Alive.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

Wow. Completely denied. That stung more than my face smashing into the car console. So why was he still standing in front of me, blocking me from talking to anyone else? It was all too confusing for my intoxicated brain to understand.

“That’s good. I couldn’t show you where mine is anyway,” I answered with a sly grin.

Even he was caught off guard by that comment, but relax, I don’t have a tattoo on my who-hah. It’s just along my bra line; a simple line of text that runs horizontally under my arm. But wow I was laying it on thick. I glanced down to ensure that I wasn’t humping his leg. Nope, but my black dress had ridden up a bit, exposing more of my tanned thighs.

“That’s not the reason,” he smirked. “Starting tomorrow I’ll be one of your coaches at ULA, so I think that would violate the rules, don’t you think?”

My heart stopped beating at the word “coach.”

## Chapter 3

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I narrowed my eyes. Had my drunken ears heard him right?  
*Coach?*

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

His eyes hardened and his jaw ticked once back and forth. “As of tomorrow, I’ll be helping out the ULA women’s soccer team for a few months.”

No. No. No, thank you. That’s not possible. He couldn’t be my coach. He was too busy licking models to coach a soccer team.

“Kinsley!” Becca called my name from across the room, and I looked up to see her and the sophomore girls waving me over.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts, but my head was too foggy. Why did someone put a fog machine in there? I dropped my ice pack in the sink and slunk off the counter.

“Better get some sleep, Kinsley. You have quite an early morning tomorrow,” Liam noted with a smile. I stepped to move past him, but then I thought of something.

“How’d you know I was on the ULA team?” I asked.

He grinned, and for a moment I thought I was going to have to pound my chest to make my heart keep beating. He had slight dimples and perfectly straight teeth. That grin should be tucked away and brought out only for special occasions—where heart defibrillators would be present and accounted for.

“You were the top recruit in the country. There’s not a person in the soccer world that doesn’t know who you are,” he answered with confidence.

I’d been featured in a few magazines in high school, but damn. Liam Wilder knew who I was. He knew me enough to recognize me at a party... and tomorrow he would be my coach.

Oh god. I just almost sniffed his shirt and then I asked him if he’d show me his tattoos.

*I’m in major trouble.*

With that thought, I nodded and turned away from him to find my teammates. I had to fill them in stat. We had a lot of Googling to do.

“Are you okay? And more importantly, were you just talking to Liam Wilder?” Emily asked with wide eyes as soon as I reached them. Becca was standing directly behind her with her mouth hanging open.

“Yes, and you won’t even believe what I have to tell you guys, but I should wait until later.” The party was still going strong and I didn’t want to squeal about what I’d just found out in front of all these people. Word would probably get back to Liam before I even reached the front door.

“Okay, that sounds really mysterious. Now I’m even more curious,” Emily answered.

“You should be,” I laughed, and then tugged her and Becca through the crowd toward the door. “I’m kind of tired. Do you guys want to share a cab back to the house with me?”

“Kinsley!” someone called from across the room just as I’d asked my question.

*Josh.*

Damnit, with everything going on I’d completely forgotten he would even be at the party. I shifted my gaze just as I saw him pushing through the crowd and calling my name again. He looked cute as always with his dark brown hair and boyish face. Too bad I knew what kind of asshole he actually was.

“Kinsley, wait up!”

Every person in that living room was watching him trying to get to me. Did he have to keep yelling my name like that? I clearly wasn’t going anywhere.

Just as he was about to reach me, I saw movement in the doorway to the kitchen and then Liam stepped into the living room. *Oh, great. Let’s make it a show. Maybe we could flip the lights on and cut the music so everyone could have a front row seat.*

“Josh, seriously, not now. I’m tired and drunk, and it’s my birthday.” I stepped closer to Becca and Emily.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I tried to call you and I even sent flowers to the house. Did you get them?”

He meant the roses that I had shredded in the disposal earlier that morning. Whoops.

“Yes. I got them Josh, but I don’t want to talk right now.” I ground my molars together.

“Just let me make it up to you. Can I come see you later this week? Maybe we can get coffee after you’re done with practice one day?” His voice was carrying over the party, and I was painfully aware of everyone’s eyes on me. I couldn’t very well make a scene in front of all those people. He deserved to be punched in the face, but seeing as how I had already incurred one injury on my birthday, I decided to give in.

“Fine. Just text me, but you need to realize we aren’t getting back together.” I turned away from him and started to make my way to the front door. I tuned out everything around me. I didn’t want to hear if Josh said anything else as I walked away. I didn’t want to know if Liam had heard that entire ridiculous exchange. I just wanted my pajamas and fuzzy socks.

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“Are you serious?!” Becca screamed.

“Dude! If you scream in my ear again I will punch you in the uterus.”

Becca, Emily, and I were lying on my bed back at the Rookie House. Four days before, I’d moved into the rookie house where I’d stay for my freshman year of college. It was within walking distance from the ULA campus and a few miles from our practice fields.

“Okay, I’m sorry, but you’re not kidding, right? I can’t tell if you’re joking,” Becca laughed.

I rolled over and gave her a dead-serious look, but I was still tipsy so I ended up laughing when she started making faces at me.

“Ugh, okay. Just believe me. He told me at the party that he was coaching us starting tomorrow.”

“But why? He doesn’t need the money and surely he’s already busy enough,” Emily protested. I’d been wondering the same thing. I wouldn’t have believed it either if I hadn’t heard it come out of his own mouth. A perfectly supple mouth, fyi.

“Oh, look at this!” Becca said, pointing to my computer’s screen. “This article talks about him volunteering as a soccer coach with the ULA team after a few of his sponsors got onto him for his ‘bad-boy’ ways. It says they gave him an ultimatum: get dropped from their labels or clean up his act.”

“They couldn’t drop him! He’s the best soccer player in the US!” I argued.

“Obviously. But this article says he’s a huge liability,” Emily muttered.

“Well, he seemed fine earlier and he wasn’t even drinking,” I defended him, trying to recall the scent of his cologne from memory. It was probably called Nectar of the Gods.

“Well the night is still young, so maybe he started partying hard after we left,” Emily murmured. “He’s really hot, though, I have to admit.”

“She does have a pulse!” I joked, poking her in the lungs.

“Hey! Yes, okay. I’m not immune to Liam Wilder, but it doesn’t matter—he’s our coach now.”

Ugh, she just had to kill my buzz.

“Not until tomorrow,” I clarified.

“How old is he?” Emily asked.



“Twenty-five,” Becca answered, having known it off the top of her head.

“Do you think he has a girlfriend?” I asked.

“Well according to Google images, he has about one thousand of them. Seriously, does this man sleep?” Becca clicked through photos, but I didn’t look.

“Gross, close it,” I groaned, lying back and staring up at my ceiling.

“He’s never been linked to anyone in particular, though. He’s photographed with women, but he’s never gone public with a relationship. For being a media darling, his life is relatively private. These photos of him with women are mostly at fundraisers and parties,” Becca explained.

I wasn’t sure what to make of that information. Did he not have a girlfriend because he liked to play the field? Or did the media just not know about it?

“So, what happened with Josh? That was super awkward,” Emily asked, trying to broach the subject lightly. There wasn’t time to fill Becca and Emily in about what had transpired with Josh, so I’m sure they weren’t prepared for the scene back at the party. Emily probably wasn’t sure how heartbroken I felt about the whole situation.

“I walked in on him cheating on me a few weeks ago.” I paused as Becca and Emily gasped Jerry Springer style. “We’d been friends for a long time, but only dated for a few months. He sucks major cojones, and we aren’t getting back together. He still probably has that Bimbo on retainer.”

“But he’s *really* cute,” Becca cut in.

“He’s hot, but there’s hotter...”

“Liam,” Becca and Emily both inserted, and we started laughing all over again.

“You should date Liam to get back at Josh. Could you even imagine?” Becca started rambling. “If there is anyone on the team who even has a chance at dating him, it’s definitely you.”

“Oh please,” I said, rolling my eyes at the idea.

“No, I mean it! Who gets offered sponsorships from Adidas when they’re in high school? Beautiful people like you.” She fake rolled her eyes and then I grabbed a pillow and bonked it on her head.

“Hey! What the—”

“I’m not dating Liam to get back at Josh,” I laughed, hitting her again.

“So date him to *not* get back at Josh,” she suggested.

I bonked her on the head again.

“So help me, you’re about to start something you don’t want to finish,” Becca laughed, grabbing a pillow of her own.

Poor Emily was right in the crossfire.

“Emily, here take my pillow.” I paused, eyeing Becca with a small wink. Her smile told me she understood my wicked plan.

“Oh thanks, I thought you guys—”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence before Becca and I, how should I say, brought the pillow pain train into the station.

“What the fuck, guys!” Emily screamed and laughed, trying to break free. She eventually did and ended up almost knocking me out with a perfectly timed pillow punch.

“Mercy! Jeez Emily, you’re quiet and cute, but then you almost break my neck with a pillow. I am now officially scared of you,” I joked as Emily and Becca sat on top of me so that I couldn’t move. “But in all seriousness, my birthday would have sucked without you two. I’m really glad you’ll both be on the soccer team with me.”

Becca answered my sweet declaration by smothering me under my goose down comforter. Girls are vicious.

After they eventually wandered back to their own rooms, I laid awake contemplating what tomorrow would have in store. I knew it was going to be a rude awakening for all of us rookies. We were the top athletes in high school, but starting tomorrow we’d be small fish in a big pond. The workouts would be harder, the practices would be longer, and the coaches would apparently be much, much hotter.

I checked my phone for last minute birthday messages. Every hour on the hour, my mom had sent me a text. Her last one had come at eleven.

**Mom:** Kinsley Grace, I’m so proud of all that you’ve accomplished. I really wish we could have flown in to be with you for the day, but I knew you’d want to spend the day with your new friends. I mailed you a care package, and if you didn’t receive it today, it’ll definitely be there tomorrow. Hope you love it. You’re a rock star. Good luck tomorrow. XO

**Josh:** Kinsley, please text me back. I’m so sorry and I know you need time to process everything, but I made a mistake and I want you back. Please consider it. Love u.

I groaned and dropped my phone back on the nightstand. Did he love me? Could he truly love me? If he loved me so

much, couldn't he have spelled out the word *you*? I prayed for his sake, and mine, that he didn't.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. There were no excuses. He wasn't drunk or under the influence; his cheating was premeditated and I'd bet my life that it wasn't the first time. The thought of getting revenge by sleeping with Liam sounded good for about thirty seconds, and then I thought about the fact that I didn't really care about Josh enough to go through all of that to spite him. Now if there was some other reason to sleep with Liam Wilder...

---

"Hey, wake up or you won't have time to eat before practice. Oh, and you have a giant package downstairs." Becca's voice pulled me out of deep sleep and I groaned loudly. *Hangover, meet brain. Brain, meet hangover.*

"God, this sucks." I groaned again and shoved myself out of bed. I didn't have time to be hung-over. I had to eat breakfast and get hydrated for practice. I followed Becca downstairs where my tired teammates were sitting around in their pajamas eating breakfast and looking like really in-shape zombies. Scary.

The clock on top of the stove read 5:30 A.M. Jeez, this would be a long summer. Practices started at 6:00 A.M. Monday through Friday for the foreseeable future.

"There she is!" Emily called as I wiped the sleep out of my eyes. "Open your package!"

"Is there a stripper in the box?" I asked as I walked toward the kitchen table.

As I bent over the package, Becca caught my eye and mouthed, “It’s Liam”. I stuck my tongue out at her and started ripping the tape off.

My mom is extravagant and since she can afford it, she usually gives gifts that are way too over the top. That day was no exception. Inside of the box there was enough soccer gear to clothe the entire team. She’d sent me new sports bras, running shorts, leggings, dri-FIT shirts that would fit me like a glove, and some new HYPERVENOM cleats that weren’t supposed to be released for another month. Oh, and they were bright pink. My mom knew me well.

“Are those what I think they are?” Becca asked, eyeing the cleats with envy.

“I have no clue how she got these, but somehow I’m not surprised.”

Like they would for most girls, getting new shoes and clothes momentarily trumped my hangover. I ran up to my room and put on a new matching set of workout gear before I grabbed my phone to text my mom.

**Kinsley:** THANK YOU for the birthday gifts. It’s too much, but I’ll give my teammates some of the gear, too. I’ll call you after practice. XX

By the time I finished getting ready, I had to grab a granola bar to eat on the road.

“Here, I bet you didn’t remember these,” Emily said, handing me two Advil.

“Yes! Thank you, thank you.” The excitement of my new workout gear was starting to pale in comparison to my serious hangover. The granola bar and bumpy car ride hadn’t settled

my stomach, and by the time we made it to the practice field, I felt like I was going to throw up everywhere.

The seniors met us at the doors to the soccer field house with wicked smiles.

“Looking a little worse for wear there, Rookies,” Tara laughed, her eyes pinned straight on me. “How you feeling, Bryant?” Her question seemed sweet, but her tone implied that it wasn’t meant to be.

“Peachy.” I smiled and reached down to grab my water out of my bag.

“Let’s go. Coach wants to meet us in the conference room.” Tara turned and opened the door so we could file in behind her. But just before she stepped inside, I heard the same sexy voice that I’d heard the previous night—the voice that said, *I’m sexy and I know it*.

“Morning ladies.”

Every single girl froze and we turned in unison. Liam Wilder was standing a few feet away wearing workout gear and a friendly smile. Of course his friendly smile could easily be misconstrued for a take-your-panties-off smile, so it’s a wonder we all managed to mutter shocked hellos. I guess he’d pulled up in the parking lot a few minutes after we did. I peered behind him and saw a black Mercedes SUV parked in the spot closest to the field house. A photographer was snapping pictures on the other side of the fence. Jeez, they wake up this early to get pictures of him?

“Oh, hi Liam.” Tara smiled wide.

I shot Becca a gag-me face.

“You guys should probably call me Coach Wilder while we’re at practice,” he admonished. I had to fight to keep from

cracking up. The shocked look on Tara's face was absolutely priceless, but it still wasn't enough to make me forget the awkwardness of the situation.

I couldn't look up at him. The last time we'd spoken, I'd literally asked him to show me his tattoos, which we both knew really meant I wanted him to show me his *soccer balls*. Hah. I'd have to tell Becca that one later. I tugged her and Emily forward without acknowledging Liam and headed for the conference room. Thankfully, Coach Davis was there already and Liam didn't follow us in.

"Take a seat, girls," Coach Davis instructed with a small smile. The best way to describe our coach would be as... a grandmotherly drill sergeant. On the outside, she had greying hair and kind blue eyes, but when you least expected, she'd make you drop and do fifty pushups. She was one of the main reasons I'd picked ULA. She was the top women's soccer coach in the nation and I wanted her to teach me how to improve my game.

"Morning, Coach." I smiled and took a seat near the front of the small room with Becca and Emily.

After the rest of the team filed in, Coach Davis began to fill us in about practices and what she expected of us throughout the season.

"As you probably noticed, we have a new coach this morning," she began, and I could practically feel everyone's ears perk up to attention.

Coach Davis scanned around the room with a stern expression. "Coach Wilder will be with us for a few months. However, he'll only be with us during the morning drills because he has his own team's practices in the afternoon."

“Why’s he here?” one of the junior girls asked.

“Every LA Stars player volunteers. Liam has helped our program in the past, and I didn’t hesitate to have him back again this year. Any other questions?”

“Why isn’t he coaching the boy’s team?” Sofie asked from the back row where the seniors had quarantined themselves.

“One of our assistant coaches is on maternity leave, so when the LA Stars contacted me, I thought it was a perfect time to bring him on. He’s a top soccer player and he’ll be a source of knowledge for all of you. However, I still feel the need to clarify that he is not here for your personal entertainment. Please use your judgment when it comes to any fraternization away from practice...I have no problem kicking you off this team faster than you can count that man’s tattoos.”

His tattoos. The same tattoos that I’d asked to see the night before. Okay, the universe was taunting me.

“So I shouldn’t tackle him on the soccer field?” Becca whispered behind me, and I almost laughed in the middle of Coach Davis’ speech.

“Um, Coach,” Tara raised her hand in the air so that she’d be seen from the back, “some of us know Liam *outside* of practice. We’re friends with the LA Stars’ players, so we’ll see him at parties.”

Coach Davis nodded but kept her cool facade. “You’ll refer to him as Coach Wilder while we’re here,” she clarified with a hard tone. “I understand that a few of you run in the same circle as Coach Wilder and avoiding him completely would be impossible. However, I’d like you to distance yourself from him in social settings until he is no longer a coach here.”



A knock sounded at the door and a second later Liam stepped in quietly. “Are you ready for me?”

Yes. Yes. Yes. We are *all* ready for you.

“Good timing, Coach Wilder. Please come in and introduce yourself. I’m going to go set up drills out on the field. You can meet me out there with the girls in about ten minutes.” She headed for the door, but my eyes were trained on the space she’d last occupied. “Oh, and girls, be sure to leave Saturday morning open. We have a team bonding activity. We’ll meet here at 7:00 A.M. sharp.”

I didn’t even register her team bonding comment. I was more concerned about what she’d said before that.

“Drills?” I whispered to Becca. I’d worn my workout clothes, but it was only because that’s what I wore on most days anyway. I thought today was just a learning day.

“Do you still feel sick?” she asked with a wary gaze.

“Like a small toddler is smashing a toy truck onto my head,” I answered as Liam took his position at the front of the room.

“Hi everyone. I’m not sure how much Coach Davis has told you, but I’ll be with the team for the next couple of months. I’ll help you guys with morning drills, and since I’ve played as a midfielder and striker for most of my career, those are the positions I’ll be working with the most.”

Oh goodie. He’d be helping me perfect my skills as a midfielder. Unfortunately, about ten other girls also fit that bill, including Tara and Sofie. Becca and Emily were both defenders, so I wouldn’t even have them to joke around with.

“Does anyone have any questions for me?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Becca whispered beside me, and I kicked her under the table.

Liam must have noticed her whisper because he glanced over toward us. His grey eyes met mine and I almost choked on my own tongue. It was the first time we’d made eye contact since he arrived that morning and I should have given myself more of a pep talk. *He’s a normal person. Don’t let him take over your brain.* It was no use. He wore his black t-shirt in a way that made me lose focus on everything beyond his reach. His tattoos were just barely visible. His hair was mussed on top like he’d run his fingers through it when he’d rolled out of bed.

And I was expected to concentrate when he was around?

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