

Long Term Plans



THE PLANS SERIES: BOOK 3

MEG FITZ

Long Term Plans
The Plans Series Book 3

Meg Fitz

Meg Fitz Writes

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ISBN-13: 979-8-9868447-7-0

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Sweet 15

Library of Congress Control Number:

Printed in the United States of America

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Note to the Reader

This is a spin-off story from *Best Laid Plans* and *Failure to Plan*. While you do not need to have read either book to understand this story, you may have a few gaps that were better explained in the other books.

As a bonus for my readers, I included my thought experiment called *Plans Go Awry*. These are alternative retellings of *Best Laid Plans* and *Failure to Plan*. Again, you don't need to have read *Best Laid Plans* or *Failure to Plan*, but you will notice stark differences between stories, and it's more fun. I thought the scenes between Davin and Kinsley were funny, and I wanted to share.

About the title: I am aware grammatically speaking the title should be Long-Term instead of Long Term. But the dash would look weird on the cover. So, I made a choice.

About the spice: This book. *Long Term Plans* is very mild. But the alternative retellings have higher heat.

Trigger Warning:

Family illness, parental death, sexual assault and discussions of depression, suicide and anxiety.

Chapter 1



Seventh Grade

Jayden

My armpits felt like a swamp. And why were my hands so sweaty?

Nothing about puberty seemed fair. I declare INJUSTICE! Whoever thought middle school was a good idea clearly hates kids.

Of course, the deck was stacked against me. I was skinny, my blond hair never did what it was told, and I kept growing, so my clothes never fit. Crappy body image equals crappy self-esteem.

While my best friend had the confidence of a linebacker who won the Super Bowl. Alister was smart, good-looking, and stupidly talented. Plus, he'd kissed girls before. Did he need to be so much better than me at *everything*?

I rubbed my palms on my jeans, but it didn't help. They were still damp. Alister nodded at me like it would be okay. How the hell would it be okay?

I was supposed to walk into a closet with the love of my life. Ginny was amazing. She always shared her mini-Oreos and knew exactly what to say when I was stressed. She laughed at my jokes and thought Yoda should've had his own movie. Agreed! Somewhere around fourth grade, I decided she was my soulmate and we would get married. I just needed to let her in on the plan. And tonight, we were going to kiss.

In a basement, at some kid's birthday party. He sat two rows behind me in math class and asked everyone to come to his house. Probably a ploy to make friends and score some gifts. Shit, this guy was a genius. I should learn his name.

Ginny stood at the door near the water heater closet. She had her hair down instead of in the ponytail she always wore. I liked the way the basement light made her hair look like a freshly minted penny. She wore a tee shirt with flowers on it and those fuzzy sweatpants that looked fun to touch because they changed colors depending on which way you moved them.

This was not the romantic moment I envisioned; there was a shocking lack of unicorns running around fields of daisies in central Maryland.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and stared at my grass-stained sneakers as I stepped closer.

"Hi." How the hell could my voice crack on one word?

Not cool, body. Not cool at all.

“Hey.” Her voice sounded like music. She pointed to the closet door handle. “Do you want to do this?”

“Yes!” I screeched, and everybody whipped around to stare at us.

Ginny turned Santa Claus red.

As the door creaked open, my heart stopped. Wow, that water heater took up a ton of space. Like, we both might fit, but breathing would be out of the question. Our shoulders jammed in like geared-up football players getting out of a tiny car. A sharp slicing sensation cut across my ankle.

“Ouch.”

The cracks under the door gave us our only light, and Ginny’s eyes seemed even wider. “Are you okay?”

I bit my lip, trying to ignore the blood dripping into my sock. “Yeah, I scratched myself.”

“Oh, on what?”

“Something metal.” Probably rusty too. She tried to look, but her head bumped against my chest. Then she popped up, and it slammed into my chin, ricocheting my skull against the drywall. Ten seconds in, and I would bleed out and have a concussion. How was I going to explain this to Mom?

“Ohhhh.” She cooed like she had stepped on a puppy. “Are you hurt?”

Until this point in my life, I had only lied to Ginny one other time. “No.”

She leaned back by an inch, creating a sliver of space between us. “Are you lying like the time you blamed your fart on Todd Richardson?”

Yep, that was the other time.

“Maybe.”

She huffed, “This isn’t exactly how I imagined my first kiss. This place smells like paint thinner and bleach, and you’re hurt.”

“I couldn’t find a unicorn,” I mumble.

“What?”

Before I could explain my answer, I pressed my face against hers. My lips puckered out, but her lips were not. I think I got the corner of her mouth. Yep. I missed.

“What are you doing?” She was questioning my sanity now.

“I’m trying to kiss you.”

She shook her head. “Nope, try again.”

This time she softened her lips, and when I made contact, it was wet, like my palms, but not gross. Something much nicer.

Before I could get a better gauge of what was happening, the door opened, and Alister stood there wide-eyed. “Your mom is here.”

Wow. Way to go, Mom. Thanks for being a cockblock.

I limped out of the closet, which warranted a glance from my best friend. At the top of the basement stairs, I looked at Ginny. She wiggled her fingers at me. Okay, the first kiss was not a home run, but I had a lifetime to make it up to her.

Two days later, my leg got infected. At least I got a cool scar, and Ginny texted me every night. A win was a win.

Chapter 2



Ninth Grade

Ginny

It was three weeks into freshman year, and my whole world had crumbled around me. I'm not talking about bad hair days or liking an ex's picture on Instagram. I'd never experienced that. According to internet comedy, it's better to jump off a cliff than tell your ex you're thinking of them.

No. This was literally the end of the world. My whole life, it had been me and my dad. He was my cheerleader, my

rock, and my protector. And then everything spun off its axis.

It wasn't like my little group of friends had immunity to tragedy. Shortly after my first kiss with Jayden, Alister's older brother died in a car accident. It was my first funeral. After a week's absence from school, he wanted to be called Davin upon his return. He buried his old name with his brother.

But this was different.

My dad was everything. He baked cookies on the first day of school and acted shocked every time Hans betrayed Anna. He taught me about gravity, humanity, and art. My dad was the smartest man in my world.

And now an extra cluster of cells decided to go rogue and spread.

Cancer.

One word.

One astrological sign.

My dad had cancer.

I walked around in a daze. He told me the night before; I didn't sleep. How could I? I couldn't even close my eyes without thinking about how one day soon my dad might close his eyes for the last time. I was lost in my head. During third period, I noticed I had two different sneakers on.

Jayden, with his endless energy, bounded over to me. Every day, he swung past my locker to say hi. Jayden's wispy, dirty-blond hair and freckles on his nose used to be the highlight of my day.

I wasn't in the cool crowd like that blonde girl dating that senior or a stoner like Davin morphed into. I was me, on my little island of nothing. Soon Jayden would find someone cooler and better.

"Hey. Quick question." He shifted from foot to foot.

"Uh-huh."

"Homecoming. You wanna go?"

Dress up? Uncomfortable shoes? Didn't my dad have a doctor's appointment that day?

I shouldn't waste money on stupid stuff. "No," I said, slamming my locker.

He grabbed my arm, keeping me from walking away. "Wait. What? No." I pulled away; he looked like I slapped him. I wanted to go to homecoming, but it all seemed silly now. Life and death versus dresses and terrible music. If there was anyone I would want to go with, it was him.

His brows furrowed. "Are you okay?"

I lied. "No, I don't want to go."

Over the years, we didn't lie to each other. At least not after the closet incident of 7th grade. The truth would only make Jayden feel bad for me. Pity. A sense of nobility to do the right thing. But what was the point? We were on different paths.

I turned away and walked to science class. I hurt him, but he would rebound. There were plenty of hot girls sending him DMs. Besides, it's not like he *liked me*, liked me. Life made it clear we couldn't be more than friends.

I wasn't sure about the existence of God with a capital G. If there was someone in charge of all space and time; they were raging assholes.

Too sad and confused to be mad, I instead launched into self-loathing. At least I knew how to deal with that. Wrap yourself in a blanket of pity and inferiority and let the darkness crush you.

And of course, the next few weeks, for seemingly unconnected reasons, were a blur of terrible.

Davin overdosed on pills. The details were still unknown, but I suspect it was a suicide attempt.

Jayden couldn't handle my sudden withdrawal. He fell into the sports bro crowd. The jocks were idiot jerks, but at least they distracted him from the pain of losing his two best friends.

But this school year had taught me that absolutely nothing was fair or a guarantee.

At Dad's first appointment, the doctors asked me to sit in the waiting room during the exam. A nurse with a frizzy bun got me so they could go over the results. The doctor frowned as soon as I came in. But Dad made it clear, "We're a team." Also, he sucked at remembering things that weren't sports stars, so the second set of ears would be helpful. They were still waiting for some more tests, tests with long names I couldn't pronounce. The doctor gave me a smile. "He could have a year, or, if we were really lucky, ten. But I've seen people beat this thing before. There's no reason to lose hope." But the treatment plan looked promising: chemo, surgery, and a chance of survival. It was a microscopic chance. But it was the hope I needed.

"Hey, kiddo," he said to me while I rocked out to Amanda Chase's second hit song. Odds were she was destined to be a star. "Let's celebrate! Good news deserves a treat." Dad leaned closer to the steering wheel and looked around. "We should be safe since we aren't home."

"What do you mean?"

"Milkshakes, according to the rumors, they bring all the boys to the yard." He wiggled his eyebrows, and I held in a snort. Laughing felt like breathing after the past few weeks of pure hell.

We pulled into a little ice cream shop, and once we came out with our lactose-sugar coma, I said, "You know there's a game today at school if you're interested." Dad liked local football as much as the pros, and he had been low-key watching Jayden play for years. We both needed the distraction.

I scanned the field and bench, finding his number. A clean uniform meant Jayden would be grumpy and require silly memes. A green and brown-stained uniform meant he would send me some. Instead of Jayden, I saw the crowd of cheerleaders, with skin so perfect they didn't need filters, and the sports bros pumped up with energy. It ratcheted everything to twelve, and it made me uncomfortable.

My faded slides, sweatpants, and a tee shirt I might've spilled coffee on this morning didn't fit in at the game. But that didn't matter; I came to see the one person who might want me here.

But he was in the center of the cluster of people, talking during halftime while the band played. His uniform was dirty. Good, that meant he had played. Maybe he would start the second half.

“Gin.” Dad clutched my shoulder; all color drained from his face. His eyes were unfocused. Every alarm bell screeched in my head.

“Dad!” My hands gripped him, but his weight was enough to topple me into the fence. My massive father created a tsunami with the chain-link fence, rattling it all the way back to the main entrance. Mrs. Conroy, my English teacher, left the ticket booth and sprinted after us. She called out to a few students to get the EMTs waiting on the field.

Two hours earlier, we devised a plan to combat the cancer nightmare. The cancer and its treatment had been an invisible, imaginary threat. But now it smacked me in the face, pinning its weight against me. It had roared into reality.

Mrs. Conroy stayed with us, Dad faded in and out of awareness, and his strawberry milkshake splattered all down my shirt and pants. Cold, confused, and scared, my world shrank to me and my dad. The ambulance came, the lights flashing over us as it glided slowly from where it waited in case of a game emergency. I glanced over my shoulder to find my one source of comfort. But Jayden hadn’t noticed because he was already on the field.

Chapter 3



Senior Year

Jayden

Partners.

We were going to be writing partners. It would trap her with me for the rest of the year.

Bwhahahahahaha. I could seduce her and make her mine, and eventually she would be the mother of my children.

Mrs. Conroy displayed our partners on the board behind her. I scanned the rest of the names on the list. Oh, no. Kinsley Adams could ruin it all. She was partnered with Davin, not her best friend. This would be completely unacceptable. Princess Kinsley demanded perfection from herself and tolerated microscopic mistakes from others. We hung out in the same circle, going to a few parties. We had always been friendly, but not friends. Kinsley had one friend, Casey. Everyone else was a fixable problem.

She frowned. Not good. If Kinsley demanded Conroy to switch our partners, Ginny could slip through my fingers. Again.

Conroy sat behind her computer screen, watching the class and anticipating every reaction. I caught Conroy's eye, motioned to Kinsley, shook my head, and mouthed, "No."

Thank merciful God, Conroy got the message, acknowledging me with a nod. The bell rang. I packed my binder and rushed to meet Ginny at the door.

"So, partners, huh?" I said.

Ginny pulled her binder to her chest. "Yeah, I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

At first, I ran away because she rejected me, and I'd never felt that shame and embarrassment before. I spent countless nights replaying that moment, analyzing it to see where I went wrong. It was a few months later, I found out her dad had cancer. It all sort of made sense. She needed to focus on more important things. So, I backed off completely. Respected her space, her time, and assumed when she was ready, she would come back.

She didn't.

That broke my heart in a whole different way. She would rather be alone than with me. Ouch.

"I'm kinda busy with football practice, but I can text you tonight and we can come up with a plan." But this time, it would be different. *Once the lines of communication go back online, you'll be mine.* Damn... I really need to cut back on that evil genius thing.

She tucked a flyaway strand of strawberry blond hair behind her ear. That same one that had tormented me for years. That and the black yoga pants and long tee shirt that showed off her curves. “Um, sure.”

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket. “Same number? No change?”

She nodded. “I’ve got class in the other direction, but we can talk later.”

Turning on her heels, she walked away. The crowd swallowed her, and if it wasn’t for my years of practice with hidden object games on my phone, I might’ve lost her among the masses of people. But no matter where she was, I always found Ginny.

One bright patch in my day before I returned to the sports bros.

It’s not that I hated Todd Richardson. *I really fucking hated him.* He was sexist, racist, and just about every *-ist* there could be. Worst of all, we were now associated with each other, and I couldn’t escape. Our identities were linked. At least he kept his evil tentacles hidden away while in public.

Kinsley strolled across the cafeteria; her jaw locked in a scowl. Her expression didn’t match her Disney Princess vibe at all. Which meant only one thing: Conroy didn’t switch her partner. But I needed to confirm.

Todd slithered his way toward her. I’ve never seen a woman more disinterested in a guy as much as Kinsley. She saw through his evil mask, and I had a suspicion she was only using him. But for what? It wasn’t social clout. Kins had tons of that. No, it had to be something only Todd could give her. Homecoming decorations, maybe? No, Kinsley was a long-term planner... prom. Todd’s dad ran a company that had tons of decorations from various concerts. She was probably banking on those to offset the prom budget. Sneaky. And all she had to do was put up with Todd. Maybe the punishment wasn’t worth the crime, though.

“Kins, you wanna study after school?” He invaded her space to ask the question.

“Ohhhh, I can’t. Sorry. I’ve got to drive Casey to work.”

“What about afterward?”

“Ohhhh, I can’t. I’ve got to work on an essay for English.”

Take the hint, Todd.

Time to defuse the situation and get much needed intel.

“You got partnered with Davin, right? We used to be friends back in middle school.” I waited for some form of acknowledgment from her.

Her frown deepened.

Jackpot! I had to reassure her he was a good option; otherwise, she might go back to Conroy for a second plea. “He’s interesting. Um, you’re busy. I can give you more details later.”

Todd scoffed. “They aren’t busy. They’re just playing on their phones.”

I dragged him away before Kinsley committed any physical harm. Once at our table, Todd sat on his throne and held court. The team waited for his newest declaration. Sometimes it was about some teacher “who sucked and unfairly gave him a bad grade.” Other times, it was which girl he wanted to fuck or who he had fucked.

“Kinsley Adams is so fucking hot.”

Right on cue.

“She’s not interested.” I slapped him with reality, but it never had an effect.

He cracked open an energy drink that one of the JV players slid over to him. “She doesn’t know what she wants. I know what she wants.”

Kinsley Adams not knowing what she wanted? I almost snorted. That girl was born knowing exactly what she wanted, who she wanted, and what she wanted to do with them. Todd wasn’t anywhere near that list.

I mumbled, “You should tell her what she wants. She would love it.”

He never understood sarcasm.

“Of course, she would. She’s not one of those feminists; she likes cock.”

Sigh.

Maybe that’s why Ginny never wanted to go out with me. She’s into girls. Yeah, that makes sense.

But maybe she’s one of those half-feminists who likes guys too.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Football practice and debating what to write to Ginny. I kicked off my shoes, dropped some food into Race and Rocket’s cage, and flopped on my bed. Should I go for fun? Flirty? All business? Culturally relevant?

Me: Hey.

Classic.

Ginny: Hey.

Me: Did you start the English work?

Three dots danced across my screen.

Ginny: Not yet. I’ve been kinda busy.

Me: With what?

Ginny: house stuff.

Me: need any help?

Three dots again.

The phone rang. I jumped. Who the hell *called*?

Her voice ached with desperation. “Yes. The lawn needs to be mowed, the weeds were out of control, and a storm took out a screen on one of the windows. And if I don’t get everything in order, the HOA is going to fine us.”

I flung my feet over the side of my bed and picked a shirt off the floor. After a quick sniff test deemed it worthy, I threw it on over my head.

Did I look thirsty as hell to head over there? Yes.

Did I care? Not at all.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Wait, what? Really?”

“Sure, what else are writing partners for except manual labor?”

“Writing? I’m pretty sure they’re there for writing.”

“And manual labor.” I jammed my feet back into my shoes. They’re still warm.

My stomach dropped as I pulled up to her house. It looked like it had been in disarray for quite some time. Her house was small, but it fit in with the rest of the neighborhood.

The grass needed to be mowed and fertilized. There were brown patches everywhere. Dead summer flowers were like zombies around the yard, standing but unalive. As the son of a real estate agent, I knew how critically important curb appeal was.

This house had none.

I knew her dad was sick, but did they not have anyone helping them? No neighborhood kids who wanted to make a little extra money?

Ginny opened the door before I rang the bell. Her crimson face told me how ashamed she must be. The girl couldn’t even make direct eye contact with me. Something happened.

Regret’s icy hands gripped my spine. I should’ve checked on her sooner. It’s not like I didn’t know her dad was sick. My mom dropped food off at the house when he was first diagnosed. But I guess that’s the thing: the bad news happens, and it gets instant attention. But prolonged bad news requires more help and support than people want to sacrifice.

She pulled at her fingertips. “You didn’t have to come over.”

Of course, I did. She asked for help. What other option did I have? “It’s okay. It’s not like I was busy.” I was, and I didn’t care. “Come on. Where’s your lawn mower?”

Forty-five minutes later, I was a hot, sweaty mess after mowing the lawn. September in Maryland could be anywhere between crisp fall or boiling summer temps, depending on what Mother Nature felt like doing that day.

Ginny came out with water in a plastic tumbler decorated with tap-dancing turtles. Who could teach turtles to tap dance? Was it another turtle? How fast could their legs really move? I got it was a cartoon and a stupid cup, but now I had questions I would never get answers to. Maybe she had more cups that told the story.

I tried to peek over her shoulder. I don't know why I assumed she had a stack of tumblers in her hallway that explained the epic tale of these tap-dancing turtles. But she shifted her weight and blocked my view before slamming the door so hard it rattled in the frame. Message received; the house was a no-go.

We sat on the porch. "Is everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, yeah. Everything's fine. It's just my dad. He's having a rough day," she said.

"Okay. 'Course, cool. Look, if you need anything, like, I'm here. Right? Besides football, practice, and school, I don't really have much going on, so let me know."

She sighed. "It's been such a long time since anyone came over. My whole life has been with my dad and me." She paused. "I don't know what's going to happen."

Yeah. The future was always hazy. But I knew what she meant. She didn't know how much time she had left with her dad.

I hadn't seen him in years. I vaguely remembered seeing her dad at the eighth-grade dance before things went south. He was once a massive man, full of energy and life—the kind of guy that every single person immediately was drawn to, and for many reasons, I had no desire to lose that image of him. At all. So, like a coward, I stood outside.

"Well, I guess we should get to work." She sat with her phone out, reading through the topics to write about. "Um, yeah,

let's do question number one." She held out her phone for me to read Conroy's assignment.

And, I mean, it wouldn't have been my first choice, but I don't think she read past number one. Desperate to have one thing in common, I said, "Sure."

And that's how it started.

After football practice, I'd swing by with food or to help out with the house, with any excuse to help. Damn, cancer didn't only drain the life of its host but anyone else in its radius. Whatever I could do, I would. It was pretty nice having her back in my life, even if she saw me as an errand boy.

I saw myself as her hero.

Chapter 4



Ginny

Jayden asked me. AGAIN.

“I don’t know what he was thinking, but he asked me to homecoming. I didn’t have a dress; he knew I didn’t have a dress. What was he thinking?”

I paced back and forth as Kinsley stared blankly at me. Hell, I wasn’t even sure why I went to her for advice other than she always seemed to have her shit together. But she was clearly in her own world thinking about homecoming and whatever the hell she was doing with Davin.

Like, she tried to be super sneaky about it, but for someone who is as smart as she is, she was totally letting her feelings show. And Davin hadn't smiled that much since his brother died. Something was definitely going on there.

Why were they trying to hide it?

I leaned against the locker next to her. Why couldn't my life be as interesting as hers? What the hell? What should I do? Bills were piling up; Dad's disability checks hadn't been enough for a while, and it became impossible to keep everything afloat. And now, out of nowhere, Jayden wanted me to go to homecoming. Seriously, where was I going to get a dress?

Kinsley put the last book in her locker and slammed it shut. The metal-on-metal clank made me jump. How much of my little mental rant had she heard? It didn't matter. If it wasn't on her list, then she didn't pay attention.

With a sigh to copy mine, she suggested, "Why don't you come by my house and borrow a dress? No big deal. And some shoes too."

Wait, had she been listening? Did she have psychic witchcraft powers? No, sometimes I forget how good she is at seeing what other people were hiding. "Are you sure?" I questioned.

"Of course," Kinsley repeated herself. "I'll add it to my mental to-do list. Check, check, all good."

That's how I got my dress for homecoming.

But hanging out at Kinsley's house and trying on dresses came with a cost. My insecurity was showing.

Kinsley had everything: dresses, grades, beauty, and a best friend. Why was she nice to me? Pity? Was I another project for her? No matter how much she tried to bring me into her little cluster of friends, I never belonged. Kinsley and Casey were one entity, one super robot of awesomeness, and I was the left boot of the robot. I was there, but invisible.

She watched me as I stood in her room, trying on dresses I'd never be able to afford. Casey grabbed a book from the nightstand and asked her best friend, "Did you finish this?"

Oh, I knew that cover. Excitement washed over me.

Did Kinsley just blush?

“Well, I read certain parts several times.”

Kinsley Adams, a fairy-porn smut reader? Okay girl, I see you.

I snorted. “That scene at the high court? So good?” Not gonna say that the high court scene was the *beginning* of my sexual awakening, but I read it enough to memorize it.

I slide the first strappy heel on with no problems. It was the second that made me wobble from side to side. I steadied myself on the dresser while Casey threw the book on the bed. “I liked the captain of the night guards. She’s such a badass.”

“Yeah, Reina reminds me of Captain Galecrow.” I was ninety-nine percent sure Reina modeled most of her looks from the sexy fictional character.

“You went to middle school with Reina, Jayden, and Davin,” Kinsley said.

“We went to Rosewood Middle School.” Oh, the simpler days, back when no one’s identity had been formed. Davin, tragic, sad boy. Jayden, second in command of the sports bros. I was the girl whose dad had cancer. Only Reina cracked the identity code early.

“Reina came out of the womb knowing exactly who she is and what she likes.” The shoes were tight on my toes, but I could live with a minor discomfort. The sexy and strappy heels were good. I wouldn’t be taller than Jayden. There were a few months back in middle school when I towered over him, but those days were gone.

“Davin and Jayden were best friends; they were always nice to me,” I said. But then everything changed. “They stopped hanging out sometime freshman year.”

Not sometime, I knew exactly when.

Casey crossed her arms and sat on the edge of the bed. “You mean right around the time Jayden started sitting in the front of the douche canoe?” Yeah, and I was the one who had handed him a paddle.

Anger and guilt hit me like a bullet. I hated that other people saw him like that. Jayden was with the sports bros by default because he had no one else. And that had been my fault. Time to deflect. “Maybe it was. Not sure. We don’t really talk about it when we’re working for Conroy’s class.” Mostly because both of us avoided the topic. But at least one thing was certain: these shoes were the winner. “Can I take these?”

That’s when Kinsley hit me with extra work. Research about medical bills, like I wasn’t already an expert on it. But this was different. She wanted me to look for loopholes and ways the insurance companies were losing money. Like those assholes were the victims in this one... oh wait, she offered me a way to lower my bills. She tacked on, “I’m super swamped between homecoming and life. You’d really be doing me a favor.”

I didn’t need her pity, but I needed her dresses. All I wanted was one night where I could be a normal teenager. And now even that was tarnished. Still, she framed this as if I was doing her the favor, when really she gave me tools to manage my bills and a dress. “Oh, okay, yeah, as payment for letting me borrow your dress.”

As the days ticked closer and closer to homecoming, I turned into a ball of nervous energy. Everyone around me ramped up their intensity with all the extra activities like spirit week and the pep rallies.

And something had happened between Kinsley and Davin.

When Davin walked into Conroy’s class on Monday, I thought it was a joke, or at least that he was only there to get his work. He was pale, sick, and sweaty.

But the second he walked into the room; Kinsley’s whole body tensed like she was in battle mode.

Even Conroy seemed confused and walked over to him. I was about to ask Jayden if he knew what was going on, but Mrs. Conroy yelled, “A goat bit you?” Oh shit, I forgot Davin had goats. A few seconds later, Mrs. Conroy had the entire class laughing at the goats dressed in spirit wear.

Kinsley's shoulders sank, but then she shook her head and stiffened her back. Yep, whatever Davin had done wasn't easily fixed with a cute picture of goats.

Every day he came into school, he looked worse than the day before, and every day the goats showed their school spirit.

And I should've seen it coming. Kinsley was on a warpath and nothing would get in her way.

We moved the decorations into a supply closet near the theater when she asked me to swap partners. For half a millisecond, I almost took her up on it. After all, she was a beast I didn't want to get into a battle with, even if she annoyed me. But that would mean...

"So, you would be Jayden's partner?" My stomach twisted with a feeling I couldn't place, irrational anger. What was her deal? One second she was super sweet to me trying to solve all my problems and now she wanted to steal Jayden from my non-existent clutches?

Kinsley's blond ponytail shook from side to side. "No, you and I would be partners."

Dear God, somehow that was worse! Her insane desire to be right all the time? Perfect? I was under enough stress as it is. "You know I love you, right?" There was no way I could handle her. I needed to let her down without making her mad enough to demand the dress and shoes back. "Um, it's just you're a little intense." I moved a pile of dust around with my foot. "And, well, with everything going on with my dad, you would stress me out even more." At least I'd have that excuse to get me out of things. And Jayden was mine. "Sorry. Besides, Jayden has been awesome about picking me up from the hospital." He didn't take us to the hospital. Dad took a cab back and forth for treatment. But Kinsley didn't need to know that.

Her annoyance filled the tiny space. This wasn't the answer she expected. I moved two more boxes and had another excuse to bail. I might be depressed, but I didn't have a death wish.

The week continued, and Kinsley became more distant. It was easy to blame the stress of planning homecoming, but I

knew better. She sat next to me at the pep rally, looking lost. Her eyes glazed over, and she rubbed her knuckles on her thighs, cheering and singing on autopilot.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “I hate being wrong.”

The marching band played “Another One Bites the Dust,” and I shouted to keep her attention. “Anything in particular you’re wrong about?”

She shrugged and clapped her hands when the song was over, almost robotically. “A lot more than I want to admit.”

The football team ran onto the field, and I searched for Jayden’s number. His dirty blond hair peeked out of his helmet, and even from the stands, I could see every detail on his face. Or maybe I had memorized it. I cheered with the crowd, hoping that my voice would carry over and land in his ears. But it didn’t.

The football players waved before running back to the bench. That was it? We left class and huddled into the bleachers for that?

Lame. Maybe the football game tomorrow would be better.

“Hey, can you take me to the game tomorrow?”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Kinsley said, not paying any attention.

Homecoming morning, I texted Kinsley to remind her to pick me up for the game. Dressed in reds and blues, she appeared to be all in but spent most of the game on her phone, smiling and laughing under her breath. Maybe something changed with her and Davin. While driving home from the game, I asked, “All ready for the dance?”

She turned the radio up when an Amanda Chase song came on. “I can’t wait for tomorrow. It will all be over.”

A cheesy grin spread across her lips. While Kinsley looked forward to her future, every day led me closer to the inevitable conclusion.

“Are you going to Todd’s party?” I asked.

If she was going, then I would. Todd's crowd wasn't my scene, but Jayden would be there, and my dad said I needed to get out more.

Her smile fell like she bit into what she thought was a chocolate chip cookie, and it turned out to have raisins. "Yeah, kinda forced to."

"Well, we can hang out."

She gave me a smile like she had won second place, and in her world, that means she lost. "Definitely." Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the wheel.

Homecoming night, I fought with my hair for an hour. One side refused to curl the way I wanted. My left side had perfect loopy curls, and my right side looked like a curl forgot how to be a curl. Thanks to some samples Casey snagged at the makeup counter, I could look semi-decent for the first time in a while. Kinsley's dress was a little tight on my hips, but if I didn't eat anything or breathe, I should be fine. But I felt I was playing dress-up in this peacock-colored dress. Like I was a sticker of a princess, fake and one dimensional, something to be looked at once and thrown away.

Kinsley had outdone herself with the decorations. They had completely transformed the gym into a galaxy-themed nightclub, complete with a balloon archway. I hadn't been to many school dances, and if this was how they were, I missed out. An ache started in my stomach. I had spent how much of my life in waiting rooms and lines at the pharmacy, worrying about things that were way out of my pay grade? I lost my entire youth.

The last four years of trying should've been about me trying to figure out who I am, getting into trouble, and hooking up with guys.

But now, I was Ginny, the girl whose dad was dying. I wasn't even the main character in my story.

"You look amazing."

I heard the words but assumed they were for someone else. Lots of people looked incredible. Homecoming seemed like the one day a year when sequined dresses the size of

napkins were not only acceptable but required. My dress didn't fit that description. It was long with a high slit up the leg and a satin bodice with spaghetti straps, sort of a classic dress.

I turned around to see who spoke. Jayden. My stomach flipped. He had a shirt that was a similar color to my turquoise dress and black pants with a black tie. His blond hair was slicked back, entirely new. But the way his eyes danced around and his smile spread across his face, it was familiar.

“Me?”

“Who else?” he said.

I shrugged and motioned with my hand. “Like everyone here.”

“But I'm not talking to everyone, just you.”

My cheeks warmed, sending a burning fire down my spine. Not one of the raging infernos, but one of those safe fires that you snuggled next to in the winter with a blanket and a book.

That's how he made me feel.

“You look nice too.”

“I guess I clean up alright.”

The music changed from a bass-heavy dance song to something slower. One of Amanda Chase's songs. Jayden wiggled his eyebrows. “Wanna?” He held out his hand.

I hadn't danced with anyone since eighth grade...hell, I think it might've been him. No, I danced with Davin for the first slow song. He cracked jokes the whole time, but Jayden had definitely been the last dance.

I should've kissed him that night. But I was too worried about what people would say. God, how fucking lame am I that my biggest regret with a guy comes from middle school? Now that I've flown under the radar for so long, I could probably walk into school naked and no one would notice.

Well, Jayden *might* notice.

I nodded and wrapped my arms around his neck. His hands rested on my hips, leaving enough space to keep this

platonic.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Of course.” He rested his forehead against mine. “You could ask me for anything.”

The words “kiss me” screamed in my head. Make me feel like I didn’t miss out on everything. Kiss me because *you* want to, because *I* want you to. Kiss me because you think I’m pretty.

“I’ll take a Slurpee.” *Damn it, Ginny, why’d you have to be such a chickenshit?*

He laughed. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Platonic, that’s what we were.

Friends trapped in a zone with an invisible yet completely impenetrable layer. “You can get me one on the way to Todd’s party.”

His arm muscles tensed around my waist. He looked away into the crowd. “You’re going to that?” There was an edge to his voice. Did he not want me there? With his friends?

I had every right to be there. “Yeah, like half the school is.”

“You normally don’t go to parties.”

“Kinsley wanted some moral support. I don’t think she wants to go.”

Again, his body tensed. “But she’s definitely going?”

The words seemed to choke him. Kinsley. Of course. That’s who he wanted to be with. I was at a second-place pity party.

“Yeah, I think so.”

His face tightened, and he looked off into the distance like he was searching for some sort of mythical creature. “Um, okay, can you do me a favor?”

Friend-zone favor. “Sure.”

“Stay by my side all night. Like always stay within eye line of me and don’t take anything from anyone.” His fingers wrapped tight around my waist. Before I could ask what the hell was going on, he said, “The guys are being fucking shady, and Todd’s had his sights on Kinsley for a while.”

I flinched. “What? Is she in danger?”

Jayden stayed quiet and considered every word. “I don’t think so. Todd’s a douche, but I don’t *think* he’ll go that far. It’s just a precaution.”

There was a whole dark world that my sheltered life had only watched on TV. This was real. If this was what youth was like, maybe I didn’t miss out on much after all.

Chapter 5



Jayden

I sat on the porch with my hands on my head, elbows on my knees, vaguely aware of the screaming and yelling. The red and blue light's flickering patterns filled the space between my legs. *What had I done? Was it enough?* The image of that girl with her underwear around her ankles, unresponsive, and Todd thrusting, scorched my brain. As long as I live, those images and sounds are going to haunt me.

I thought getting Kinsley out of the party would've been enough, and if I kept Ginny safe, my responsibilities ended.

Todd's screams came echoing down the stairs. The impact of his flailing legs knocked over the vase in the foyer; the crashing of the ceramic was drowned out by his outcry of, "Fucking traitor!"

I didn't move as the police dragged him across the wet wooden porch. The stairs were wide enough to fit five people across, and the two police officers and the screaming, kicking spawn of Satan passed me without an issue.

"Jayden Trudge?" a gruff voice called out.

I recognized it even without hearing it for years. "Hi, Officer Mike." This was Davin's uncle. He used to be my baseball coach in middle school. If there was anyone here I could trust, it was him.

"Did you make the call?"

I nodded.

"Wanna tell me what happened?"

"Todd tried to put something in Kinsley Adams's drink. I didn't know he had more than one pill."

My former coach made a sound that wasn't quite a cough and wasn't a choke—something in between. "Kinsley Adams? The blonde who doesn't take shit from anyone?"

I nodded. "That's her." I finally looked at him as he dragged his hand across his face. Whiskers from a long night peeked through.

"I just came from her house." He added, "Davin's staying there tonight."

Are Davin and Kinsley together? That's probably who picked her up from the party.

Officer Mike patted me on the shoulder. "Can you give a statement?"

Without emotion, I pulled my phone from my front pocket. "I took video. I didn't watch it. But in case you needed more proof..." I placed my phone in his hand. "I should've done more." Numb facts, that's what I used.

Officer Mike didn't offer me words of comfort or berate me. Instead, he said, "When you're ready, I'll drive you to the station."

He turned to help the other officers who were dealing with underage drinking, noise complaints, and other madness.

Something brushed across the back of my neck—it kind of tickled—and I squirmed out of the way. A flash of turquoise caught my eye. "Can I join you?"

"No," I said, bracing myself and pushing off the porch. "Don't sit. The wood's wet, and it soaked through my pants. Don't want you to get your dress dirty."

My knees cracked a little as I stood and leaned against the railing. As bad as this night was, I didn't want Ginny to see my wet ass. It was a stupid thing to be worried about, but at least that was something I could control.

She wrapped her arms around me and pressed her body against mine. "You're a hero," she whispered.

I buried my head into her neck. "It doesn't feel like it."

No one ever talks about hero guilt—the ache that there was more I could've done, and there was a task unfinished. Someone got hurt because I was too scared to do more.

Ginny was the only one who thought I was a hero.

On Monday, the entire school looked at me like I burned a bag of puppies at a bonfire.

Calvin Fuller made it very clear to the entire football team whose fault it was that our quarterback sat in a jail cell. I'd been cornered on my way to Conroy's class when half the starters took their turns pinning me against a locker to kick the crap out of me. My wrist was twisted back, and I heard a pop. Maybe it was a sprain, maybe it was more. But it was my punishment.

A teacher came through the hall, and my teammates scattered like broken necklace beads on a hardwood floor. My right arm throbbed, and I clenched it. I mumbled about being late for class. Ginny ran over, helping me with my backpack. "You need to go to the nurse."

I shook my head. “That will only make things worse.” Shame kept me silent. Those guys were pissed at me, but no more than I was pissed at myself. Karma punishment.

We walked into Conroy’s class, wincing when my arm bumped my desk. My pain didn’t warrant a second look from anyone, but when we were told to work in groups and we were partnered with Kinsley and Davin, I dreaded it. Both of them had been extra gooey towards each other now that they were officially dating.

When I hissed, lifting a textbook, both Davin and Kinsley sprang into action. Davin reached for my arm and did a quick tactical assessment while his girlfriend seethed and buried her head in her phone.

I heard rumors here and there about Kinsley. An ex-boyfriend lost his scholarship to Tennent through questionable means. Other mysterious things happened to people she didn’t like. Nobody could pin it on her, but still.

She marched over to my former friends and slid a piece of paper with numbers on the table.

“Look at the numbers and figure out what they have in common while I make a quick phone call,” she said.

Her uncle was a sports recruiter for Tennent. Oh shit. She brought out the big guns. Apparently, some huge retirement dinner was coming up, and all the major schools on the East Coast, would be there. She ended the phone call, and the entire football team appeared more confused than scared. And they should be because Kinsley wasn’t done.

“One out of six women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. There are six females in your families. Wanna take bets on who on that list has been assaulted?” She tilted her head to the side and leaned in more.

While a few of the guys took to heart what she said, others glared at her like they would’ve beaten her in front of the school. Like a fucking boss, she didn’t back down. “Facts and empathy—that’s not really your thing?”

She placed her weight on the table. “Boys, like you, only care about themselves. So, I’m going to make this clear. As of

this moment, my uncle doesn't know you were at that party or that you stood by and let unspeakable evil happen. But one word from me, and every recruiter, coach, and trainer from every college on the East Coast will know. And they won't come anywhere near this school for years. Do you know what that means?"

One phone call like that, and they could lose their scholarships. Years of work, travel teams, thousands of dollars on equipment...poof, gone. Shit, this was fucking life ending.

Then she went for the death blow. "It means that no one in this building will get a sports scholarship for the next five years."

Oh shit!

The athletes who ate lunch around my table all whipped around. Now this shit affected them, and the entire athletic department looked like they had caught the early stages of Ebola.

"But that's not what I want," she declared. "I want you to earn your scholarships by eliminating Todd's old records, to erase his legacy. I want him to be nothing but an afterthought of how high school success is fleeting. His name isn't worth remembering; it's a nameless cautionary tale."

Kinsley spoke slower and louder, banging her fists against the table. Every guy leaned in, holding their collective breath. "I want you to be champions, and you can't do that without him." Kinsley pointed to me.

Hundreds of eyes zeroed in on me. I wanted to squirm from the attention but didn't. Then she led the whole football team in some fucking uniformed cheer.

"Who are we?" she asked.

"EAGLES!" they screamed.

"WHO ARE WE?"

"EAGLES!" The chanting started from their table and spread through the cafeteria. She reached out for Calvin Fuller's collar and whispered in his ear. He shrank under her touch but continued the chant. Message received.

Holy shit. “I guess it pays to be friends with a princess.”

“I’m not a princess. I am a goddess.”

Damn straight, she was.

Chapter 6



Ginny

I wasn't jealous. Not of Kinsley. Sure, she had everything: a boyfriend who worshiped her, a brain the size of a planet, and two healthy parents. I wanted everything she had. But I wasn't jealous.

Despite a glorious end to the season of non-stop victories, Jayden never settled back in with his sports bros. He had become their de facto leader, but he didn't hang out with them. Sometimes he played video games with Davin or helped his mom put up signs for her real estate company. Most days, he came over to check on me.

For the last few years, Christmas had been a light affair. I didn't have the energy for decorations. The whole lugging stuff from the attic and fighting whatever eight-legged monster lived between the boxes, only to take them down a few weeks later. The last thing I needed to do was to start a great spider war ten feet above where I slept. Lots of legs, zillions of eyes, and millions of years of evolution meant this was a battle I couldn't win.

But I did like making Christmas cookies. Jayden offered to drive me home, which had become our thing. I convinced him to swing by the grocery store so I could buy the ingredients.

Being around Jayden made everything suck a little less. We pulled into my driveway. I just hoped he wouldn't say anything about the decorations.

"Wow, that wreath has seen better days." He squinted at the sad thing on the door.

Guess I wasn't so lucky, and worst of all, he was right. The pine cones were bald, and the upper half was squished.

"Do you want to come in?" I asked, unsure why I offered or what he would say. For all the months he's been looking after me, Jayden hasn't come into the house. I didn't know if it had to do with me or my dad.

He turned off the car, checked his phone, and said, "Will there be cookies involved?"

I wiggled my eyebrows. "Possibly."

"I'm in."

But as soon as I got to the door, my messy house anxiety peaked. Did I have a sink full of dishes? What if Dad wasn't wearing a shirt? Was my underwear still on the laundry room floor? Before I could hesitate, Jayden walked right into the house.

Dad's wheelchair scuffed the floor. He'd taken to sleeping in the living room since it was closer to the bathroom.

You know how you see someone every day and you don't notice how bad they look? That wasn't the case with Dad. He used to be huge—six-foot, two hundred pounds of muscle.

But now, after the surgeries, he lost his legs trying to keep the cancer at bay. It didn't work, and the chemo kicked his ass. I was well aware of how bad my father looked.

"Hi, Dad!" I yelled, hoping this would give him a chance to get fully clothed.

"Ginny Bear! Did you bring home the stuff for cookies?" Dad rolled out of the living room; his wheelchair had carved a path into the carpet. Dad's hairless head pulled back when he saw my guest, and instantly the biggest smile crossed his face. "Jayden Trudge, is that you?"

Jayden put the grocery bags on the counter. Wait, when had he taken that from me? Crap, I was out of it. As he unpacked everything from the bag, he answered, "Yes, it is! Hi."

"How are you doing? How did your season go?"

My dad knew exactly how the season went; he asked me about it all the time. I shook my head while searching through the cabinets for a bowl. We'd moved everything to the lower shelves, but Dad kept switching where he put things. I think he did it to mess with me.

Jayden shifted his body around. "It was great. I got scouted by Tennent and a few other schools. Fingers crossed for a scholarship."

Dad rolled in closer. "You'll get one."

Success! I found the bowl next to the canned tomato sauces that were also in the wrong spot.

"You're awfully confident about that."

"I saw you play a few times. My favorite game was against Westbrook East, where you got that one hell of a tackle." I only heard that sort of excitement in his voice when he talked about sports or the *Fast and the Furious* movies. And since I didn't have an interest in either, that level of excitement didn't happen often.

This time, Jayden matched my dad's energy. "That was a hell of a game."

I didn't know what they were talking about. All the games seemed the same to me. Run, tackle, throw, and yell

when everyone else does. My dad had tried to explain it to me like a billion times. I was more interested in all the workers at the stadium—the announcers, the players, the lawyers, and the behind-the-scenes stuff. Dad liked the sport. I liked the community.

I lost both of them as they got deep into sports jargon, so I worked on the cookies on my own. It was nice to hear them in their own little world while I worked my magic with flour and sugar. I browned the butter to give it an extra nutty and rich flavor, a step I didn't think anyone ever noticed, but I liked to do.

Dad wheeled himself back into the living room to show Jayden his fantasy football league while I turned on the mixer to work the dough. Once it was done, I threw it in the freezer for a few minutes to let it chill. Somewhere along the way, Dad turned on the Christmas music while they continued to compare fantasy football rosters. While they were both busy, the stack of mail called to me. It was a morbid curiosity that made me flip through the stack. One past due bill, two more with a thirty-day notice. Sighing, I logged onto the banking app, trying to move funds to pay the electric bill and internet. Without one, I couldn't have the other.

Funds were running low; we had maxed out all of Grandma's inheritance. I should've gotten a job by now, but I needed to take care of Dad. Part of me wanted to drop out and take my GED test so I could work. Dad had never been as mad at me as he was when I brought it up. He didn't talk to me for a week.

Pulling the dough out of the freezer, I rolled it out. I hated this part. It always hurt my arms. I didn't like asking for help, but I hated rolling out the dough even more.

"Hey, Jayden, come here." He lifted himself off the couch and instantly got to work with the rolling pin when I held it out to him.

Dad followed into the kitchen, not ready to give up his sports bro. "How's your mom doing?"

Jayden flattened the dough. "She's been bummed since my sister moved to Denver, but work is keeping her busy."

Dad nodded, but a spark flickered. “Is she seeing anyone?”

Both Jayden and I paused.

Dad motioned to his broken body. “You think she could turn all this down?”

“DAD!” Oh my god, he was the worst. “This is why I don’t bring anyone over.”

“I don’t hear Jayden answering my question.” Dad wiggled the space where his eyebrows would’ve been. Then he shrugged. “Because she’ll have to get in line. Mrs. Jenkins down the street has first dibs. For a ninety-two-year-old, she’s a cougar who still has claws.” He made a claw with his hands and added a roar.

Then Jayden laughed like I’d never heard. Big, deep, rolling laughs that spread across the room and became infectious. He pressed a snowman cookie cutter into the dough, but when it came out, it looked like stretched-out blobs. He doubled over with laughter at this point.

Before he destroyed all my hard work, I pushed him out of the kitchen, and he returned to the living room with Dad. Between batches one and two, I threw in a frozen pizza. Normally, I would take the leftovers to school, or we’d eat the rest the next day. But with Jayden over, that wasn’t going to be an option. Once we ate dinner and the cookies cooled, I made some royal icing, and we decorated them.

None of us had the cookie decorating talent of a professional. Dad told stories about his time on the college football team and the different pranks he used to play on the neighbors. Our cookies looked like holiday icons melted in a radioactive blast.

But they tasted amazing.

Jayden hung around for an extra hour. He helped clean, and I packed him some cookies for his mom. As I walked him to the door, my dad came rolling up.

“Jayden, in case you go four years again between visits, I wanted you to know I’m proud of you. You’ve grown to be

one hell of a man.”

My writing partner looked like he had been hit in the face with a flying puppy, surprised, a little in pain, but mostly excited to experience something so amazing. He cleared his throat before saying “thanks” and lifted the bag of cookies. “Thanks for these. I’ll pick you up in the morning, Gin.”

Once the door closed and it was my dad and me, the house retained the joy from Jayden’s visit. Now wasn’t a time to worry about bills, but to eat cookies and live in the moment. Before I headed to bed, Dad said, “He really is a good guy. Not many of those around.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, he’s great.”

Dad looked at his lap as darkness fell across his face. “It’s not fair you missed out on so much of your life because some stupid cells in my body decided to be overly productive.” Cancer was more complicated than that, and we both knew it. “Don’t let your present situation hinder your future.”

I gave him my typical response of “of course.” I unlocked the expert mode of lying to everyone else but never to myself. With building debts and a weakening tether to the only source of joy in my life, the future seemed like some nebulous blob of fear and danger.

Chapter 7



Jayden

When I was a kid, I wanted my mom to marry Ginny's dad. It was a late-night fantasy that kept me from sinking into a horrible depression.

Ginny's dad was everything I wished my bio father was. In my daydreams, he read the newspaper, but no one had those anymore. He would smile and ask me how I slept and if I had plans for the day. He would've been good for Angela, my sister, too—a strong male figure to look out for her and beat the shit out of anyone who sent her dick pics and made her feel lesser. When Bio Bad left, at least he had the good sense to stay away.

Still, it left a hole in my life I didn't know I had until I met Ginny's dad back in elementary school.

Everything about him was larger than life. He was giant, good-natured, and liked all the same things I did.

Plus, Ginny would be living at my house.

Then the reality of the situation hit me. In that fantasy scenario, Ginny would be my step-sister, and I didn't like those implications. According to Kinsley, that was a whole subgenre of smut, which was fine on the pages of fiction, but in real life, it was creepy. And, at the very least, uncomfortable around Thanksgiving dinner.

A part of me wished Ginny's dad was in my life more, and maybe I could've found other athletes that weren't sociopaths. Case in point: Todd called me yesterday, and, against my better judgment, I drove to his house. I told him I could only stay for five minutes, and that was four minutes and fifty-nine seconds too long.

Todd looked and smelled like shit. He hadn't left his bedroom since he was arrested. His family put him on lockdown since they spent so much money to bail him out. He scratched at his patchy beard, and I couldn't tell if he had ingrown hairs or acne. Deep bags that hung under his eyes showed how little sleep he had. He scratched at his chest, then his ass, and told me to come in. I opted to hang outside on the patio; it made for a safer escape plan.

"What do you want?" I asked. Was he looking for an apology?

He leaned on the doorframe, showing me the yellowed pit stains on his once favorite shirt. "Does everyone hate me?"

Yes. Everyone did. But that wasn't the truth. No, it was worse.

"No one talks about you. It's like we erased you from the school." Exactly how Kinsley wanted.

"W-What?" he stammered. "What about my records?"

"Jenkins broke your touchdown record in the last game of the season." It had been fucking glorious.

Todd punched the side of the door, then threw his head back and screamed. Over the years, I'd seen him throw things and push kids around—generalized aggressive behavior. Fine, whatever. But there was nothing worse than a broken monster that had nothing to lose. I took a step back.

“Fuck that shit!” He pulled out his cell phone, pressing the screen so hard I was afraid it would break.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“They’ll never forget me now. My dad will pull the prom contract. That fucking bitch will have to scramble to get a replacement. She won’t have enough money, and now she’s fucked.”

I stepped off the porch and headed to my car. Done. I was fucking done. “You’re going to ruin everyone’s prom because you didn’t get away with rape? You know you’re the villain in the story, no matter how you try to frame it.”

I didn’t hear his retort. What was the point? I needed this asshole out of my life. But now it fell on me to do the worst possible task: tell Kinsley Adams her plans for prom poofed into smoke.

The next day, I caught her between classes, staring at her phone screen. Wrong. She looked wrong. Her shoulders slumped instead of the regal confidence she normally carried.

“Hey, Kinsley.” I started off nice and neutral before hitting her with the news.

But she snapped back, “What do you want?”

Oh shit. Redirect, regroup.

Last night, I wrote my whole little speech to her. When you are about to drop the worst news of someone’s life on them, it’s important to choose your words carefully.

Step one: Apologize for the previous sins and put everything in context. I said, “I’m sorry about how everything went down in the fall. Lots of fucked-up things.”

She glared at me. “Yes, I agree.”

Step two: Remind her of our relationship. “And we used to be friends.” Well, friendly at least.

She shrugged, her gaze drifting off to the crowds of people. “We still are,” she said.

Good. Very good.

Step three: Remind her that things are good now and will be good again. “You seem happy now...” No, she didn’t. “I mean, like, not at this exact second because you look like your cat died.” Oh shit. “Did your cat die?” I should retreat.

“No. Do you have a point? I’ll be late for class.”

Step four: Info dump and throw all the bad shit at her at once. “Remember back in September when you promised every senior would get a free yearbook and that prom would be half price?” I think she did all of this for Casey and Ginny’s sake.

“Yeah.”

“And you remember how Todd’s dad said he would donate the sound equipment and decorations if you helped get him into college?”

“Yeah.”

Ok, here comes the bad news. “But Todd got kicked out of school because...” He’s a rapist.

Kinsley crossed her arms and looked like she wanted to kill me. Which might be fair, all things considered. “Actions have consequences. He isn’t entitled to anyone’s body but his own. What’s your point?” Yeah, she was not going to like this.

“Well, I bumped into Todd last night, and he said,” I smashed all the words out at once. “His dad isn’t going to donate anything because you never got the contract in writing and his son isn’t going to benefit.”

She crumbled. I broke Kinsley. All the color drained from her face, and her breathing changed. The light in her eyes faded. “I need to get to Davin.”

I wrapped my arms around her, and I wasn’t an expert on Davin’s schedule, but the odds were he would be in the music room. Kinsley gasped for breath, and I debated if I should take

her to the nurse instead. But she requested Davin, and that's who I delivered her to.

I was like an Amazon delivery person, and Davin got next-day shipping on a panicked girlfriend. Worst package ever.

Chapter 8



Jayden

I sat in English, minding my own business, when Andy screamed into the room. “What the hell, Graeloch? What’s this?” He waved a Battle of the Bands flyer around in the air.

Here’s the thing: for years, Andy has bitched and complained about Davin. But Davin was like a mountain, casting a vast shadow, unaware of who was stuck in the shade. Andy and I were lab partners in sophomore year, back when Davin won Battle of the Bands for the second time. Andy bitched for four months about it. Nonstop. Like, since I was no

longer best friends with Davin, that I would want to hear all the ways he sucked.

I hated Andy.

“A dead tree?” Davin answered.

Andy stormed across the room. “You left the music program two years ago.”

“No, I didn’t. I stopped singing in the chorus and focused more on composing. I never left the program,” he said, continuing to draw in his journal. But already the class’s energy changed; drama brewed, a scene, possibly a fight.

Andy pushed back his floppy hair, revealing his punchable face. “This was supposed to be MY year.” Wait, was Davin going to do Battle of the Bands? Shit...of course, that’s how they were going to get the money for prom. Well played.

“Your year? How are you gonna make it on the audition circuit if you can’t handle your high school?” Davin made a valid point.

“I’ve paid my dues; this is my time.”

“Stages are big, so more than one person can fit. I only signed up because Kinsley needed a favor. I was gonna half-ass it.”

Not a chance in hell would he half-ass anything for Kinsley.

Davin met Andy’s gaze. “But now you’ve pissed me off.”

He had.

“I might do a punked-out version of ‘Music of the Night,’ or maybe an acoustic ‘Dear Theodosia.’ What song are you doing? I’ll do it better.”

Did I know what they were talking about? Nope. But I felt a throwdown coming.

Andy’s eyebrows twitched as he mustered his lamest “angry white man” face. “What, you think you’re the shit because you’re smashing Adams over there? You weren’t the first to get in her.”

Oh yes, shit was about to go down. Conroy screamed across the room, but her cries were white noise. Davin stood and rolled his head from side to side, cracking every vertebra in his neck. I never understood why this action always made someone look like such a badass, but it did. I kicked my feet on the empty chair in front of me, ready to watch the fight. Davin had nearly a decade of martial arts to fall back on.

“Are you that delusional to think that she spontaneously arrived the instant I saw her? Do you think my girlfriend didn’t have an existence prior to dating me? Because that’s not how time works,” Davin said in a low voice.

Kinsley sat at an angle; her finger traced down her neck. Her eyes hid none of her thoughts as her lips curled.

A part of me thought Davin would have taken a swing at him just out of principle. Shit, if someone had said that about Ginny or my sister, they would be laid out. But he surprised me by saying, “And if you think this is the part where I kick your ass for talking shit about my girlfriend, then you don’t know her. Because Kinsley Adams can take care of herself, and she’s probably thinking about ways to end your career before it even starts.”

Ginny pulled out a pair of sunglasses from her purse, slipped them to Kinsley, and said, “Wear some protection if you’re gonna keep eye fucking him like that.”

Kinsley gave a shoulder shrug and a coy smirk. “What? I know what I like.”

Ginny agreed. “Yeah, feminism is very sexy on a man.” Her face was pale, and deep blue circles hung under her eyes. She hadn’t slept in days, and her ponytail was slightly askew. She had spent days in and out of the hospital. Her dad had taken a turn for the worse, but this wasn’t the first time this had happened, and Ginny didn’t seem phased. Clearly not if she had time to think about...

“Wait? What?” Then I dug my phone out of my pocket, typed, and pulled the phone closer to my face. No way. No fucking way. I spent the last four years assuming Ginny hated men and, by default, liked women. I reread Google’s definition

a fourth time. “Guys, feminism does *not* mean what I thought it meant. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Conroy shook her head and slid back into her chair. “We did, many times.”

I clicked on more links, almost like I was downloading a lifetime of information. I pointed at Andy and said, “He’s being massaginisdick.” But I think I’ve said it wrong when everyone started laughing at me.

“The term is misogynistic, with a y,” Ginny said, laughing like it was the first time she had done it in weeks.

I turned my attention to my writing partner but pointed to Andy. “I don’t know why he hates women. Clearly someone didn’t watch Mr. Rogers, and it shows.” I shooed Andy away with my hands. “Be gone. We don’t need your woman-hating attitude in our little dark corner of the classroom.” Seriously. Feminism and lesbianism... not interchangeable.

Andy hunched his shoulders and walked back to his seat on the other side of the room. Conroy laughed. “Well, that’s it. My career has peaked. We learned a valuable lesson about the importance of safe sex. Jayden finally used Google the right way, and we took Andy down a peg. I’m retiring at the end of this year.” She pointed to the PowerPoint slide behind her. “Now get to work.” Like magic, the class got to work. About five minutes later, the classroom phone rang. Conroy pushed her rollie chair across the floor, stopping inches away from the phone. “Conroy here.” She paused and turned her chair to face the wall.

Her body language changed; her shoulders sank like the weight of ten thousand planets had landed on her. “No, I’ll take care of it.” She hung up the phone. But the mood had shifted again. It wasn’t in my head. Conroy walked to the front of the class and stood in front of Ginny’s desk. “Let’s go for a walk,” she said.

“No,” Ginny said, like the word had the power to bend reality. “No. No. I’m not leaving.” She threw her binder across the room, an explosion of paper scattered on the desks. But that didn’t stop Conroy’s approach. Ginny’s defiant war cries of “no” broke into heaving sobs. “No. They sent me home. They

said he was..." A guttural wail of loss echoed through the room as Conroy placed her hand on Ginny's shoulder.

The class averted their eyes, as if crying was contagious. Everything else in the room seemed more important than the tragedy unfolding in front of them. Kinsley had reached out to touch Ginny, but another wail made her hand stop mid-air and withdraw. I reached Ginny. I kneeled on the floor next to her and pulled her into my arms. She sobbed into my shirt and choked out, "Tell me it's gonna be okay."

I rubbed her back as my voice broke. "I can't do that."

She sobbed again.

"But I can walk with you and stay with you as long as you need." I struggled to lift her to her feet and bore all her weight.

It was fifteen strides from the front of the class to the door. Each step felt like a lifetime. I said, "I wonder what other words I've gotten wrong. Does ambidextrous mean what I think it does?"

Between hiccupped cries, Ginny asked, "What do you think it means?"

I whispered it for her ears only. "Like to have sex with someone named Dexter?"

She made a sound, not quite a laugh, but not a sob either. "No, that's very wrong." By the time we were out the door, she had regained control.

Chapter 9



Ginny

I spent the next few days in a haze, but never alone. Jayden’s mom helped with the funeral arrangements. Kinsley was in planning mode and organized the food and “other things we could deal with later.” I didn’t have a dress, and she helped me with that too. I pulled my hair back into a bun, and a thin coat of lip gloss made me appear presentable.

My dad had the grave plot picked out years ago. The funeral director was shockingly young, in his thirties. He spoke in a constant, quiet tone, which made me wonder if that was his real voice or his work voice. Did he stay that quiet during a

football game? Did he have a constant calming presence whenever he walked into any room? When did he wake up and decide, “Yep, I will only work with dead people so no one steals my lunch... and if someone steals my lunch, then I have bigger problems than being hungry.” I was about to say that aloud to Dad. But the words stopped. There was no one to hear them. I held back a choking sob. Arms wrapped around my shoulders and pulled me in. Jayden hadn’t left my side since we walked out of Conroy’s room together. I spent so much time in his arms in the past week. It was cold and empty when he wasn’t there.

The February sky was gray, with no peeks of blue or sunlight. Maryland weather was schizophrenic. The day before, it had been twenty-two degrees, but now it was a balmy forty. I wished for a more fashionable winter coat, not something that made me feel like a marshmallow.

What the hell was wrong with me? Why was I thinking about such stupid things during the worst day of my life?

One glance to my left, and I knew exactly why. Kinsley looked like she stepped out of a movie. She wore a business dress and a long coat with a white scarf and leather gloves. Davin nearly matched her with a gray wool coat. They were both insanely good-looking and far too polished. And I looked like a sad pink marshmallow in my puffer jacket.

Lots of kids from school stood around the gravesite. Most of Conroy’s class was there. Parents who I’d seen at events back in elementary school gave me hugs before the entire event started. People kept telling me how great my dad was, like I didn’t know. The minister said a few words and read from the Bible, but I couldn’t focus. It’s not like I could read the roadmap of my life, trying to plan out what’s next. I wasn’t overwhelmed with grief or anger. It was nothing. My mind’s eye was blank. Nothing. It was gray, like the sky. I watched the casket get lowered into the grave. Nothing.

More people came over and hugged me. Mrs. Conroy brought her son and husband. I felt like I was meeting celebrities after hearing about them over the years. There were a few people milling around. A wild wind whipped and scattered the stragglers. Good. They weren’t loyal anyway.

Andy ran to the sanctuary of his car. Some guys from the football team hung around to put the chairs away. Kinsley and Davin walked over with their fingers interlocked. It was like they couldn't go seconds without physical contact.

"We'll be over at your house in a little while," Kinsley started and turned her head to glance at Davin.

He pressed his lips to the crown of her head. Yeah, I didn't need to hear about their booty call fifteen minutes after I buried my father. Davin pointed to the other end of the graveyard, past a giant oak tree. "I'm taking Kinsley to meet my brother."

Oh shit.

Not a booty call.

She wasn't holding his hand because she wanted PDA. She stabilized him, keeping him from shaking. Now I was an asshole. Awesome. I couldn't even have one day where my self-pity was justified without mentally snapping at someone and then calling myself an idiot. Yep, this was the groundwork for the next forty years of therapy.

People filled my house. Some kids from school stood in the corner, talking, laughing, and having the luxury of being kids.

They didn't know how good they had it. "Youth is a gift squandered on the young," my dad used to say.

My chest tightened at the thought.

I thanked people on my way from the living room to the kitchen. Money was collected, and my counters overflowed with food I would never eat. Green bean casserole and various types of chili were in crock pots. I hoped whoever brought them knew which one was theirs because I stopped paying attention about ten minutes into the wake.

Ugh. Why was it called a wake? All I wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep.

Dishes filled my sink, and the trash overflowed with paper plates and cups. It would be a nightmare to clean up. And

I would have to do it on my own. Everything would be on me now.

A couple of people who used to work with my dad came over, said their goodbyes, and handed me an envelope. Mostly, I noticed that as soon as someone handed me one, there was a glimmer of relief in their eyes. Like they had done their good deed for the day and were waiting to go home.

When did *I* get to leave this party and go home? I was in my house, but I might never be home again.

A hand brushed against my back. I half expected to see Jayden there, but a much taller and darker figure stood behind me. “Do you want this to be over?” Davin asked.

“More than anything.”

He tucked me under his arm in a hug and smiled. “Everyone’s grief is different. You’re not alone unless you want to be, okay?”

“Do you mean that literally, figuratively, or emotionally?”

“Whatever you need.”

I dipped my head and looked at his shoes. Damn, he had grown-up shoes. Did everyone grow up but me? “I want everyone to leave so I can go to bed.”

“Done.” He took his hand off my shoulder, juttied his chin in a vague direction behind me, then made a circular motion with his finger. Mrs. Conroy popped out of nowhere with a box filled with plastic containers and dropped it in the only remaining space on the counter.

Then I saw a blonde blur walk into the center of the living room. Kinsley brought her fingers to her lips, and a crowd-controlling whistle bounced off all the walls at once. Conroy stood next to her.

It was mom-mode perfection. “Okay, if you brought something, pack it in a container. Take half for yourself and leave half for Ginny. Label it and stack it on the counter. If your name starts with a vowel, help with the dishes. If your name starts with a consonant, leave this house better than you found

it. Ginny thanks you for coming and appreciates your love and support during this trying time. Thank you.”

She clapped her hands, and people sort of paused what they were doing. Mrs. Conroy cleared her throat and raised an eyebrow. “Do I need to repeat myself?” She said in that menacing teacher tone that was both terrifying and effective.

Thirty minutes later, the house was empty of all the people who felt they needed to be there out of obligation. Only Kinsley, Davin, and Jayden stayed.

The house really looked better than how it started, and the dishes were cleaned and stacked. A few guys said they would be by tomorrow to fix the window sealing and other things. I didn’t know what was wrong with the house, but they seemed to do a full damage and repair report.

Kinsley and Davin looked at the stacks of food containers. She clapped her hands. “Time to play freezer Tetris.”

I pointed upstairs. “Um, I’m going to take a shower and go to bed. Thank you guys for everything.” As I walked to my room, I became acutely aware of the quiet. The constant hum of the pity-givers and the help had been the heartbeat of the house. But now, it was only my footsteps. The numbness of the fade shredded its protective armor, and it left me with nothing to protect me from all the emotions hitting at once.

I was alone.

Forever.

Because that’s what I asked for.

I wasn’t sure how I ended up in the shower, but I wept as the water erased any evidence of tears. Crying until the hot water turned cool, I got dressed on autopilot in the dirty pajamas from the tile floor. My soaked hair carved a river down my back, and I trudged back to my room.

I noticed feet. Black socks and black pants. Male.

For obvious reasons, it couldn’t be my dad. He lost his legs years ago. Oh, right, and the other reason.

“Ginny?” Jayden’s voice cut through my confusion. He grabbed a towel off my floor and wrapped it around my hair,

squeezing out the extra water. “You’re shivering.”

Was I? I hadn’t noticed.

He dried my hair more thoroughly. It wasn’t until his stable arms wrapped around my waist that I noticed how much I shook. He ushered me to the bed and lifted the blanket. I reached for him. Pulling him into the blanket with me. He said nothing but held me, my back pressed against his stomach like a sponge trying to soak in all his warmth.

“Kinsley and Davin left,” he whispered. “And my mom said I could stay as long as you needed me.”

“How long will that be?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one that gets to make that choice.” He pulled me closer, maybe testing how much I would let him touch me. But we were friends. Friend zone only. He would leave like everyone else, wouldn’t he? How much time did we really have?

“Will you stay the night?”

His breathing changed, and his chest rose and fell against my spine. “If that’s what you want.”

“I do.”

The idea of nothingness, isolation, and silence was too much. I listened to his breathing because it wasn’t mine. His warmth was all that kept me from freezing to death. He nuzzled me closer, his breath on the sensitive skin on my neck. No one had ever touched me there; it was intimate and not friendly.

Like... more.

Jayden’s hand wrapped around my stomach, brushing against the exposed skin thanks to my tank top riding up my body.

His fingers stroked my stomach again, like he wasn’t sure he’d done it the first time. Then he froze. He stopped, like I’d caught him in some crime. Was touching me what made him a criminal?

But he didn’t pull his fingers away; they remained, like an animal caught in the eyes of a hunter. Waiting for some sort

of clue about what to do next. Should I stop him? Scold him? Kick him out? No, he was all I had, and I liked the way he touched me.

Burying my dad was hard and terrifying. But reaching for Jayden's hand to place it back on my skin somehow felt dangerous. Like I was playing with a fire that water would never quench. Only embarrassment and shame could crush that fire into embers.

Pressing his hand against my stomach, I whispered, "I like that." Would it be selfish if I wanted more? More touching, more fire, and more ice.

His voice was soft, like a midnight promise. "Do you like anything else?"

"The way your breath feels on my skin, and the fact that you're in my bed. That you've taken care of me this whole time." I twisted in his arms until my back was flush against the mattress, and he looked at me. "I want more."

More was vague. And that's also what I wanted. Nothing solid or defined. Something to distract me from this horrible new world I lived in. He pushed my hair off the side of my face and placed his fingertips on my cheek. "How much more?" His voice had an ache I'd never heard. It was dark and rich, and it made my stomach tingle.

"As much as you are willing to give me," I answered.

"I'll give you everything you want and need. Just ask, and I'll do it." The next few minutes were a hormone-induced haze of hands and lips and a late-night fantasy coming half-true. It was the first of many things, except sex. He stopped before it got too physical, and we blew past a point we could never return from. No. Instead, he held me for the rest of the night, but when I woke up, I was alone in an empty house.

Like I would be for the rest of my life.

Chapter 10



Jayden

The next morning, I found Davin in the cafeteria with his head buried in his sketchbook. I sat next to him and muttered the words that ate me from the inside out. “I hooked up with Ginny.”

Davin paused, lifted his head, dropped his pencil, and laced his fingers together. “You what?”

“I hooked up with Ginny.”

“What? When?” Davin started.

“Um, last night.”

Davin rubbed his temples with his fingers. “You hooked up with the girl that you’ve been in love with since before you had pubes? You waited until the day she buried her father? Her father, who had been battling cancer and losing various parts of his body for the last four years? You thought that was the time to touch her tits?”

“She said she wanted to feel something. Other than sadness.”

Davin’s eyes flashed with an anger I hadn’t seen in years. But then he took a breath and regrouped. “Then show her a video of pandas falling over. This is not the time to try to get your dick wet.”

“Yeah, no. Well, we didn’t go that far. I wanted her to feel something that wasn’t horrible.”

“Well, what are you going to do?” Davin asked.

I pause for a moment, glancing around the cafeteria. “Um, nothing.”

“Nothing? Your plan is nothing?”

“Yep. That’s my plan.” I moved my hand in a straight line, cutting through the air. “Absolutely nothing. Stay the course. She’s in charge. If she wants to take this further, awesome. If she doesn’t, that’s fine too. All right. There we go. We are all good. I will do it. Nothing.”

Kinsley draped her fingers across Davin’s back. “You’ll do nothing about what?”

“Uh, Ginny,” I said.

“No, she needs things. Right? We started a GoFundMe and she got some money at the service. That’ll last her for about two months, but she doesn’t have enough to keep the house and pay all the medical bills and all the other things. And she’s four months away from graduating high school. Has she even gotten out of bed today?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea what to do. This is all out of my wheelhouse.” I thumped my head onto the table.

“Well, of course, it’s out of your wheelhouse, but use common sense. Make a list. Check it off.”

Of course, Kinsley had the most rational explanation of all time. Like, it was obvious or something. Um, yeah, lacrosse starts up soon, so I need to get working on that too. I left with nothing solved.

It had been three weeks since Ginny came to school. Three weeks after her dad had passed away.

I checked on her every day. She still had a frozen feast. And she was often sending me home with all of her leftovers. There was only so long before the edible arrangements would start to mold and ferment. She had joked about making pineapple wine from the flower-shaped fruit she had lying around the house.

“So, are you gonna come back to school?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” Ginny said unconvincingly. “I mean, I don’t see the point. School seems so trivial. There are other things I could be doing.”

“But what are you doing?” I asked.

“Right now, my bed is the greatest place on the planet.” She tilted her head upward like she wanted to be there now. With me? Alone? I wasn’t sure, but I wasn’t going to step on that landmine again.

Besides, we had other things to discuss. I hashed out a plan a few days ago, but waited until it was guaranteed. “Listen, Davin’s uncle Carlos runs a gym. And they need someone to work at the front desk. Basic managerial stuff, payroll, organizing, class scheduling, checking clients in and out, that sort of stuff. There’s a good possibility for potential career options. But the stipulation is that you graduate from high school. He’s willing to take a chance on you since there are only a few months left. Interested?”

She frowned until I showed her the salary. Her eyes widened, and the first smile appeared on her lips in weeks. “Pick me up tomorrow,” she said.

Chapter 11



Ginny

My life had a trench in it, and I lived at the bottom as dirt fell on my head and buried me alive. I knew this would be hard. I mean, I sort of planned for it. But the way the world kept moving on was so strange.

I returned to school in time for the Battle of the Bands. Jayden picked me up. He looked good in a black tee shirt and jeans. He normally wore jerseys or hoodies. But it was one of those freakishly warm spring nights that made you think winter was finally over.

I tried to look good tonight, and by tried, I mean I put work into it. I braided my hair and put on a push-up bra and cute leggings. The whole nine yards. My effort paid off when Jayden scanned my body...like he liked it.

Ugh, two months away from graduation, and I sounded like a fucking fourth grader.

He rubbed his chin, dragging his hand across his cheek. "Looking good." He gave me a little wink.

Who knew I might like being objectified?

We never talked about our hookup. Maybe because he was too ashamed, or maybe because I was bad at it. Probably the latter. Either way, being in the friend zone was the safe and familiar space I needed. It was like he was actively staying away from me while still being in my general proximity. I guess I didn't mind. A real relationship would've made it all weird, anyway.

Saying nothing, he opened the passenger door for me. He learned that trick from Davin. Kinsley never opened car doors. Her man always opened her door first and snuck another chance to kiss her. He said it was because his car was old and didn't have power locks.

No, I think he wanted to touch Kinsley again.

I'd never seen anyone look at someone how Kinsley and Davin looked at each other.

Jayden talked about the lacrosse team and how he'd pushed for a hard step away from the bro mentality. He didn't talk about it, but I know Todd Richardson's party fucked him up.

He didn't get much pushback, but there had been a few guys who didn't really agree.

We pulled into the school parking lot and headed towards the building where everyone hung out. Already tiny groups had popped up.

"I'll meet you inside," Jayden said as he pulled away, but his fingers dragged across my back.

I joined Reina and Casey on the other side of the lawn. Reina waved to me but stopped as her eyes bulged. “Holy shit!”

The entire crowd buzzed and whispered as glances floated from group to group. Kinsley entered like a celebrity with paparazzi behind her, looking like a piece of perfect arm candy for a rock legend.

Look, I have to remind myself I’m not jealous of Kinsley, but God wasn’t exactly fair when doling out traits. I mean, come on.

She’s drop-dead gorgeous with that long blond hair and curves that aren’t photoshopped, but did she have to be smart and nice? She’s working with a stacked deck, and all I have is a pair of fours and a reverse UNO card.

Kinsley walked over to Jayden, who called out to her. I couldn’t hear their conversation. He rubbed the back of his neck and turned his head to the side, like he was trying not to look at the sun.

Some freshmen kid stepped into their conversation, all faux swagger. Kinsley threw her head back and laughed—big, ugly laughs that rattled through the quad. She turned away and sashayed toward us.

“I mean, the audacity of some,” she said.

“What did that freshman say?”

“He asked if I wanted to sit on his face.” Instead of being completely horrified, she laughed it off. This kid was an ant among butterflies, too low to the ground to even be considered. I didn’t feel bad for him, especially when Jayden reamed him out. Again, I couldn’t tell what he said, but the way his whole body tightened as he got into the kid’s face. Yeah, he was pissed.

Ten minutes later, I sat next to Reina when Jayden pushed through a bunch of people to take the empty seat next to me.

I leaned over to him. “Call me crazy, but I think Kinsley and Davin are having sex tonight.”

He laughed, “I’m pretty sure they have a spreadsheet of positions and a sex budget.”

“Jesus, how much money could be in a sex budget? How much could condoms possibly cost?”

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s just...” He shook his head. “You know what, never mind.”

His cheeks turned pink, and even his ears turned a bright red. He pulled out his cell phone and played a game until the show started.

It was fucking torture, possibly even a war crime.

But the entire night changed when a shirtless Davin stepped on the stage. HOLY SHIT.

I knew Davin worked out, but I didn’t know how much. His chest was defined, and his six-pack tensed when he played. I also didn’t know he had a tattoo, either.

Davin was hot, like mythologically hot. Holy shit. He and Kinsley together. Their sex budget had to be in the billions. How did either of them get any work done?

The other obvious statement was that he won. Kinsley had a look of lustful gratitude on her face. As we stood to leave, she said she was going backstage.

Leaving an auditorium was always such a nightmare. It was a slow process, with bodies smooshing into each other. It’s not for the faint of heart. Jayden grabbed my hand and led me through the pack. It was only when we pushed out of the hallway like we were leaving a birth canal that I noticed the scuffle behind us. Whatever happened, Kinsley stormed off, wearing her rage like a cape.

Jayden still held my hand as we headed out the front door. For a second, it felt right—sort of perfect—like the rest of the world had melted away and it was only us. But then one of his lacrosse bros called him, and he released my fingers.

I stood there in the middle of the hallway, unsure of where to go. Should I walk with Jayden, go find Reina and Casey, or try to track down Kinsley?

Two girls whispered behind me; I wasn't sure who they were. They were the epitome of average girls, with no defining features other than basic Pick Me's. "We're so sorry to hear about your dad."

"Um, thanks?" I said. Yeah, I didn't know these girls. Never saw them until today, yet somehow they knew about my most personal and horrific moment.

That's it. This was my new identity. I was the girl with the dead dad.

My shoulders hunched as I shuffled to the parking lot. Around me, the crowd buzzed. The energy shifted as some freshman lacrosse player came out cursing and yelling. He rotated his shoulder, and the side of his face wore a red blemish. He had the puffed-up angry energy of a chihuahua, and nothing about those dogs should exist.

Like a magnet drawn to him, I walked toward Jayden and his team. But then the words, "That's the fucking cunt who jacked my arm," rang out from the angry chihuahua guy. It took me a second to register that he was the same kid who graphically solicited Kingsley.

But as fast as my brain clicked, the kid was on the ground, with Davin hulking over him. It had been so long since I'd seen this side of him that I forgot all about it. Back when Davin was younger, he was a giant ball of anger. He was always nice to me, but I also knew to avoid him when his face was ten shades of red. Now his fist hovered over this freshman chihuahua. Hulk versus the dog nature never intended.

"What the fuck did you say?" Davin screamed in the guy's face.

Jayden broke ranks from his group and rushed between me and the melee on the ground. But it was the constant calm of the goddess Kingsley that could soothe the beast, Davin.

"Baby, if you hit him, it's gonna take longer than fourteen minutes to get home." Then she vaguely motioned to the guy. "And I already took care of it, look at his arm."

This seemed to calm him, even more so when she explained she learned her self-defense skills from Davin's uncle.

Jayden exhaled as Davin loosened his grip on the kid's shirt. "Keaton, you're damn lucky his girlfriend is the rational one."

Of course, Jayden was quick to compliment Kinsley. He always did. The chihuahua kid named Keaton snapped back, "I'm gonna tell my mom what you did, you bitch."

Jesus Christ, just take the loss and go home. But like a true demon rat-dog, he had to get the last word in. Or at least he thought he was. Clearly, he had never gone toe-to-toe with Kinsley.

She snapped back, "What? You're gonna tell mommy I almost broke your wrist because you tried to finger me in a crowd while grabbing my ass?"

The change in the air was instant.

This wasn't some misunderstanding; this was a fucking sexual assault. I thought Davin would've strangled the kid right there, but he didn't. The change in Jayden had been subtle. Above his eyebrow tensed and his mouth tightened. "He did what?"

Other guys had been holding Davin back, but his blood-chilling screams made it impossible to distinguish every word. Arms swung around like windmills. Bodies scrambled to keep Davin far away from Keaton. But it was like holding back a tidal wave with a sponge.

"You were right behind me; how did I not know?" Jayden's voice had an eerie darkness. Since when was Kinsley his responsibility?

"A few people slipped between us," Kinsley said, turning her attention back to her boyfriend, who was pinned to the ground by the other lacrosse players.

"How many people were between us?" Jayden flexed his hand as everything went rigid.

"Three?"

Then Jayden snapped. He dropped to his knees, so he was next to Davin's face. "Hey, Allister."

“Don’t call me that.” Davin tried to shake his way out of the grips of the players.

But Jayden stayed quiet. “Get up, get your woman, and fuck each other stupid until your IQ drops to the same as the rest of us normies.”

Everything about this statement made my stomach drop. But worse was when Jayden took four quick steps and slammed himself against Keaton’s body. Waves of nausea struck me. I wanted to scream out, but the words were damned in my throat.

My Jayden yelled, “How far would you have gone if she didn’t know how to defend herself?”

And in that instant, I knew he was never *my Jayden*. He had been harboring some crush on Kinsley all these years. Of course, it made sense. She was everything I wasn’t. It hurt in ways I didn’t know I could hurt. I thought after losing my dad, I would have nothing else to lose. Yet I lost what I never had. Jayden.

Somewhere in my mind, I knew Davin had left. The sound of Jayden’s fist on Keaton’s jaw didn’t wake me from my mental stupor. It was the way Keaton cried when the third punch made its impact.

Jayden stood like a towering mountain over the kid, who curled on his side with his knees tucked into his chest. “No one helps him up.”

Jayden’s voice sounded too alien and harsh. But the rest of the team did exactly what he told them. He shook his fist like he tried to shake away the pain and rolled back his shoulders.

He turned to me and said, “You ready?”

I’m not sure why I nodded or why I even left with him. This was a side of him I’d never seen. If he had a thing for Kinsley, did I even know him at all?

Chapter 12



Jayden

Ginny was pissed at me. When I texted her, I only got one-word answers or a thumbs-up emoji, which was never good. When I picked her up for school, she stared out the passenger window the entire ride.

“How’s the new job at the gym going?”

“Fine.”

“I took a few classes there between seasons.”

“Well, that explains it,” she said with a frown and leaned her head against the window.

Red flag—warning, warning, warning. I shouldn't ask for the follow-up. Leave it alone. That was the safest option. And I didn't take it. "Explains what?"

She huffed. "That whole tough guy thing a few days ago. You took two classes, and now you think you are some type of superhero."

"I'm Batman."

Her lip curled slightly as she crossed her arms. "I'm the one with the tragic backstory."

"And my guinea pig died in third grade. That forever shaped my view that the world is an evil and cruel place."

The second corner of her lip curled, and I was rewarded with a smile. A win is a win.

We joined the power couple of the century at our usual table in the cafeteria before school started. I reached across the table and grabbed one stack of notecards from in front of Kinsley. We both had AP tests to study for and now was as good a time as any.

"Hey, do you know when course selection starts at Tennent?" I read the card and flipped it over. Wrong. I stuck it to my left. Picking up the next card, I smiled and got it right. Pile on the right.

Kinsley sucked on her iced coffee straw. "Don't know. I'll ask my dad."

College seemed to be a sticking point with Kinsley since she didn't get into Los Angeles Business School like she had hoped. I guess hanging around here wasn't exactly her dream, and she sort of bristled every time we brought it up. "So, Casey's not going, right?"

Kinsley slammed the notecard on the table. "No, she's chosen to be a makeup influencer instead."

Ginny sat cross-legged in the chair, her top leg swinging back and forth. "Oh right. So, unless you go to college, that's the only way you have worth?"

Kinsley put the cards down. "No, but I spent the last three years busting my ass to help her get a scholarship, and it

was a waste of time.”

“You spent years trying to get me one too, but I’m not going to college. Am I a waste of time?” Ginny snapped with venom. If Kinsley felt hurt, she didn’t show it.

“You’re different,” she said, picking up the cards again. Another presence stepped towards our table, and the tension shifted. The piece of shit, Keaton, stood behind Kinsley. My hands clenched into fists and heat pumped up my spine. He cleared his throat, and everyone paused what they were doing, glanced up, and then returned to their cellphones and flash cards.

“Excuse me,” he said, his hands deep in his pocket, looking pathetic and as harmless as possible. “I would like to apologize to Kinsley for my inappropriate actions.” He swallowed his shame.

I kept going through the flashcards. “Why? Is it because you realized that your actions have consequences?” Another card in the right pile. “Is it because you found out that Graeloch can kick your ass eighteen different ways? Or that Kinsley probably is one phone call away from having the bank foreclose on your parents’ house?” I shook my head in disgust. “No, or maybe I have you riding the bench for the rest of the season.” Keaton’s sorrow turned to frustration as his lips pinched tight.

“Whatever, I’m sorry.”

Kinsley took one long sip from her iced coffee, slurping it loudly. She said, “I’m glad you’re sorry. Learn your lesson now, don’t be a sexual predator.” She waved him away. “Shoo, shoo.”

He stormed off in a huff, not getting the reaction he had expected.

How the hell could she be so nonchalant about this? I lifted the card from the pile. Yep, I didn’t know it and put it to the side.

Ginny turned to me and said, “Well, since you’re both going to Tennent, you can run off and be with Kinsley since you’re so in love with her.”

I jumped back in my seat like the words had smacked me in the face. “What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

Ginny threw her hands in the air. “Oh, come on, you were drooling over her all night at the Battle of the Bands. You took a couple of classes at the MMA gym, and now you think you’re a badass and ran to her rescue.”

Jesus, was that why she was mad?

I deflated and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Everyone with eyes knows she’s beautiful. I’m not in love with her,” I mumbled. “She scares me.”

“Sure, you are. You both have a ton in common, and you’re going to the same college. Davin’s going to art school that’s an hour away. They’re going to break up. It’s a matter of time.”

All color drained from Davin’s face, like these words had manifested his darkest fears.

I made excuses for Ginny all year when she snapped like this. She’s having a rough time. She’s stressed. Cut her a break. But now she attacked the two people who had her back.

Davin had gotten Ginny a job, and Kinsley had been pulling some invisible strings somewhere. But her attack continued: “I’m not special and beautiful like Kinsley. I’m different. You went all white knight for her twice now, and you’re giving me rides to school out of a sense of nobility.”

I didn’t get mad at Ginny, like, ever. Not even when she cut me out of her life. But she was lashing out, accusing me of things that weren’t true.

My eyebrow twitched, my fingers flexed, and I tried to keep my voice even. “I got a scholarship to Tennent so I could stay home if my mom needed me. My sister moved out in the fall, and I didn’t want my mom to be alone. Besides, going to Tennent makes more financial sense.”

But none of this seemed to be getting through to Ginny. She snapped like a mom who loaded the dishwasher only to find ten more plates around the house. “You punched a kid. Shit,

even Davin could hold back. Clearly, you love her more than he does.”

I slammed my hand on the table, and my neat piles scattered as righteous rage ran through my body. “It could have been you! Three bodies. That’s it. Three bodies between you and a fucking predator.”

My legs burned as I stood up. “I’m a fucking nice guy, but I’m not driving you around out of a sense of nobility or civil duty. I like being around you. And the thought of someone hurting you, that you could’ve ended up like one of the girls at Todd Richardson’s party, is my worst fucking nightmare.”

I pushed my weight off the table and launched myself into the crowd. I needed to get out of there. Shit. How could Ginny ever think I liked Kinsley? Was she that blind? Did she really not see it? How was that even fucking possible?

I’d done everything for her.

She was the one who made it physical. I was fine living in the friend zone. She was the one being weird about it.

I pushed open the bathroom door and put my hands on the cold, wet sink. Water splashed, getting my pants wet. Awesome. I looked like I pissed myself. Perfect start to the day.

“So, you’re trying to steal my girlfriend?”

“No, I don’t have enough money for her sex budget,” I said, bracing my weight against the sink, counting all the questionable stains. “Or the Excel skills to manage the spreadsheet.”

Davin leaned against the paper towel holder. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He pulled out his phone, and a second later, it buzzed. “Holy shit, she did create a spreadsheet, and we have a weekly budget.”

“Told ya,” I said.

“Damn, it’s even color coded. My woman sure loves a good spreadsheet.”

I smiled despite my shitty mood. Davin and Kinsley were devoted to each other. There’s no universe where I could

split them up. “Sorry about all that.” I waved my hand vaguely towards the door.

“I get it. Ginny’s scared, confused, and she’s lashing out. If anyone can take it, it’s Kinsley.” He added under his breath, “Hopefully, I won’t be spending my evening digging a ten-foot hole either.”

Ten feet? Really? Did Kinsley even have a plan for ditching a body? Should I be worried about Ginny’s safety more so than I already am? “I don’t understand what else I need to do.”

Davin shrugged. “There’s nothing you can do. She’s the one who needs to figure it all out. She cares; she wouldn’t have gotten jealous if she didn’t, as misguided as it was.”

The toilet flushed, and a guy walked over to wash his hands. “Bro, your girl wrote a sex spreadsheet?” He was a basketball player on the JV team. “How is it color coded?”

Davin scrolled through his phone. “Um, it’s colored by kink, position, location, and possible equipment needed.”

“Jesus.” I slapped my forehead. Seriously, how was anything about Davin’s life fair?

Chapter 13



Ginny

In one minute, I offended Jayden and Kinsley. I jumped to an insane conclusion. And it was like jumping head first out of a plane flying over the Alps on a hang glider with a broken wing. But she was an easy apology. I sent her a GIF of a sad goat, and she forgave me. As friend crimes go, this one was an easy one to get over because it stroked Kinsley's ego.

Jayden... well, that was a different matter.

I hung around school after his lacrosse practice, at first in the media center and then later at the soda machines,

wandering through the silent hallways, my footsteps echoing. After beating a few levels of the games on my phone, I finally headed out toward his car. Should I sit on the hood or lean against the trunk instead? Nope, my best bet was the driver's side door, because there was no way he could avoid talking to me if I stood there.

One by one, the lacrosse team came rolling out of the gym, punching shoulders, and pulling each other's backpacks. Jayden was the last to come out.

He saw me and his head dipped, and he kicked a rock along the way.

Take a deep breath. You can do this. I wiggled my fingers. "Hey."

He opened the trunk of his car, dropping his gear and his backpack in before slamming it shut. He walked toward the driver's side of the door. "I'm assuming you need a ride," he said flatly.

I hated this. I hated when he was annoyed. Jayden was always so cute and happy and endearing and a giant warm ball of marshmallow fluff. But when he was mad—when he was disappointed—it was like frozen marshmallow fluff, sharp and pointy, and could break your teeth.

"Well, I needed a ride, but I also wanted to talk to you."

He nudged me out of the way and pointed with his chin. "I'll take you home."

I headed over to the passenger side, opened my door, and slid in. As soon as he turned on the car, a deep bass rattled the seats.

He didn't talk until we got to the stop sign at the end of the parking lot. "Well?" he said.

"I'm very sorry. I jumped to conclusions, and it wasn't fair. You've been nothing but wonderful and nice to me, and I shouldn't have accused you of liking Kinsley. That was uncool."

"I don't know in what delusional world you thought I had feelings for Kinsley. I mean, come on."

I felt so small in the car and twisted my fingers around in knots. After having all day to find the perfect words, I still had nothing. I was so confused with my feelings, with my life, and with everything spiraling out of control, I didn't want to lose the one thing I knew I could count on. Him. "I'm sorry. I don't know how much more you want from me."

His jaw tightened as his focus stayed straight ahead on the road. "Yeah, that's just it. You don't know what I want from you. Or rather, you don't know what you want from me."

"I know I want you in my life. Beyond that, I don't know."

Jayden said nothing but turned up the radio, and we drove in silence. It had almost become a habit, his driving me home, but today it was different. The grass woke from its hibernation spots of green and started to rise from the yellow hues. The trash cans were exactly where I left them, but there was something different. Something new. There was a note on the door.

Dread, that wasn't the right word...

Impending doom was slightly closer. It was like watching my entire future shatter all around me: FORECLOSURE NOTICE.

No.

Jayden jumped out of the car and ripped the note off the house. Has anyone else seen this? The last thing I needed were more neighbors whispering, "So sad" or "Pathetic Ginny." Everyone felt bad for me. Another public humiliation.

This paper announced to the world I would be homeless. My legs trembled, and Jayden caught me before my knees hit the concrete porch.

He wrapped his arm around me. "Come on. Let's go in." They hadn't changed the locks on the doors yet, but I didn't know how much time I had. "What happened, Ginny?"

I sighed. "I made a choice. Either electricity, water, and food, or the mortgage. My dad's burial was way more than I anticipated. I don't think my dad paid the mortgage last few

months he was alive. I guess toward the end he assumed I started managing that because I paid the other bills. Just one more fucking thing in my giant, colossal ball of fuckups.”

“Go upstairs. Pack your stuff,” Jayden ordered. He pointed as if I needed directions to my room, but he already had his phone to his ear. “I’ll call my mom.”

He was on the phone while I stomped upstairs. I looked around my room. This wasn’t my room anymore. This was never going to be my room again. I shouldn’t even be here now. Where was I going to go tonight? What about tomorrow?

My brain froze, and I was unable to think for the next couple of seconds. That’s what it had felt like for months. My brain was constantly frozen, and when it started to move, it was like walking through pudding and frozen mud.

Toothpaste, toothbrush, hair stuff, the necessities and a bunch of hoodies and shorts and whatever else I could find went in a suitcase. I also grabbed my stuffed lobster Dad won for me when I was six and a few pictures.

Mrs. Trudge had come over many times over the last couple of months, but today she looked different. She was in a completely different mode. Not comforting Mom mode, but real estate agent extraordinaire. She glanced around and looked me directly in the eyes. “Okay. I’m going to make some calls and see what I can do, but, Ginny, I need to see all the paperwork to get this worked out.”

A few minutes later, more people showed up. Adults in fancy suits ignored me as they read through any papers I could find. They shouted at the banks. I sat there on the couch, invisible. Jayden came over and held my hand.

“It’s okay to ask for help.”

“I have a feeling you’re going to give it even if I don’t ask for it,” I said.

Jayden huffed. “Yeah, yeah. That’s exactly what’s going to happen. Listen. I can call Kinsley and see if she’s got a spare bedroom. I don’t think Casey does, and as far as I know, Reina’s house is pretty full. But my sister moved out a couple of months ago. Her bedroom’s empty. You can stay with us.”

What? Stay with us? The words didn't make sense, and yet they kind of did. But the implications were so much more. "I can live with you?"

"Yeah, we're going to have to share a bathroom, but you'll have your own room and I'll have mine. It's not a big deal. You can work out with my mom what you want to do for rent. You'll have your own space. Mom will be there to help you with the foreclosure of the house and anything else that you need. You're not alone anymore."

I'd never really felt alone. I mean, my dad's presence had always been in the room. When I was in school, I was around people. At work, all the gym rats went out of their way to make me laugh. But I never really felt alone until now. And yet, I wasn't.

There was Jayden, holding my hand and rubbing my knuckles with his thumb. He'd been my rock this whole time, and he made sure that I was never alone.

Oh no!

All the feelings came rushing in. It was like a broken dam being held together with a piece of Scotch tape. The years and years of him standing by the sidelines, watching me from a distance. I watched him flirt with all the adorable girls swooning over him, shaking their boobs while laughing, but his eyes would cast towards mine. While I never belonged in his world, he always seemed to invite me in.

What was I going to do?

Chapter 14



Jayden

The rush of water hitting her naked body in the room next to me pounded against my eardrums. Knowing the scents wafting from under the door came from the soap she'd lathered and rubbed all over herself in all the places I'd dreamed of touching...

This was a bad idea.

No.

No, it wasn't.

This was the right choice, the only choice. I was pissed at myself for not thinking about it sooner. I knew she couldn't handle living in that house alone. I knew logically the bills were piling up. There was no way twenty hours a week working the front desk at the gym would be enough to hold it all together. I was disillusioned to think so.

But now she was here. Six feet away. Our bedrooms are right across the hall from each other. Privacy, space, and a friendly face. That's what she needed, right? She has a home, food, electricity, and everything else she needs for basic survival.

This was the right thing.

The shower stopped, followed by the rush of water crashed against the tub as she squeezed her hair. Her feet squeaked against the wet tile. Maybe she grabbed a towel. Was she the kind of person who stepped out of the tub to dry off and got water everywhere, like my sister? Or did she dry off in the tub like a rational human being?

God, stop thinking about her being naked.

I turned on the music, grabbed a controller, and sat on the floor. I was three cars away from winning a race in the back streets of some town in Mexico when I heard her knock.

"Come in."

She opened the door. Her hair was still wet, a dark red, almost brown. She wore a white tee shirt, soft gray pajama shorts, and no bra. Of course not; it was bedtime. Why would she?

"I've never seen your room," she said, standing in the doorway.

Taking a second to look around, I relaxed, seeing all my laundry was in a pile near the closet. A few Cheetos bags were on my desk, along with a couple of Ansel Adams prints, because I didn't want Star Wars posters on my walls when I was old enough to drive. I painted everything navy blue, and the room screamed "male," like I'd been overcompensating for being the only guy in the house.

My sister's room was a light sage green because it was peaceful or some new age shit. There was probably weed still in the floorboards if Ginny ever wanted to go on a treasure hunt.

“Is that Race and Rocket?” She walked in, and I got a whiff of her fruity shampoo as she passed me and rushed over to the guinea pigs. I scrambled to my feet and reached for the plastic container that held their food. “Do they make a lot of noise?”

“Only when I'm trying to sleep.” I slid off the lid and dropped some pellets into their bowl. “I normally sleep with music, so I can drown them out. Is that going to be a problem?”

She shrugged, and a water droplet dripped from her hair onto my floor. “I think it depends on the song,”

“Any requests?”

“Got any Amanda Chase songs?”

I squished my nose. “No, sorry. I could play Davin's music.”

“No, it's weird to listen to his stuff. It's too personal. We know who all the songs are about.” She watched Race wiggle his nose and squeak at her. “Can I hold him?”

Race jumped on Rocket's back as he ran to the other side of the cage to escape my hand. He cried like the melodramatic creature he was as I lifted him out of the cage. He adjusted in my hand and settled down as my index finger petted the top of his head. Ginny opened her hands, ready to accept the brown and white squeaky little devil. She flinched as he clawed her fingers, but it was probably more in surprise than pain. I knew those tiny paws well.

She brought him to her face and rubbed him on her cheek. “Why guinea pigs?”

“My mom didn't want a pet that needed to be walked, and my sister is allergic to cats.”

“I had suicidal hamsters growing up. One crawled to the top of its wheel and jumped to its death.”

“Jesus.”

“I thought it was best to stop getting hamsters after that. It was safer for the entire population.” She continued to pet Race. “Any other animals I should know about?”

I thought about it for a second. “The neighbor has a dog named Rusty that howls every morning at seven, so if the alarm doesn’t get you up, Rusty will. And there’s Chunkers the Fifth, His Royal Highness of the Trash Heap. He’s a massive raccoon that lives in our backyard and eats from our trash. A few years ago, I got tired of cleaning the broken trash bags, so we started feeding him cat food in the backyard. He waddles out there at night. If we don’t feed him or we forget, he comes to the back door and stares at us until we feed him.”

She put Race back into his cage and said with a sad sigh, “It sounds like you have a habit of saving strays.”

My heart stopped. “Is that what you feel like, some animal I took pity on?”

She latched the hook and locked the cage. “I’m at a level of pathetic not often seen around here. I mean, what else would I be?”

“You’re amazing, funny, sweet. You’ve had insurmountable challenges and handled them with grace and dignity. Pathetic isn’t a word I would ever use.”

She groaned and wrapped her arms around her chest. “You can’t do that.” She headed a few steps toward her room.

“I can’t do what?”

Ginny rested her head against my door. “You can’t be that sweet to me.”

“What? Why?” I was finally working up the courage to talk to her—to tell her exactly what had been swirling around my head for over a decade.

“I live here now. What if I started to have feelings for you? What if we start dating?”

My heart did seven flips, and I wanted to scream, “Yes, that’s exactly what I want.”

“And?”

“You’re going to college in a few months, and I’m staying back here. What happens if you meet someone cooler and prettier and who isn’t a hot mess? Someone who has their shit together. What if she’s better for you than I will ever be?” She opened her bedroom door and stepped in. “What if we broke up? Then where will I go? I’d be trapped here, listening to you hook up with Ms. Perfect across the hall.”

No, that would never happen. There was no one else for me. I tried, and I spent the time wishing she was you. Say it. Tell her. But I didn’t. The words died in my mouth.

“If I live here, we need rules and boundaries. Because if we don’t, I’ll fall in love with you, and it could ruin both our lives.” She closed the door behind her.

The sound echoed around the hallway. Like she had slammed the door on all my dreams.

It was a complete one-eighty. Did she like me? Did she love me?

It was like the hallway carpet was made of lava, and I didn’t want to cross it. But I needed to. I jumped to my feet and let them burn as I stood in front of her door. “I would never do that to you.”

Her voice sounded muffled and strained—the same ache I heard so many other times. “I know.” The door lock clicked. “That’s exactly the problem. You would stay with me no matter what. You would be with me out of a sense of obligation. There’s no way I could ever be with you without assuming it’s because you’re being a nice guy, forcing yourself to be with me.”

I wanted to scream that she was insane. That I would walk through fire for her.

And she thought that was exactly the problem.

If she lived here, then we shouldn’t be together. “Can we still be friends?”

But she didn’t answer.

I turned around and slammed my door behind me. Flopping on my bed, I smothered my head with a pillow.

Chapter 15



Ginny

What the hell was I doing?

Kinsley would say I was managing expectations. I played fair. Everything about this arrangement could end in destruction. I only agreed because I needed a place to stay. I would pay Mrs. Trudge for rent and get myself back on my feet. After graduation, I would pick up more hours, maybe a second job if needed, and work for the next forty-five years until I died sad and alone.

Yep, that was the life path created for me.

It was time to be self-reliant because if I counted on other people, they would leave me. Better not to feel this pain again. Done.

I could hear his music through both of our doors. It sounded like music from a video game soundtrack.

The bed was softer than I expected and the pillow fluffier. The room itself was a little bigger than my own. This was an upgrade from what I was used to. My heart broke. I didn't know we had gone without until I found out what other people had.

I woke to the neighbor's barking dog and the sound of the shower running. Sleeping with wet hair turned my head into a massive, frizzy mess. I attempted to tame it the best I could, but opted for a bun instead. Grabbing my phone and my backpack, I headed into the kitchen. Mrs. Trudge sat at the table with a bunch of paperwork.

"When you get home today, we'll talk about all of this and get you a plan you can work with. Something long-term instead of band-aids. You know."

I heard the thumping of Jayden's feet coming down the stairs. I paused for half a second to see him in a white button-down shirt, a tie, and khaki pants.

"Hi," I said. "You look all fancy."

He didn't seem impressed.

"I always dress formal on game day. You never noticed?" He shook his head, trying not to sound hurt. "Coach wants us to look professional, like the model citizens we're supposed to be when we aren't hitting each other with sticks."

I never made the connection. But today he looked different—yummier. Mature, like a man. A sexy man.

What was wrong with me? One second I'm totally in love with him, and the next I'm telling myself I shouldn't be anywhere near him. For my safety and for my livelihood, I wish my lady bits would figure out what they wanted.

He opened the refrigerator and grabbed a protein drink. "You ready?"

“Yeah, let me go get my bag.”

A couple of minutes later, we were off to school as if it was the most normal thing ever. And sure, he drove me to school every day, but this felt different somehow, yet exactly the same.

When we got to school, Kinsley and Davin were in the middle of some conversation. Kinsley’s head was buried in her laptop as she solved the latest issue with prom, budgets, paying vendors, and all the things that she had to do.

Kinsley slid her phone over to me. “Hey, why don’t you pick one of my dresses, okay?”

I paused. “What are you talking about?”

“Prom,” Kinsley said. “You’re going, right?”

Before I could say yes or no, Davin chimed in. “Oh, fuck yeah, she’s going because I had to stand in front of the entire school and sing for Battle of the Bands, and now I’m stuck doing Bayfest. All because Kinsley wanted to make sure you had the perfect senior year. So yes, you’re going.” His hands crossed his chest, and he thumped his butt in his chair.

Jayden held in a chuckle because Davin’s problems were not remotely close to anyone else’s problems, and he rarely got angry anymore. So, seeing him so upset instantly guilted me into saying, “Yeah sure, I’m going.”

And of course, Kinsley, being Kinsley, already had multiple dresses ready for me to go. She had accessories and shoes. All the things that I could need to make the perfect prom night, all except for the date. Jayden coughed slightly.

“Yeah, we can all go as a group,” Jayden piped in. “Keep it chill.”

I lost before I even started, and of course, Jayden would be my date.

For the next couple of days, I fell into a routine. Wake up. Get dressed. Stare at Jayden as he moved through his home with such comfort and ease. Talk to his mom about more financial stuff that I didn’t understand. Go to school. Do my

homework and then head over to Carlos's gym. Go home, take a shower, and try not to dream about Jayden.

That last one always failed.

History was on repeat as I stood back in Kinsley's bedroom, going through her formal wear. I held a shiny silver one. It looked kind of like a waterfall, but long and elegant, like an icy cascade. Kinsley didn't say which dance she had worn it to, but she frowned like it was some awful memory from the world and a life that she wanted to forget. These dresses were artifacts, relics from that time.

She sat on the edge of her bed, wiggling her toes. "You and Jayden, how's that working out?"

"I feel awful because I keep sending him all these mixed messages. On one hand, I really want to be with him, but on the other, when I sit and do the math, it doesn't make sense."

Kinsley paused and looked up. "Math? Do tell."

I pulled my shirt over my head and tried to shimmy into Kinsley's shiny dress.

"Well okay. An apartment would be two grand a month plus food, furniture, bills, and I have none of that. So, for me to live on my own, it would be at least three grand a month, and that's barely scraping by. And right now, I'm not remotely close to that at Carlos's gym. Living with Jayden seems to be my only logical financial option. Jayden's mom is only charging me a hundred dollars a month for rent. There's no way I could live anywhere else for that. That's impossible. So, if I was to be with Jayden and then suddenly we broke up, I would be financially ruined."

Kinsley huffed and crossed her arms, staring me down with a glare. "So, you're using Jayden as your sugar daddy?"

"What?" I said. "No, that's terrible. I'm not. And that's just it. I don't want to use him. I want to be with him, but it locks us both into a situation I don't see a way out of."

Kinsley shrugged. "I think you're looking at this whole thing all wrong." She lifted her cell phone and flipped through different pictures. "Look, I've known Jayden for a while. We

hung out in the same circle for a couple of years, and he has turned down pretty, top-shelf ladies. And do you know why he's done that?"

"No."

"Because how Davin looks at me is the same way that Jayden looks at you. And if anyone on this planet understands how quick and fleeting life can be, it's you. So why are you holding up what could be your chance for happiness just because you're scared of where you're going to live?"

"Well, what if he's only with me because he feels bad for me?"

"I don't think that's ever been the case, but look, everybody has their own hang-ups. This is clearly yours."

"There's more. What if Jayden wants to do something? And, I don't know, what if I'm not good at it?" I added under my breath, "I mean, it's not like we have a sex budget or anything."

Kinsley sat on the edge of her bed. "Yes, Davin and I have sex now, but we waited about five months before we got anywhere near that. I mean, we did all the stuff, sure, but actual sex was off the table for him. Everybody moves at their own pace. I wouldn't freak out about that, and Jayden is not the kind of guy that's going to make you feel like shit if you don't want to do something."

I sort of assumed that Kinsley and Davin had been falling into bed with each other since the instant that they met. It certainly seemed to be within the realm of possibility. I mean, look at the two of them. But on the other hand, Davin was a giant ball of fourteen different anxieties wrapped into one shell of a human. Kinsley was such a perfectionist that neither one would risk any potential future that they would have. No, I guess it makes sense that they waited.

Kinsley stood and packed her bag. "Do you remember way back in October when Davin and I were in a huge fight. I didn't think I could ever forgive him?"

"Vaguely." I remembered. "You wanted to switch partners."

“Yeah, and you didn’t want to give up Jayden, not then, not now. When shit happens, who do you run to?”

“Well, I used to run to my dad.”

“Jayden’s not a replacement for your dad, but he’s always been a stabilizing factor. He’s your cornerstone.”

I crossed my arms and leaned against her dresser. “Is there a point to all of this because you’re not really giving me the answers that I was hoping for?”

“What were you hoping for? Logic? For me to tell you that you’re right? That financially it doesn’t make sense and that you could lose everything? Is that what you were thinking I was going to say?”

“Yeah, why else would I go to you?”

“Well, Logical Kinsley had her ass kicked several times. Sometimes things don’t work out. Despite years of planning, I still fucked things up. I didn’t get into the school I wanted. I screwed up prom. Davin had to come in and save my ass. So, listen. Planning everything isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be. Ask yourself, can you handle everything all on your own, or do you want someone next to you?”

I pulled my hair off my neck in some mockery of an updo. For a second, I imagined Jayden’s breath on my skin as he kissed the tender area where my neck met my shoulder. Yeah, my hair needed to be up for this dress to work.

“I’ve got black fuck-me heels that you could wear, too.” Kinsley sat on the edge of her bed, eyeing me.

“Um, maybe.”

She heaved herself off the bed and walked over to her closet. A row of computers hummed in the back, with her shoes in front. “Why do you have a bunch of computers back there?”

“Crypto mining.” She pulled out a pair of shiny black shoes. “Maybe when you pull your head out of your ass, I’ll give you a Bitcoin.”

I laughed. Kinsley always said the craziest things. “Right. How many do you have?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t really checked in a while. It’s found money, anyway. Not like it’s real.” She put the shoes on my feet to help complete the whole look. “Do we have a winner?”

The woman who stood in the mirror was unrecognizable, confident, happy, and beautiful. Her hand was still holding her hair, letting a few strands fall around her face. She had curves in all the right places, and she didn’t look like some middle school girl pretending to be grown up. No, she’d matured, suffered, and come out on the other end of tragedy. She was smarter. She was the kind of woman who could get what she wanted—as soon as she figured out what the hell it was.

“It’s a winner.”

Chapter 16



Jayden

The days turned into weeks. Ginny and I found a new routine. Since I didn't have to drive all the way to her house to pick her up in the morning, I could sleep for an extra twenty minutes. We rode to school listening to some podcasts about various murders or mysteries or whatever. She stopped avoiding me in the house. If I was in the living room, she would join me, either sitting on the couch or on the love seat. Sometimes, she would lean over and show me some meme or post she thought was funny. It was little things, like whenever she got up to get a drink, she would ask me if I wanted one.

Everything was civil, with a dose of kindness.

At night, I could hear her cry.

One night, after listening to her for twenty minutes, I knocked on her door.

There was a muffled, “Come in.” She was curled up, her knees touching her chest, her eyes pink, and her hair frizzed out in all directions. Her eyes pleaded with me. She looked at me like that once before. “Take away the pain,” she said.

It was a trap, one she didn’t mean to spring, but deadly all the same.

Torn between wanting to help her, liking the way she felt against my body, and not wanting to get hurt again, I stood in the doorway.

“You okay?” Ugh, why was I so fucking stupid?

“It’s a lot,” she said, crying into her pillow.

Earlier in the week, all the financial stuff got worked out. Her dad’s estate paid off most of the bills, but it left her with nothing. I think a part of her hoped to return to her house, but the bank took that. My house was the best place for her. She was safe, with a roof, food, and a family. She scooted over to give me space on the bed.

I knew I shouldn’t, but I crawled into bed with her and wrapped my arms around her waist. I could imagine what she was thinking, but I couldn’t really understand it.

“I don’t have a plan,” she whispered.

“Do you want one?” I pressed her back against my chest.

She made a squeak.

“Okay, so we’ll go to prom together, as friends, roommates, whatever the fuck we are.” I buried my nose in her hair. It smelled like oranges. She huffed out a laugh that wasn’t strong enough. “Then we’ll graduate high school. We’ll both work shitty jobs over the summer that we’ll come home and complain about. We’ll binge-watch shows and hang out together. And we’ll take everything one day at a time.”

“One minute at a time,” she whispered. “That’s about how much I can handle.” Her breathing slowed, and the tears stopped. “I don’t know how long I can work at Carlos’s gym. It’s kinda boring and everything smells like bro.”

“Yeah, you kinda stink like plastic mats when you come home.”

She squeaked and tried to twist around, but I held her in place. Somehow, looking her in the face would’ve made all of this harder. “Do I really smell?”

“A little, but as soon as you come home, you shower, and the entire house smells like oranges and vanilla, like one of those creamsicle ice cream pops.”

“Oh.” She wiggled her hips, pressing her body closer to mine. I tried to ignore how good she felt, changing the topic.

“If you don’t want to work at Carlos’s gym, then what interests you?”

She was quiet for a while. “I took a journalism class and hated it. I tried to take AP Bio, and I hated that too. I can’t draw or talk in front of crowds.”

“That’s a list of things you don’t like. What do you like?”

“I like helping people and talking one-on-one.” She was quiet again, and I thought she fell asleep. My eyelids started to get heavy. “Your mom came home a few days ago, talking about getting this young couple into a house. She was so excited for them to start their lives. I think that would be cool.”

The ideas clicked: “Real estate? Shit, you would be great at that. Maybe you could hang out at my mom’s office after we graduate and pick up a few tips.”

She snuggled into my body more. My thumb slid under the hem of her shirt and rested on her belly. Her breathing steadied and slowed.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Feeling warm and comfortable, my eyelids grew heavy until I fell asleep holding her.

Prom was perfect. Besides hogging the bathroom for most of the afternoon, there were no major problems with me and Ginny. She looked amazing in her sparkly silver dress, and her light red hair was curled in some updo. She watched YouTube tutorials all week as she practiced how she wanted her hair to be.

We headed to Davin's house, took pictures in front of his goat barn, and drove to the dance. Kinsley's work paid off, and the whole ballroom was like something out of a movie. I bounced between the sports bros and Ginny all night. When a slow song played, Kimberly Kozak asked me to dance. I said no and walked over to Ginny, who was taking selfies with Casey. I offered her my hand, and without a second of hesitation, she stood, and we walked to the dance floor.

We had danced together a few times over the years, but this time, things were different. Not like this was a dumb crush I had, but something else. Something real. She pressed her cheek to mine, and it was less of a dance and more of a hug, moving side to side.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" I asked.

"Just being you." She rested her head on my shoulder and it was the most perfect night of my life.

I loved her.

Not a crush.

Not an infatuation.

She wasn't some girl I tried to save.

She was Ginny, and I loved her.

That night wasn't the right night to tell her. But sometime soon.

Chapter 17



Ginny

It was the last game of the season. Kinsley and Davin were MIA. I hadn't seen them after prom, and Kinsley didn't answer my text messages. Wherever they were, they were together. I was pissed they were missing Jayden's last game. How selfish could they be? We had gone to all of Davin's shows, but they didn't make it to the last of his games.

He had been all snuggly since prom. Not pushy like he wanted me to do something, but just happy. He found excuses to touch me, like putting his hands on my hip to scoot me out of the way to get to the fridge.

I also talked to his mom about working in real estate. There was an opening at the front desk that was mine as soon as I took my last final. From there, there would be tons of resources for me to take any exams I would need to get my real estate license.

For the first time, I had some sort of long-term plan. Like maybe it was okay to ask for help and that it didn't make me a useless burden. I don't know, but something clicked. I would need to plan it all out. Something heroic, something romantic, something not verbal diarrhea.

A part of me was sad. This was the last time I would watch him play lacrosse on this field. Sure, I could watch him in college, but this was home. I liked watching him play football and lacrosse. Watching him play was like watching someone really live their life, and of course, I was on the sidelines. Damn it. I hated it when Kinsley was right.

The grass was wet on my feet, and it was immediately soaking into my shoes. The things I do for love. No, not love. Like—lots and lots and lots of like—but not love. That's the wrong word. Still, the wet grass soaked through my shoes and into my socks for an insane amount of like.

I walked over to the stands. Various girlfriends, moms, and dads were cheering along, watching the lacrosse team warm up. I saw Jayden's number fifteen. He stretched and was doing knee kicks, trying to warm up. Some guys were throwing a ball back and forth and doing a basic sort of warm-up. The game started with a whistle, and bam, they were off.

I'd watched Jayden play lacrosse off and on for years, and still had no fucking clue what was happening. I knew they were trying to get the ball into the nets. But lacrosse was like football, with weapons. Guys ran at each other at full speed, non-stop tackling each other, shoulder-checking, and trying to do as much damage as possible.

It scared me the first time I saw it as a freshman. He was the youngest one on the JV team, and everyone else looked so huge in comparison to him.

He was so excited when he scored his first goal. I remember cheering for him and feeling the same pride that he

must have felt. He didn't stop smiling for a week.

Of course, that was also the week that my dad started his second round of chemo, so every major event in Jayden's life was directly tied to a tragic event in my own.

It was close to halftime. They tied the game two-to-two. Jayden was frustrated. He threw his stick and huddled up the guys, trying to get their heads back on track. The other team was good, but not any better than we were. There was really no reason for our team not to win except for the other team's number eight.

That guy was fucking huge and fast. Like, he must have been a terminator or something because there's no way any human being could be that big and that fast. Or maybe it was performance-enhancing drugs.

The other coach called number eight onto the field as a substitution. I had a sinking dread in my stomach as he jogged onto the field.

The whistle blew, and number eight sprinted at full speed towards Jayden.

It was in slow motion. Jayden flew up, his feet sliding underneath him on the wet grass. The way he landed; I could almost hear his bones breaking from the other side of the stands. There was silence, no movement. The ref came running over, and Jayden lay completely still.

Get up! Move! Do something!

The entire team huddled around him. A wall of meat and pads blocked him from my line of sight. I don't know when I stood up or how I got off the bleachers. I just remember moving closer and closer to the field as if on a tractor beam.

Jayden was hurt.

I called out to him; his name ripped through my vocal cords. A pair of arms grabbed me, pulling me back. I needed to get to him. I couldn't lose him. Not him. Not after everything.

The medic ran over.

"Is he awake?" someone said.

I needed to call his mom. But tell her what?

Then I heard him groan.

I knew that sound. He made it every morning when he didn't want to get out of bed. He was alive. Okay, that was a step in the right direction. I heard him wretch, and a few guys cringed. Damn it, why hadn't I ever taken the time to learn anyone else's name?

One guy said, "Oh crap, look at his leg!"

Number Eight, the monster who tackled him, burst into tears. "Is he okay? Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

One of Number Eight's teammates tried to pull him from the crowd, saying, "It's okay, man, these things happen." Number Eight pushed his teammate away, unable to take his eyes off of Jayden.

I don't know how long I'd been struggling in the arms of one of our players. "Let me go! I need to see him."

Number Eight whipped his head toward me. "Are you his girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry." He pleaded for forgiveness.

My face felt wet, and everything was blurry for a second until I blinked. Number Eight was even bigger in person; acne pockmarks dotted his face. "I need to see him," I said.

Number Eight pushed the guy who held me back and picked me up. I floated in the air until he pushed me past the coach.

I dropped to my knees and grabbed Jayden's hand. Everything else faded into the background. I called his name, and he groaned again. Did he know I was there? His head turned to the side, and vomit pooled at the side of his mouth. He was so pale, and he didn't open his eyes. I squeezed his hand. He squeezed it back.

"Ginny?" his voice gasped.

The relief from the circle of men was palpable.

“Hey, I’m here.”

His eyes fluttered open. “You’re not supposed to be on the field. You could get hurt.”

The laugh came out before I could stop it. Of course, that’s what he was concerned about. Then I saw his twisted foot. A huge bump appeared on his ankle. And that was the extent of what I could see.

One medic pushed me aside and said, “We’ve got to get him on a stretcher. He needs to go to the ER.” The next few minutes were filled with the minutia and technical elements that seemed so slow. They boarded him in the ambulance, and I stepped inside. The EMT paused for a second, then sighed and let me in. I was already on a call with his mom, giving her all the information, I had.

I wasn’t going to let him leave my sight, and I would be by his side the entire time. There was so much to say to him. What if I didn’t have enough time?

Chapter 18



Jayden

We won the game.

Mostly because the other team's powerhouse who tackled me had a panic attack on the sidelines. I ended up with a compound-complex fracture on my leg, a minor concussion, and my ankle was torn to shit. Plus, my left shoulder was all jacked up. I'm pretty sure those are the technical terms.

I'd never hurt so badly in my life.

The doctors promised I would recover, but my summer preseason was shot. I might even need surgery. That all

translated into a super-shitty summer.

Ginny knocked on my door. “Who wants a milkshake?”

I didn’t, but Ginny offered, so how could I say no? She’d been amazing. She stayed by my side, took notes about everything the doctors said, kept track of my meds, and handled all my incoming text messages.

I winced as I shifted my weight to sit up. She dashed in, put the milkshake on my nightstand, and lifted me up. Her hands stayed on my waist and on my good shoulder for a few extra seconds. Then her hand left my shoulder and pushed my hair out of my eyes before resting on my cheek.

“Hey.”

“Hey, yourself,” I said, wanting to stay locked in this moment of her gentle touch and my loss for words.

It was nice to feel something that wasn’t painful or scary. So far, I had missed three days of school. Ginny stayed home with me for two of them, but she was in danger of hitting too many absences for the year. Being so close to the end of school, it wasn’t worth it. I spent most of my day alone, staring at my ceiling, switching between pain every time I moved and fear of the future.

I’d been playing sports my whole life; I’d been banged up a few times here and there, but this was the first time I lost consciousness. I could’ve been really hurt. And with surgery on the table, I didn’t know how long the recovery would be.

Shit, you only have one body, and if I fucked it up when I was eighteen, then how would it affect me when I was fifty? I had a lacrosse scholarship to Tennent. What if I couldn’t play or my own fears choked me on the field? Would I lose my scholarship? My future?

It had never really been in question before, and because of one hit—one second—and my whole life changed.

Holy shit, was this how Ginny felt for the last year? This constant sense of uncertainty?

No wonder why she didn’t want to move forward with me. This fear was fucking paralyzing.

“Where did you go?” she asked.

“Lost in my thoughts. Sorry, I gave you a hard time this year. I know things have been confusing and weird. I shouldn’t have pushed anything.”

She reached for my milkshake and brought the straw to my lips. She adjusted my blankets over my toes so they wouldn’t get cold. Her fingers brushed against my leg.

“When did you get this?”

“What?”

“This moon-shaped scar on your leg.” Her fingertips circled around it.

Dirt bike riding? Slamming my leg against a metal pedal? Football? Oh shit, I remembered. “So, way back in middle school, do you remember kissing me in that water closet?”

She blushed and smiled as she dipped her head. “Yeah.”

“The water heater cut my leg.”

“You said you were fine.”

“I was. I mean, I needed a tetanus shot, and I had a scar, but that means you’ve been with me even when you weren’t.” Oh, fuck, that sounded so cheesy. She would throw the milkshake in my face.

Instead, she took a long sip of my milkshake, and she turned her head to look at the guinea pig cage. “Huh, I came in here to tell you I think we should try to make this work. I already told the entire team I was your girlfriend. Seemed kinda shitty to make it a lie.”

WHAT?!?! There’s no way I heard that, right? Was I talking in my sleep? “Oh. I’ve been highly medicated; you shouldn’t listen to anything I say.”

She grinned. “Oh, so you didn’t mean all that about the scar?”

“No, that was true.” I shook the milkshake in my hand. “No, you should ignore the part where I said we should just be

friends. That was dumb. We should be more. So much more. All the things.”

Then she kissed me. Her lips were soft and sweet. It was everything I dreamed of. I was lost in a dizzying sensation of joy.

“Am I interrupting anything?” My mom’s voice cut through the room.

Ginny’s eyes filled with panic. “Um, I think I’m dating your son now.”

“Now? But I thought you two had been dating since... October.”

“You invited me into your home because you thought I was dating Jayden?”

Mom rolled her eyes. “Well, he’s been in love with you since elementary school. I thought he finally worked up the nerve to tell you.”

“MOM!” I snapped.

“What?” She knocked on the doorframe. “Anyway, I got off the phone with Tennent. The athletic department wants the doctors’ reports, but they are assuring us your scholarship is safe for the next five years, even if you don’t play as a freshman.”

What? An enormous weight was lifted off my chest.

“Oh, Ginny, tomorrow after school, swing by the office. I want you to meet Linda from HR. She’s going to get your paperwork going so you can start in a few weeks.” Mom turned away. “Don’t forget to take your meds.”

Ginny rested her forehead against mine. “You’ve been in love with me since elementary school?”

“I’m not sure about all that, but I’ve had a lot of long-term plans for you.” I caught myself, “But if you don’t feel the same way...”

Her lips crashed into mine. Kissing Ginny was like ten thousand fireworks at once. “Life doesn’t care about your plans,

but as long as we've got each other's backs, that's all we'll need."

THE END

Thank you for reading Long Term Plans. Please continue to read the bonus stories about Kinsley and Davin.

If you liked Long Term Plans, it would help me out if [you left a review.](#)

Lastly if you join [my newsletter](#), you will get access to a free song written by Davin and tons of digital content.

Plans Go Awry

An alternative telling of “Best Laid Plans” and “Failure to Plan.”

What if Davin and Kinsley were never writing partners? How would that change their lives and the lives of the surrounding people?

This was a thought experiment I did and figured I would share it with my readers.

Best Laid Plans: Writing Partners

What if Kinsley and Davin weren't writing partners? What would be different?

Mrs. Conroy rubbed her temples as Davin walked into the room. His fingertips were so cold they burned from the ginger ale he held. "Rough day?" Bribery worked whenever he needed something from his aunt.

"Change of plans. You'll be working with Jayden instead of Kinsley Adams." Mrs. Conroy reached for the soda and opened it with a snap. "I just didn't have it in me to fight with her today."

Davin frowned. Out of all the seniors, Kinsley was the only one he didn't know much about. In four years, this was the first class they had together. Judging solely on appearances, she probably didn't want to work with him and ruin her perfect reputation.

"Whatever," he said, grabbing his journal off her desk. "I've got ninety-nine problems, and this stupid birthday card is most of them."

"Yes, Davin, your life is very hard." She took a long sip of the soda. "Are you going to be okay with Jayden? I have my concerns."

He shrugged while thumbing through his journal. "I'm a big boy. I'm sure we can work it out." A small huff of relief left his lips when he saw the birthday card still snug in the back of the journal. He looked at his teacher, his aunt, and said "I need to finish this by tomorrow night; otherwise, Jackson won't get his birthday card, and Uncle Mike will have another reason to hate the Graeloch men."

Vanessa Conroy knew all about the tension in Davin's family. She had been to enough Sunday night dinners over the years. She shooed him out of her room, pointing to the journal. "You should write in iambic pentameter. If it's good enough for Shakespeare, it's good enough for you, Goober."

The nickname struck him. Aunt Nessa never called him Goober at school. A weird pit formed in his stomach, like the universe had shifted somehow and everything was slightly off-kilter.

He headed back down the hall to the music room but paused and took a quick detour toward the science wing. The anxiety bees that lived in his stomach buzzed alive. Four years ago, he had been best friends with Jayden, but they picked different social groups. Jayden picked the sports bros, and Davin spent his freshman year in the stoner crew before leaving and heading to the tortured artist club.

Davin caught Jayden's eye. "So, Conroy switched our partners," Davin started.

"What? Fuck!"

He had sort of been expecting this reaction since they hadn't spoken in years.

Jayden rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Who's Ginny's partner?"

Ginny? A sound built up from his stomach and blurted out of Davin's mouth that could only be called a croak. "Ginny? Still? Bro, it's been like six years."

Jayden shook his head behind his hands and made fists in both hands but left the middle fingers extended. "Go to hell." He paused and then repeated, "Who's Ginny's partner?"

"Kinsley Adams." Davin added, "I guess Princess Kinsley didn't want to work with me."

Jayden sighed. "Probably doesn't have anything to do with you. So, are we partners now?"

"Um yeah." Davin rubbed the back of his neck, trying to gauge his reaction. Would Jayden be cool with this, or would this be a year full of anxiety attacks?

Jayden pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. "Is your number still the same?"

"Um yeah."

Jayden's thumbs danced over the screen, and a few seconds later, Davin felt his ass vibrate. "Cool, talk to you later." Jayden slid his phone into his pocket and headed into class.

His self-restraint impressed Davin to wait to check the text until he was safely away in the practice room where he spent most of his day. His high school day was spent lost in an artistic haze of music and drawing to fulfill two independent study classes. The isolation probably wasn't great for his mental health, but neither was being around people.

The smile peeked across his lips like a sprout leaving the dirt.

JAYDEN: Kirby for the win.

Childhood memories of playing *Super Smash Bros.* flooded his brain.

DAVIN: Link all the way.

He took a deep breath and relaxed for the first time in months. It wasn't until Davin drove home from work did he realize that no matter how shitty things got, Jayden had never deleted his number.

September 30th

Davin had no major complaints from the first month of his senior year. Besides a major case of writer's block, everything had been going fine. His sister got into her dance class, and his dad was on his case, but that was par for the course. He and Jayden were getting A's in Conroy's class, although 90 percent was too close for comfort.

Kinsley Adams' perfect facade had diminished in the last few weeks. A vein on her forehead bulged almost every day. Maybe it had always been there. Or not. She would check her phone in class, tensing and whispering, "Jesus Christ, not another one," and jam her phone back in her pocket. While it had registered on his radar, Davin hadn't worked up the nerve to ask her what was wrong. Besides, she probably wouldn't tell him. Why would she?

Kinsley's blonde hair and perfect body had made their way into his dreams. He wasn't sure why. They had never spoken, and despite being ten feet away from him, she never looked at him in English.

He hopped out of the shower and dried off when his sister banged on the bathroom door. "Ass breath, hurry; I want to curl my hair."

A part of him wanted to snap, "Give me a damn minute," but the words stopped in his throat. It was only a few weeks until homecoming weekend, and the whole family would be a fucking mess. No, he opted for kindness and grabbed his clothes off the floor. He wrapped a towel around his waist as he pushed past his sister. "All yours."

Restless energy had been pulsing through him for a while, like his body simmered like red embers, hot and still dangerous. As if one fallen leaf landing on the embers would ignite a fire and turn the forest to ash.

So, he did the same thing he always did when he felt like that—he rubbed one out with the image of a nondescript blonde girl with her lips wrapped around his cock.

In the darkness, Davin drove on the roads he hadn't been on in years. The house had the same blue door, but the landscaping had changed. The door flung open, and a woman with wrinkles around her eyes beamed at him. "Alister." She paused. "Davin," she corrected, "it's so good to see you."

He hugged Jayden's mom. "I haven't been Alister in a very long time."

She waved her hand. "I know, sweetie. I'm sorry." She took a step back and ran her eyes over his body. "You've grown so much."

Davin shrugged. "Yeah, time has a way of doing that to you."

"Jayden's upstairs."

He walked through the house from muscle memory alone. The house's interior hadn't changed much. Maybe an extra coat of paint and a few more pictures hung up. The light blue

carpeting still had the blood stain from when he and Jayden were playing NERF guns in the hallway. He slammed his head against the corner of the wall. Davin touched the scar. His hair hid the hemorrhage. Like most pain from the past, it was always there, even if it had been forgotten.

One of the bedroom doors was open. This room had always seemed so forbidden as a kid. Tie-dye blankets hung on the wall, and a smattering of crystals lined a bookshelf. Half-full boxes lay on the floor.

Davin pushed the door across the hall open. Jayden sat on the floor, his back against his bed, with a controller in both hands. “Is your sister moving out?”

Jayden answered without taking his eyes off the screen. “That’s the plan. She’s moving in with her boyfriend out in Denver. She’s got a job all lined up. We’re spending Thanksgiving helping her get settled.” He jutted out his chin toward the TV where the second controller lay.

Davin grabbed the controller and slid onto the floor next to Jayden. Neither of them spoke for half an hour. While their avatars were deep in enemy territory, they both leaned their upper bodies closer to the screen, as if that would help somehow. Eventually, Jayden spoke. “Sorry, I was an asshole back in freshman year.”

The apology meant more to Davin than he had ever thought. His throat burned. “Well, I was being an asshole, too.”

“Oh, you definitely were.” Jayden laughed, and nudged Davin on his shoulder. “But still, I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Before they went too far down memory road and hit the detour of trauma, Davin changed the subject. “So, you and Ginny?”

Jayden frowned. “There is no me and Ginny. I think it’s because she’s a feminist and only likes girls.”

Davin snorted, “You don’t think that lesbian and feminist mean the same thing, do you?”

Jayden remained silent.

“Oh my god!” Davin laughed and pulled out his phone, googling the definitions of both words.

Jayden sighed. “So, she’s not gay, she just doesn’t like me.”

“Her dad was diagnosed with cancer at the start of high school. I think she’s just been preoccupied.”

“You’re saying I would’ve had a better shot if she was my writing partner instead of you?”

“Probably.”

“Sonofabitch.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

They resumed the game for another hour before Davin’s dad texted, demanding his immediate return home. “I won’t be at school next week, but I’ll finish our paper for Conroy’s class.”

“You going to any of the homecoming parties?”

“No.” Davin acted as if he had just been asked to slaughter a puppy.

Jayden gave him a desperate plea. “I don’t know how much more I can handle of Todd Richardson and his douchy friends.”

“I thought you were the second-in-command?”

“Only by default. If it weren’t for football and lacrosse, I’d be outta there.”

They were all trapped in prisons of their own design. “Only a few more months, then you can start a new life someplace else.”

On the drive home, his words swirled about his head. Davin wanted a new life, to be someone he wasn’t. But once his brother died, Davin’s fate was sealed. He would be locked in a cycle of self-loathing, fear, and disappointment. He was in a dense forest of his anxiety and fears, with no guides to help him out. Only the meds provided a small flashlight in the darkness. Thank God he had those. Otherwise, the week

leading up to the anniversary of his brother's death would've been an unending nightmare.

As he lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, loneliness and the dark ache returned. He had zero motivation to work on his portfolio. Autumn Foxes' songs rang out through Bluetooth speakers, but it didn't provide Davin with any of the inspiration he had hoped for. Instead, he scrolled through his phone, lost in his photo gallery. One picture caught his eye, and blood rushed to the lower regions of his body. He scrolled back to his text messages.

Davin: Hey.

A few seconds later, Amare texted back.

Amare: Hey yourself.

Amare: I was just thinking about you.

Davin didn't believe this for one second. Everything with Amare had been physical only—no emotions, no deep connections. After all, it wasn't like he could get Amare pregnant.

Amare: Whatcha you up to?

Davin: Mental health break.

Amare: ...

Amare: You alone?

Right on schedule. Amare only wanted one thing, and right now, that's all Davin wanted too.

Davin: Yeah. You?

Amare: Give me five minutes.

His phone buzzed four minutes and thirty seconds later. Amare's face popped on the screen. Then he stepped further back, already down to his boxers. Fast start. Davin was already pulling his shirt over his head. "Damn, you're so fucking hot." Amare's voice was thick with midday lust.

Again, Davin didn't believe it. But that didn't stop him from palming his cock. They both knew what they were in for.

Twenty minutes later, after describing what they wanted to do to the other in graphic detail, their releases came and went. Amare rushed off the phone because his roommate would be back any minute.

The room was even lonelier now. A superficial connection was still better than none. He needed to get used to it.

Keep it physical only. Give them what they want. None of them would love him. Besides the orgasms, he had nothing to offer.

He worked at the shop for six hours and watched the first *Lord of the Rings* movie at his uncle's house. It was the anniversary of his brother's death, homecoming weekend, and his family was in New York for his sister's dance trip. But Dino and his boyfriend were at the beginning of a fight. Davin didn't want to be around for the inevitable breakup.

It sucked. He liked Carlos and hoped Carlos would still let him work out at the gym after the breakup. He would probably lose his discount, too.

His phone buzzed.

Jayden: BRO I NEED YOU!

Davin: What's wrong?

Jayden: Ginny looks super-hot; she's got this blue dress...

A picture came a few seconds later.

Yeah, she looked good. Davin wondered where she got the dress. Between the medical bills and regular life bills, he didn't think Ginny had the cash for something so nice.

Davin: What's wrong?

Jayden: I need you to run interference.

Davin: Why?

Jayden: So I don't tell her I'm in love with her.

Davin reread the text several times. Basic math told him it would end in heartbreak and more stress than Ginny or Jayden could handle.

Davin: Where?

Jayden: Todd Richardson's house.

Davin: FML. are you kidding me?

Jayden: Please, bro.

Jayden sent a GIF of a sad cat crying.

Davin screamed “fuck” inside his car. He didn't know what was worse: going to Todd Richardson's party or people. No, the worst were the people who would be at the party. He had plenty of reasons not to go and would be breaking the rules by leaving the house. He shouldn't be driving on this particular night. Plus, he didn't want to go.

But his one-time best friend needed him now. And as much as he hated it, he hopped in his car to go to Todd Richardson's party.

Davin regretted it the instant he walked through the door. Too many people cramped in a room far too small, smelling like a mixture of body odor, cheap cologne, flowery shit from Bath and Body Works, and beer. Yep, this was a huge mistake.

Jayden sat on the couch next to Ginny. He cracked each knuckle with his thumb, pressing the life out of every digit. He did this whenever he was nervous. Davin first noticed the tick during the second-grade spelling bee. Internally, Davin smiled. Some things never changed.

He pressed through the crowd, getting pushed and jostled along the way. But Jayden jumped to his feet.

“Bro, you made it.”

“Wouldn't miss it,” he lied.

Ginny rose from the couch like Ariel walking out of the sea at the movie's end, all smooth and graceful. She wrapped her arms around Davin. “I can't believe you're here. I was worried about you all week.”

Another statement he didn't know how much he believed.

Before he could sit, the entire room cheered, "Kinsley!" Now *that* was a freaking Disney Princess. She looked incredible, with perfect makeup, hair in some ornate updo, deep red lips, and smokey eyes. Disney Princess was not the right term. She was the physical embodiment of his sexual fantasy.

But the joy didn't match her eyes. She looked tense and annoyed, like she had spent the last two months planning something just for it to be over and anticlimactic.

She moved toward the couch and smiled at Jayden, or maybe Ginny; Davin wasn't sure. But he knew it wasn't him.

Kinsley was so focused on navigating the crowd that she didn't see the snake coming from behind. Todd Richardson's arms wrapped around her, and pangs of jealousy pricked at Davin's brain.

All the pent-up frustration Kinsley must have been feeling got unloaded on Todd. "Jesus fucking Christ, stop touching me!" she screamed. The party stilled and searched to find the direction of the drama.

But Todd seemed undeterred by her request. "What's wrong, babe? I made you a drink." He pushed it into her hands.

Kinsley held it without thinking because she focused on her next attack. "Babe? No fucking way did you just call me babe? We are not a thing, and you can't touch me, give me a nickname, or send me one of your micro dick pics, okay? I'm in a group chat with every woman in the world, and we all agreed that none of us wants to see or touch your dick. Got it?"

Todd pushed his hair off his face and hissed, "God, you don't need to be such a bitch."

"Oh, now I'm a bitch for laying out clear boundaries that you don't seem to follow? You think I'm worried that you

won't like me, so to make you feel better, I'll let you touch my tits?"

Davin's lips pulled into a smile. This alone was worth the drive to the party. He only wished he had it on video.

But the attack wasn't over.

"I swear to God and all other deities that if you touch me again, or any other woman who doesn't want you to, I will cut off your dick." She whipped around and stabbed her index finger into his chest while perfectly holding her drink in her other hand. "After I cut it off, I'm gonna ram it up your ass so your own cock can fuck you. Then, after you start to enjoy it, I'll shove it down your throat. Oh, but you won't choke on it, because no one ever chokes on a Tic Tac. Are you worried about the gaping wound where your manhood used to live? Don't be. No one dies from a fucking paper cut, either."

Davin was in love, or at least lust. But either way, he was intrigued.

Todd's lower lip quivered. "Damn, Kinsley, you don't have to be so mean." He turned and retreated to the other side of the party.

Kinsley lifted the cup to her lips, but Davin moved toward her. His hand gently touched her wrist. "Maybe you shouldn't drink from the cup given to you by the guy you just threatened to commit crimes against humanity."

She blinked at him. "I'm trying to wrap my head around that sentence." She looked at the red Solo cup. "Yeah, you might be right."

"Why don't we get you some water?" Davin offered.

Kinsley handed the cup over to him and nodded. "That might be a good call." He followed her into the kitchen, where they both cracked open bottles of water. She leaned against the counter. "Um, thanks."

Davin took a long gulp of water. Normally his mind blanked when talking to someone he didn't know. But despite being a literal threat to his health, he found the words came easily when he spoke to her. "I thought I should help defuse

the situation. It might be better than life in prison and becoming a meme.”

She laughed with her lips around the bottle, trapping the air and muffling the sound. “I’m Kinsley.”

“I know. Everyone shouted your name when you came in,” Davin said.

“Oh, right.”

“We’re in the same English class; you didn’t want to be my partner.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, and then she clasped a hand over her mouth. “No!”

“Um yeah.” Davin couldn’t understand why she argued with him about this.

She shook her head, and the updo wobbled from side to side. “No, it’s not that I didn’t want to work with you, but I’ve been trying to get my best friend a college scholarship, so I asked Mrs. Conroy to switch partners. When she said no, I asked to be with Ginny since I knew she was having a hard time with her dad and the chemo and stuff.”

Well, this was not the answer he expected at all. Despite threatening bodily harm a few seconds ago, she seemed kind of nice.

She placed her hand on his chest. The warmth shocked him, but he didn’t move. “It had nothing to do with you at all. I mean, I didn’t know you, but that wasn’t the reason I didn’t want to work with you. Ginny needed me more.”

Davin’s head tilted to better look at her hand on his chest. But she pulled back and wrapped both hands around the water bottle. “Well, you cockblocked Jayden over there,” he said.

She lifted herself onto her toes and peeked over his shoulder to see Jayden and Ginny on the couch together. She closed her eyes and hung her head. “Oh, no... she likes him too. But senior year is a stupid time to fall in love.”

Davin held back that Jayden had been in love with Ginny since elementary school. He didn’t think Kinsley needed to be

kicked while she was down.

She took another sip of water, and Davin watched her neck as she swallowed. Flickers of dirty images popped into his head, but he pushed them out as fast as they came.

“Do you ever feel that you just made the biggest mistake of your life?” she asked.

“Every day, all day long,” Davin replied, as dry as the desert.

She laughed, and it was the best sound he had heard in weeks. It made him brave enough to suggest, “You know, I could teach you some basic self-defense techniques.”

Her eyes brightened as she looked at the plastic bottle in her hand. “Really? Why?”

He shrugged. “Consider it my civil duty to all of mankind... and our various man bits.”

Again, she laughed, but this time his knees weakened and his stomach flipped. “When do we start?”

“How about now?”

Damn, he was getting all sorts of brave. He led her out to the covered deck but stopped when he heard the rain splatter on the wood. Nope, not brave. Not brave at all. Panic swelled inside of him, trying to rip out of his throat. He should've never left his uncle's house. What was he thinking? History would repeat itself.

“It's not going to last long.” Her voice pierced through his anxiety. He turned back to see the white glow of a screen on Kinsley's face. “According to the radar, it will be over in thirty minutes.”

He blinked a few times, trying to register the situation. “Where did your cell phone come from?”

Kinsley's hands vanished into the folds of her dress. “Pockets!” She did a little twirl as if this proved the point.

Davin smiled in spite of the blood pounding in his ears. “It's magical.”

She walked to the edge of the deck, sticking her hand out from under the roofed portion. “As long as the wind doesn’t change direction, we should stay pretty dry out here.” Kinsley bent over and pulled off her shoes. “I feel like it’s super dangerous to do this in heels.” Once they were off and neatly by the door, she clapped her hands. “Let’s do this.”

Davin took a deep breath, followed by a second one. He had never been so grateful for meds in his life. He could focus on Kinsley; she was the perfect distraction to keep his panic at bay. “The most important thing about self-protection is being aware. Most women are attacked by people they know.” He added with a smirk, “So, don’t take drinks from anyone, especially if they send you unsolicited dick pics.”

“Good call.”

“Okay, so let’s say someone grabs your arm. What do you do?”

“Tell him to get off of me, or I’ll slice off his dick, then send him pictures of it?”

Davin pinched his lips together. “Um, no. I’m shocked it worked the first time.”

“Have an in-depth conversation about their favorite *Star Wars* character?”

The air snorted from his nose as he tried not to laugh. “Again, no. You’re going to pull your arm forward a little, put your other hand over the attacker’s knuckles, and twist. Then, with the attacker’s arm in your hand, you’ll be able to push the attacker to the ground. Then what do you do?”

“Scissor kick him in the head and call his mom to tell her she raised a little bitch?”

The laughter exploded out of him. “No. That’s very wrong. You disengage and run.”

“But his mama raised a little bitch. She needs to know.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

Kinsley nodded. “Yeah, she’s probably already aware of the situation.”

Davin put his hands on his knees and bent over with the uncontrollable air spewing from him. He genuinely laughed for the first time in months, and for a few seconds, he forgot all about his trauma and fears. He regrouped, and said, “Look, this is important; you’re beautiful, and men suck.”

Kinsley took a step back, and even in the darkness, Davin could see her face change to a different shade of pink. “Okay, I will take this seriously.”

As the rain pounded on the roof and the sky flashed with light followed by rumbles, Davin taught her four different takedowns. Did he like how her body felt next to his as he taught her the moves? Yes, he did.

Rogue rain droplets sprayed onto the wooden deck, making it slippery with each passing moment. While Kinsley had his arm pinned against his back, he lost his sense of balance. He smacked the ground with his shoulder. Unfortunately, Kinsley hadn’t quite mastered disengaging and came toppling down on top of him. They both landed with a hard oof.

Kinsley scrambled off of him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just don’t call my mom and tell her I’m a little bitch. But damn, I have a new appreciation for the mats at the gym.”

He lifted himself with a groan and rubbed his shoulder. By the morning he would have a massive bruise. But he saw the concern in Kinsley’s eye and the way she bit on her lower lip. He would rather die than tell her how much it hurt.

“You normally do this at a gym?”

Davin rolled his shoulder, and pain stabbed through his muscles, but he ignored it while he watched Kinsley adjust and sit up. He said, “Yeah, I’m a few hours short on my instructor training.” Kinsley used his thigh to right herself but left her hand there, lingering. “Maybe I should finish and train you.” He didn’t know why he said it. The words flew out of his mouth. This woman was a twenty-four-hour panic attack waiting to happen, and quite frankly, he wasn’t sure if it was

good for the rest of humanity if Kinsley was fully weaponized.

“I would love that,” she said, scrambling to her feet, reaching for the cellphones they had placed on a table near the door before they started sparring. Before handing him his phone, Kinsley stood over him and said, “I have this thing about people using my name on their phones. Can we use nicknames?”

“Sure. I can be Master”—a flash of lightning distracted his thought— “and you can be Don.”

Kinsley blinked at him for a few seconds. “No, we both can’t be...” She rubbed her temples. “Wait, repeat what you just said.”

“I will be Master Splinter, and you can be Donatello. You know, the smartest ninja turtle.”

“Don with an ‘n’? Got it. Well, that’s way more wholesome than I thought,” she said, “I’ve got to stop reading those smutty books.”

Davin didn’t know what she was talking about, but it didn’t matter. Kinsley Adams just became the most attractive girl in the whole school.

Failure to Plan: Breaking the Rules

What if Kinsley and Davin were never writing partners and never fell in love at the end of Best Laid Plans? What would be different?

Everything about this was unfair, Kinsley thought to herself. He might've had years of training, but she was faster. No, that was a total lie, and she knew it. He would let her win from time to time. He would drop his guard just long enough so she could land a punch. At first, she thought it had been her own natural talent. She won most of their sparring matches after two months of training. It was wrong. The only logical conclusion was that he let her win. But why?

Her fist made an impact on his chest, and he let out an "oof" sound as all the air rushed out of his lungs. The punch hadn't been hard. One more kick to the stomach, and he was down. She stood over him, his chest heaving, red marks peppering his skin. The serotonin of a victory took over, and she did her dance of triumph. She jumped and clapped, and her sports bra failed to keep the girls in place... oh, he liked the dance. That's why he let her win.

"You're getting slow, Graeloch." She reached out her hand to let him off the mat. Davin wiped the side of his mouth with the back of his hand before grabbing her wrist, and with one quick motion, he pulled her on top of him. A rush of excitement struck her at the same time she landed on his chest. But he cushioned her fall and slowed down her descent. Davin always took care of her.

Temporary.

No emotions.

All physical.

He wrapped his sweaty arms around her, holding her in place. She peered into his eyes, but dropped her gaze to his lips. She liked those lips. "You should stop letting me win."

Then his lips were on hers. This wasn't their normal hot and sweaty hookup kiss. This one was playful and distracting.

And before she realized it, he rolled, pinning her back to the mat. “But I like your dance of triumph.” His lips pressed against her neck, causing equal parts squeamish tickles and sensual desires. Davin was fun, no strings attached, and all pleasure.

No sex, though.

He had been weirdly clear on that.

“But you’re better than me at this. You should win,” she stated.

“Look, Kins, you’ve got me beat in every single department. I know I’m better than you at this, but I really like to see you happy. When you’re happy, I can do this.” His palm started on her stomach and slid under her shirt; over the fabric of her sports bra. He rubbed his thumb on the underside of her breast before squeezing it.

It was after hours at his uncle’s ex-boyfriend’s gym. It was empty except for the manager doing paperwork in the back office. This sort of display of public affection was fine, even sort of hot.

They never talked in class. Most of their conversations had been via text. They had been hooking up for about three months now. But senior year was a terrible time to fall in love—stupid even—but that’s not what was happening. She reminded herself that it was a mild toleration and companionship. Maybe even a tiny dabble in friendship. But certainly not love. Hell, she didn’t even really know anything about him other than that he had a sister and that he liked *Parks and Recreation* instead of *The Office*... yep no getting past that one. She knew he was an artist, and he got good grades, but besides that, he was a mystery.

She noticed his hand shaking every once in a while and his knee constantly bouncing in class. But she had assumed it was all his pent-up energy that needed to get out somehow.

His hand continued to massage her breast, and a tiny moan escaped her lips. “See, letting you win benefits both of

us.” But like always, before it got too hot and heavy, he broke away from her and rolled over.

“Lame.” She crossed her arms and pouted.

“Yep,” he said and groaned, getting up.

“Sorry.” She wasn’t.

He grabbed his water bottle from his gym bag and took a long swig. “No, you’re not.” He closed the lid and tossed it to her.

“Right again.” She did like flirting with him. She liked the way he looked at her. Maybe she could bend her rules just a little. He was fun, funny, and flirty, and they did fool around. Maybe it was worth diving in a little deeper. A school function, maybe. Slightly public, but not totally in the shadows. “I saw you were doing the Battle of the Bands.”

He instantly frowned. “Pinkly is making me do it. He said I needed more exposure in front of a crowd.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” She walked over to her cubby to grab her purse.

Davin made a sour face and stuck his tongue out. “Yeah, I don’t like attention.” This statement threw her. Davin was a great guy. Why wouldn’t he want attention? Wait, did he not have the same confidence around other people as he had around her? That didn’t make any sense.

“What are you going to play?” She stuck her arm in one sleeve of her jacket, waiting, and shifted her stuff from one hand to the other.

Again, his face soured. “I mean, I could play a classic cover, but Pinkly wants me to play an original song, too. There are a few good ones, but none of them land the way I want them to. It’s like I don’t have the inspiration or experience to express what I’m trying to say.” He hitched his bag on his shoulder and turned away.

She bumped his shoulder. “Did you write any songs about me?” It was meant to be a joke. But the way he froze halfway while getting his jacket on, then looking away, made her

stomach drop. She reached for his arm and didn't recognize her own voice. "Wait, did you?"

"Um, yeah, a few, but I won't play them at the show. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable."

He wrote not one, but a *few* songs! Her cheeks burned, and she wasn't sure if it was from blushing or the strain her smile put on her facial muscles.

She shouldn't dig in; she knew it. But she did anyway. "Why would it make me feel uncomfortable? Are you confessing your undying love to me?"

He snorted, "No." Then he laughed, and the tingly feelings he had given her went away. His "no" was like it was impossible for him to love her, like she was unworthy of his love.

Ouch. That one hurt.

"Oh, whatever." She grabbed her purse and headed towards the door. No, she wouldn't let the pain of his complete disregard for her feelings hurt her.

Stick to the rules.

No feelings

No family

No future.

Stick to the F's, and she would be okay. That's all she needed to do.

His body dashed past her as he reached for the door, pressing his weight against it. She tried to yank it forward, but the door didn't move. "No, it's about kissing you... but you're not named in the song. Hot and heavy hookups, rereading your texts all night when I should be sleeping."

Her stupid smile betrayed her again. This time, his "no" didn't sound like razors but like a gooey marshmallow. "Well, that sounds fine."

"I wasn't going to play it unless you liked it. Then maybe." His chest heaved as he pressed his forehead to hers.

“But only with your express written consent.”

She pressed her forehead back to him. When they were together, she liked the way her fingers felt around his neck and her thumb on his chin. It felt right there, like they fit. “Well, send me the file, and I’ll call my lawyer in the morning.”

His laughter crushed any uncomfortable feelings she had earlier. “I’ll be looking forward to his email.” Davin stepped to the side and opened the door for her. He walked her to her car. He had done this every time they had a session. Maybe it was to spend a few extra seconds with her, or maybe he didn’t want anything to happen to her in the parking lot. It would probably be bad for business.

His car was a few spots away. Nothing about the car seemed to match him at all. The paint job had been haphazard, but the interior of the car was perfect. Even if the seats were a little uncomfortable. There was a story behind the car. There had to be, but she hadn’t earned the right to hear it.

And that was the price she paid for sticking to her rules.

He stole one last kiss before he opened her car door and said goodbye. He watched her drive away. On the few occasions he dropped her off at her house, he always waited until she closed the door behind her before he left. The little things—things that meant he was raised right. Things that Todd Richardson and his fuckboys would never do.

By the time she pulled into her driveway, her phone had buzzed with the notification of an email from Davin. She didn’t want to wait until she was alone in her room to listen. The first song was about their first kiss. He had to be describing their first kiss unless he bought everyone to see leaves falling and a tiny waterfall hidden in the back trail of a park. She thought he would kill her there, but he kissed her instead. It didn’t mention her name, as promised. It was a slow song—the kind of song that made you relax after a long day. But he was right. Something was missing, like there was a whole other level to him that he couldn’t access. But maybe she was overthinking it.

The second song was faster and more upbeat, about getting a text message and debating what to say. It was relatable and had a killer hook. Yeah, this one might not have been about her—maybe someone else—but she still liked it.

Although if it was about someone else, she wanted to stab that bitch in the eye.

She sent him a text:

Kinsley: The lawyer approved your playlist.

**Hot Hookup: Glad he liked it. Hope you did too.
Night, Adams.**

The night of the Battle of the Bands, she wanted to look dangerous. Only one guy could touch her, and it would be Davin. Ginny, Jayden, and Reina saved her a seat. Her best friend, Casey, sat with Reina. Whenever she had plans to see Davin, Casey didn't seem to mind because she would hang out with Reina.

Maybe after the Battle of the Bands, she would tell Casey about her and Davin.

Maybe.

Let's see how the night went.

There had been a minor incident on the way in. A freshman with braces and no inklings of facial hair accosted her. He "suggested" she sit on his face for the evening. She doubled over, and her laughter bounced off the building.

While waiting for the show to start, she sent Davin a quick selfie of her in a black tank top, a black skirt, a leather jacket, and even extra thick eyeliner.

Hot Hookup: Holy shit. Are you fucking kidding me?

Kinsley: You like it?

Hot hookup: In a completely unrelated matter, are you busy after the show? We could... do... stuff.

Kinsley: I only go home with lead singers and winners.

Hot Hookup: Well, then that's the motivation I need. I was going to half-ass it, but now...

The show started, and it was ear-bleeding torture. She didn't know how much more she could take. She might've left if she wasn't trapped in the middle of the row.

Then Davin stepped on stage.

HOLY SHIT.

He didn't have a shirt on; his hair was styled like she had never seen, and his belt and pants hung low on his hips. Yeah, she would get her hands on that belt tonight.

Then he sang. Live, real, and raw. Everyone went nuts, and a new anxiety hit her. What if someone else wanted to be with him? She didn't have exclusive rights to his body, and he didn't have exclusivity to hers either. There wasn't anyone else who she was remotely interested in. She blocked Todd and his dick pics months ago. A little while later, he got busted for posting revenge porn, and the police were called in. He lost his scholarship, and his future vanished before his eyes. But Kinsley had gotten it in writing that his father needed to provide all the decorations for the prom, regardless of Todd's attendance at the dance. Her dad's law firm even notarized it.

There was no one else for Kinsley except Davin. She squeezed her legs together and shifted in her chair. Yeah, she wanted him—and only him—for tonight.

He finished his song to thunderous applause, gave a little wave, and walked off the stage. She sent him a quick text.

Kinsley: Are you getting unsolicited invitations for an illicit evening?

Hot Hookup: Yours is the only one that matters.

She blushed and pressed her phone to her chest, scanning the audience to ensure no one else saw it. The show continued, and with each passing moment, Kinsley prayed for it to be over. If the first act was bad, this was the torture of having paranoia nibble at her feet. Davin came out and sang the song about rereading his text messages. During the bridge, she could swear he looked right at her.

They declared Davin the winner, much to no one's surprise. Once he was offstage, her pocket vibrated.

Hot Hookup: Meet me by the stage door.

Task understood; now all she needed to do was find him and get out of this crowd. But as the herd of bodies moved toward the door, she felt something on her ass. And it wasn't Davin. And she did *not* like this. Her hand grabbed the wrist of whoever was trying to get up her skirt. A quick twist and yank. The No Shave Babyface fell to the ground, whimpering.

"Dickhead." She pushed her way through the crowd, ignoring the outcries she had bumped into. Another block. This time at the stage door, some underclassman douche acted like a fucking bouncer and wouldn't let her in. Instead, she stood leaning against the wall, arms crossed, with one foot propped up on the wall. The universal "I'm pissed that I have to wait for someone" pose. She watched as the losing acts left the stage, disheartened that their dreams of fame and fortune were dashed before they even began.

The stage door creaked open, and finally, Davin walked out with his backpack on one shoulder and his guitar case in hand. This time, he wore a shirt. Boo.

She was about to say something flirty and sexy, like maybe he should never wear a shirt. But he was all smiles when he stared at her. "Thank you so much for coming."

Damn sincerity.

Her stomach flipped again. Annoyingly so.

"Of course, I needed to hear *my* song played live. The question is, will you tell the next girl you hook up with that you wrote that song for her?"

His jaw clenched, and his face tightened as he turned away. "Do you think I'm hooking up with other people?"

Fuck, why was she starting this fight? Why did she do this to herself?

"You're welcome to, I mean don't let me hold you back."
SHUT UP. SHUT YOUR STUPID MOUTH.

His phone buzzed, and he scoffed, “I’ve got another offer for tonight; maybe I should take it?”

Jealousy daggers gutted her insides. His lips on someone else. His hands holding someone else. No. No. She was about to say something, but as they walked outside, masses of people huddled around. A voice cut through the crowd: “That’s the fucking cunt who jacked up my arm.”

Kinsley launched at the babyface. Maybe it was misdirected rage or an evening of pent-up sexual frustration, but either way, her fists were going to fuck up his face. A knee to the stomach, a punch to the back, and stupid-ass babyface was down. It was a hollow victory; he never stood a chance. She was about to throw another punch when a hand grabbed her wrist. She whipped her head around. Davin squeezed harder, his eyes dark and hazy, with a look of anger and something else—lust.

“Kinsley, let’s go.” She didn’t take orders from anyone, but there was something about the way Davin said it. His entire personality changed in a second, and her insides quivered. She changed her stance and stepped into Davin’s arms. He peered over her shoulder at Babyface. “Stay down. I won’t be able to hold her back a second time.” He leaned in. “Because I’ll be the one beating the shit out of you.”

She wanted to say something, but Davin was already dragging her away. On the walk to the parking lot, his grasp moved from her wrist to interlock with her fingers. They held hands until he pinned her against the passenger side door of his car. His lips were hot and wet against her neck before he whispered in her ear, “Tonight you’re mine.”

He drove them to his uncle’s condo because he was supposed to feed a kitten. He was already kissing her as they opened the front door. “Everything about you is so fucking hot,” he said as he pulled his shirt off with one quick motion of his hand. How long had he been practicing that? Or did that kind of hotness just come out of nowhere?

She yanked at his belt like she had imagined all night. Her thumb brushed against his stomach, and he moaned into

her mouth. Clothes were dropped on the floor, and her skirt was hiked up to her stomach. What was the point in taking it off when this was faster?

After six months of hooking up in the back seat of cars, at the gym, or wherever they could find a secret moment, tonight it was finally happening. She pushed his pants past his hips and onto the floor. Her hand rubbed against the tent of his boxers, and again he groaned. “Are you sure you want to do this?” He asked as he kissed her neck, brushing his teeth against the tender skin.

“I’ve wanted this since homecoming,” she admitted. She wanted him the second he started to teach her basic self-defense. She wanted him every time she saw him in the hall.

It was *her* stupid rules that held her back. And every night she cursed herself for them.

Her confession launched Davin into a completely different frenzy. He kicked off his pants with almost superhero speed. His fingertips hooked in between her hips and her panties. He broke away from her lips, only to push the lacy fabric past her knees until she had kicked them off. She arched her back and moaned as his tongue worked down her body, tasting every inch of her. Her belly swirled with anticipation, waiting to see what he did next.

He spread her legs, dropped to his knees, and worshiped her. His tongue was like magic, which sent her into an uncontrollable leg-shaking spasm. She gripped the couch, holding herself up. “More,” she gasped as if the word could give her the strength she needed to break the stone tablets her commandments had been written on.

Davin paused only for one more second. “Are you sure?”

Kinsley grabbed his face and pulled him close, their chests touching, sharing the same hot breath. “I need you right now.” Then she gasped as he lifted her and settled on the couch. She straddled him and gasped as he entered her. “Yes,” she groaned. She rode him, using his body for her pleasure, kissing his neck, lips, forehead—whatever she could land on. His hands dug into her fleshy thighs, urging her on.

“You feel so fucking good,” Davin said as if he wasn’t sure if the words had been real or just in his head. They gasped and shook together. She crashed on his shoulder, letting the wave settle her down until they synced their breaths.

She wanted to say something snarky about other plans for the night to ensure she didn’t say something true and emotional. Instead, she kept her mouth still, in sharp contrast to his racing heart.

The next few days in school, Kinsley noticed something was off. Davin’s skin was sickly pale, and his body had a constant tremor. And he wasn’t answering her text messages. Kinsley waited for him by the door after Conroy’s class. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him to the side of the hallway. In the last few months of their senior year, being late to class wasn’t her concern. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head. The trembling started again. “We had sex.”

“Yes, and it was awesome. We should do it again.” But this caused another assault on him. His eyes dilated, and sweat bubbled at his hairline. Okay, not a thing to joke about. “Is this a religious thing?”

“No.” He reached for her wrists. “We didn’t use a condom, and... and shit!” His panicked gaze tore away from her as he looked toward the ground. “Fuck, I never ever do that. What if I ruined your whole life?”

“Like an STD?” Kinsley said, trying to understand what caused terror in him. But he kept shaking his head like a dog shaking water off of his body. “Are you worried I’d get pregnant?”

He paused and nodded. She was about to soothe his nerves—to tell him she had been on birth control for years. “I can’t be like all the others,” he confessed and buried his head in her neck. “My dad got my mom pregnant when she was in high school; Grandpa got Granny pregnant. The men in my family destroy women’s lives.” He squeaked out a wail. “And I did it to you.”

God, he was so sweet. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him. “It’s going to be okay.”

“It’s not.” He broke off from her, pushing her away. “I think I’m going to puke.” He sprinted to the bathroom. What happened? Had she really been with him for this long and didn’t know his level of anxiety? She had been aware he was anxious, but everyone was. No, this was different. He was on the verge of a panic attack.

She wanted to wait for him, but the bell rang, so she hurried to class and promised she would meet him again later. But he left school and didn’t return her text messages. Around seven in the evening, she found herself driving to his house. He lived in a farmhouse; it didn’t fit in the cookie-cutter housing developments that populated their hometown. It was cute and quirky, and— “GOATS!” Kinsley paused halfway to the house and ran to the goat pen near the top of the driveway. She called out, “Who’s a pretty boy?” and made kissy sounds, but the goats blinked at her with their weird rectangle eyes.

Kinsley heard the front door open, but her body was halfway over the fence, trying to pet the goats. They would take a step forward but remain out of her reach. “What are you doing here?” Davin wore a blue polo shirt, not his normal black. It had his dad’s shop logo on it, so he must’ve just come home from work.

“You have goats! Why didn’t you tell me this months ago?”

He scratched his head. “I didn’t think it was a selling feature.”

Kinsley threw her arms in the air. “That should be the first thing you say when you meet people: “Hi, my name is Davin, I hate to talk, and I own goats.” Do they have names? Are they pets? How old are they? They look so wise. Are they wise?”

Maybe if he had been in a better place, he would’ve smiled, but he gazed at the goats. “There’s Milk, Cheese, and Kabob. Cheese is kind of a dick.” He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hands. “Why are you here?”

She turned and leaned against the fence. “Because you’re taking me shopping. I’ll drive. You pay.” She could see the storm start behind his eyes. He didn’t want to go; his shoulder sank, and hair shadowed his face.

“I’ll go get my wallet.” She had never seen him look so defeated. Davin remained quiet as he got into her car, his knee bounced faster than the car’s engine. He made tiny moaning sounds when she pulled into the shopping center. “We’re here.”

The CVS was a bright beacon of snacks, makeup, and other necessities. He squeaked, “Oh god!”

She leaned over the center console and cupped his face. “We’re going to do this together.” It took her five minutes to get him out of the car. He clenched her arm so hard that she was almost worried about bruises. The fluorescent light and the product placements blinded them. “Do you want to look around or just get what we need?” she asked. His quivering worsened by the second; each step felt like it was a mix of concrete and mud, slowing the process. They walked past the seasonal aisle and turned past the shampoo and hair supplies. Davin kept his head straight, staring at the back of the pharmacy. He kept moving when Kinsley stopped him.

“Where are you going?”

He swallowed, paused, and swallowed a second time. “Um, pregnancy tests?”

“I don’t need that.” Kinsley tried to hold back her shit-eating grin. That’s not what he needed right now.

He glanced from her to the back of the store. “Then why are we here?”

Kinsley grabbed his shoulders and spun him around to the shelf of pink and blue boxes and plastic square packaging in the feminine needs aisle. “I got my period yesterday. You freaked out before I could tell you.”

Davin blinked a few times at the boxes, then turned his head toward her. “You’re not pregnant?”

“Nope.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

The relief was instant, and he reached out and grabbed a box. “Do you use this brand?” He flipped it over. “What do the letters L, R, and S mean? Do you need a box with all of those letters? Probably.” He pulled the entire row of boxes off the shelf. “Do you need any of those cushion things?”

“Pads?”

“Hold on,” he told her, as his hands were overflowing. He shoved all the boxes in her arms and vanished. Kinsley fought with the boxes to put them back where they belonged, but then she saw Davin return with two red baskets. “Dump them in.”

“Are you kidding me?” she asked. “This is like ninety dollars in tampons.”

He continued to load the baskets. “How long will that last you? A week?”

Wow, men really didn’t know how women’s bodies worked, did they? She laughed. “This will probably last me all summer.”

Davin nodded with pride. “Perfect.” He scanned the aisles. “Um, grab some condoms, too. Do you want chocolate or salty things? How about I get you both?” His instant joy was infectious. Kinsley took a few steps away to grab a box of condoms.

But her hand stopped. “You’re not allergic to latex, are you? That’s one hell of a way to find out.”

“No, I’m not, but good call.” He put the basket down and dashed to a different aisle.

As she tossed the box into the basket, she watched this boy—this man—who had been in a panicky spiral for the last few days. His concern this whole time had been about her. Getting her pregnant. Not wanting to ruin or hurt her. She didn’t think that sort of consideration would ever cross the minds of any other guys she dated. He was a unicorn—rare and magical. She liked the way she could help him relax and

the way he made her laugh. No, she didn't like it. It was more. His text messages were the last things she read at night and the first thing she checked in the morning. Her gaze drifted in his direction all year. It wasn't just hooking up or sex. That was fun, awesome in fact, but she didn't need it. She wanted him.

His head bobbed over the aisle, and he came back with chocolate-covered pretzels. "Nailed it!"

Kinsley crossed her arms and smirked. "So, did you like having sex with me?"

He dropped the snack into the basket and then arranged the boxes in a neat order. "Um, yeah. I did."

She held the box of condoms. "I assume it's something you would like to do again?"

He cleared his throat and focused on maximizing the space in the basket. "If it's something you wanted to do, then yeah."

Ugh, he was so freaking adorable. "Well, I could do without weeks of watching you have panic attacks. I've been on birth control since I was fifteen. I could make you a sex calendar, a way to keep track of when I would be more likely to get pregnant. What do you think?"

His chest expanded as he took one deep breath. "That might help. But I'm always going to freak out about it." Davin stood, lifting the basket. She stepped forward, and his hand wrapped around her hip. "I know we aren't a thing." Those words stung, but it was too late to do anything about it. "I know I'm just a blip in the extraordinary life you're going to have. I don't want to be the reason your future goes off the rails. I'm kinda a mess."

"Kinda?" She smirked, and that won her a laugh from him.

He leaned in. "Shh, don't tell anyone. I'm trying to keep a low profile about it." He pressed his forehead to hers. Again, she wanted to say another snarky comment but didn't. Instead, she listened. "I know you only want me, and I'll give it to you for as long as you'll have me, no strings attached. No

emotions. No dating. I get the rules, and I'll play by them. It's probably for the best, anyway. You're the kind of girl who will ruin my life and ruin me for all other women."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling her body closer to him, their chests touching, giving him the affection, she didn't think she could hold back. "You're going to ruin me for all other men." Her lips found his, and as she kissed him in the feminine needs aisle of CVS, she knew how right this was.

An older woman coughed; they were blocking her way as she reached for the urinary tract infection pills. Davin mumbled, "Sorry," and stepped out of the woman's way. She sneered at them but continued with her shopping.

"Is there anything else you want?"

She lifted her left shoulder, pinched her lips, and glanced to the side. "Well, I'm never going to turn down a chance to get highlighters." A few minutes later, with an overflowing basket, Davin stood in front of the cashier with Kinsley resting her head on his shoulder.

The clerk, who smelled like weed, looked at several boxes of tampons and back up at Davin. "She's not pregnant."

The clerk sighed. "Mazel tov."

Kinsley laughed, "Thanks!"

Back in her car with two bags full of enough supplies that would last her until college and a receipt long enough to wallpaper a living room, she swallowed and asked the question that had been bothering her for a while. "Davin, you wanna go to the prom with me?" She couldn't tell from his expression, so she continued with her rant. "Um... I didn't have a date for homecoming and spent the whole time running around and managing everything. I kinda want to have a normal high school experience, and I want it with you. I'll pay for your ticket since you paid a mortgage payment on my uterus, and like you don't have to get a tux. I'm not worried about that..."

But his lips were on hers before she could finish. "I'll go to prom with you if you come to this stupid Battle of the

Bands thing Pinkly wants me to do for some local radio station,” he said.

“Is this how it’s always going to be, deals and transactions?” Kinsley wondered. She was fine with that. In her mind, the first rule shattered into a million pieces. She had feelings for him.

The Battle of the Bands wasn’t that at all. It was a public audition for Bayfest. A fact that Davin didn’t seem to know. He was so focused on surviving each second that long-term planning never seemed to cross his mind. Davin didn’t know how many people were in the crowd or even who he competed against. He wasn’t even sure if his family was in the crowd. A part of her sort of wished they were there. She didn’t want to be the only one in his life supporting him.

She expected to hear one of the songs from Battle of the Bands, but when he stepped on stage, Davin’s song was about the death of someone close. A brother? There’s no way that could be true. He would’ve told Kinsley about that. Right? Maybe he picked the song because it was his best one, maybe because it showed the range of his talent, but it was real and raw. Like there was a whole side of Davin she would never know.

She would never know because she told him she didn’t want to. Every day it got worse. Her feelings were building, and as he sang the last note, her heart shattered. He broke her, like deep down, she knew he would.

The way the light hit him, you could see the ache and sincerity in his face. The crowd erupted, and he gave a little head nod and thanked them, but as soon as he walked off the stage, he was focused solely on her.

His joy, his pride, his smile.

She was destroyed.

She loved Davin Graeloch.

“You were amazing.” She leaped into his arms, holding him, but she just barely held back her confession. She pushed the sweat off his face and kissed him again.

“Thanks.”

“You’re going to win and be the opening act at Bayfest.”

The excitement vanished. “What?”

“Bayfest, that’s what this whole thing is about. Didn’t you notice the millions of posters all over the place?” She pointed to the poster of a crab rising out of the water like the sun.

“But more people go to Bayfest, like a *lot* more than are at school or here.”

“Yeah, isn’t that the whole deal? The whole point?” Kinsley lifted his guitar and led him back into the green room, where all the other bands were milling around. She stroked his hair as he curled on her lap, her words of comfort not breaking through his layers of anxiety.

When it was time to announce the winners, he lifted his head and whispered, “I can’t do this.”

“Of course, you can. You’re Davin Graeloch. You’re awesome, incredibly talented, and the only guy I would even consider breaking any of my rules for.” He blinked, trying to process what she said. “Shh. Don’t tell anyone, but I really, really like you.”

She couldn’t tell him she loved him. There’s no way he would believe her. Not when it looked like she was only saying that just to get him on stage. No. She couldn’t. Not that day.

Five minutes later, he bounded off the stage, even happier than the first time. “I didn’t win!”

“That’s my boy!”

He picked her up and spun her around, slowing down to let her land on her feet. He pressed his forehead to hers. “I like you too.”

They were about to kiss for what must have been the millionth time when someone she didn’t recognize said, “You were robbed.”

Davin's face ran through the gamut of emotions before ending in blank confusion. The man was Maxwell Something-or-another and the lead singer of a band Davin seemed to like. Kinsley made a quick note that she would need to research that. Of course, Davin was completely useless. She took Maxwell's card from him and shared Davin's streaming site information with this famous person.

Fame was really relative. To Kinsley, he was just a guy with a leather jacket, but for Davin, this man could open his future and change his life forever.

But out in the parking lot, Kinsley met Davin's mom, who gave her a huge hug. Kinsley liked her instantly and broke another one of her rules.

She met his family.

Prom had not been the magical night she had dreamed about. She was too worried about the gift bags, and the DJ wasn't sticking to the playlist. Her entire year had led to this moment, and for what? Extra stress and a few kids to say, "Nice job?" Ugh. Why did she do this to herself? She should've learned her lesson from homecoming, but no. History was forever going to repeat itself. She did like dancing with Davin, the way his hand gripped her hips and how his thumb would rub circles on her lower back. He hummed a song no one else but she could hear. He stepped away to get a phone call and when he came back, he was in a daze. When she asked him, he said, "It was a good call."

He kissed her good night, slow and sweet. He pressed his forehead to hers and whispered, "I wish we had more time together."

She didn't think much of it. He was going to art school about thirty minutes away from her college. It wasn't that big of a deal. And they had all summer. But yeah, if they weren't starting so late in the year, then maybe they could've been something great by now. Maybe. She breathed in his cologne that he only wore when they were together.

"Well, high school has to end sometime." The words hurt. Had this really been it? Had these really been the best days of

her life? She spent it planning for other people, and her life was hidden behind lists and rules. Somewhere along the way, she forgot to live.

He kissed her one more time. “I never once take these for granted. Because I never know when the last one is going to be.” He put his hand on her cheek, and she nuzzled in. “You ruined me, Kinsley Adams, like I knew you would.”

If there was a moment to confess her feelings, it was then. But he pulled away and left her on her stairs.

Davin didn't come to school on Monday.

Or Tuesday.

He didn't answer her text messages.

When she drove to his house, his mother looked like she had been crying. Her face was all puffy. “Where's Davin?”

“Gone.”

Gone. What the hell did that mean? The possibilities and reality were too much for her. She burst into tears and collapsed on the porch. “Oh, honey, he's at his grandparent's lake house. There was a big fight, and Davin took off.” Kinsley didn't expect that answer at all; Davin's mom needed to work on her delivery.

His mother bit her lip. “Davin's uncles have been to visit him, but he would rather be alone.”

Well, fuck that. “Address.”

“Honey, you've never seen him like this; it's probably safer if you leave him be.”

Every cell in her body lit up. This was everything she wasn't going to do. “Address.” Kinsley held the power to convince anyone to do whatever she wanted with minimal effort. It was a mix of her determination and danger. Fuck around and find out. Mrs. Graeloch must have known she lost because she stepped aside and let Kinsley come in.

There was a hole in the wall, roughly fist-sized, a few speckles of blood, and boxes. Someone was moving out.

Besides the disarray, the house itself was pretty cute. She could imagine family dinners there, loud and with laughter. But now it looked like a graveyard of memories, each box a headstone.

Mrs. Graeloch came out with a paper. "I saw him yesterday. He said he was leaving on Friday."

"Where's he going?"

"LA."

There was no way she heard that right. Nope, not a chance. "Fine, that gives me a few more days." For the first time, she had no plan. Until now, her plans just seemed to get in the way of living life.

She snatched the address out of this woman's hands, turned on her heels, and walked out. Once in the safety of her car, she called her mom. "You know how I've been really responsible for the last four years?"

"Yeah." Her mom had an edge to her voice.

"Well, I'm coming home, packing a bag, and hanging out with my not-boyfriend until he moves to LA on Friday."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Kinsley turned on her car, and the radio scared her. Her mom said, "Go be a reckless youth; just pack your birth control and call me every day."

"Deal."

Four hours later, she still hadn't reached Davin yet, but calling it a "cabin" was an understatement. It was a freaking house right out of HGTV. She checked her hair in the rearview mirror, grabbed her overnight bag, and prepared herself for the worst.

What was the worst?

He wasn't alone. There were scores of naked girls and guys in the middle of an orgy, and he had forgotten her name. But the only car in the driveway was his, and Kinsley assumed there would be a lot more moaning from an orgy.

He could be dead.

But then why could she hear music playing, followed by a pause and the same five notes on repeat? No, he wasn't dead.

She took one deep breath and walked up the stairs. Waiting for another pause in the notes, she knocked. There was movement, then footsteps, and the door unlocking.

He looked awful, almost zombie-like, pale with red eyes; his hair was frazzled; the perfect, polished prince he had been a few days ago was replaced by this undead version.

"Kinsley?" He stepped back into the living room, not quite an invitation in, more like trying to keep her from smelling him. "What are you doing here?"

"Besides stating the obvious that I was worried about you, I wanted to see you before you left for the mysterious trip to LA." She pushed past him and shifted her bag onto her shoulder. The house was even more beautiful on the inside, except for the broken lamp in the corner. A pile of blankets, pizza crusts, soda cans, and his bass surrounded the couch. Well, that explained the hair and the smell.

He tried the word a few times before it left his lips. "Why?"

She picked up the pizza crusts and the empty box shoved under the coffee table and walked into where she assumed the kitchen would be. "Because, Grae Loch, I don't think you fully see the significance here. We. Are. Alone. In a giant, albeit kinda smelly house with no parents, no friends, no school, or expectations. Just you and me."

She dumped the pizza in the trash and returned to him. He was still standing in the doorway, blinking toward her. He hung his head and shut the door. "Kins, look, I'm not in a good place. My life is all fucked up, and I just want to be alone."

She tented her fingers and touched her lips with her index fingers. "I see." Her bag dropped to the floor with a thud. "I get it. But let me give you a second option. You can be alone, or we could have copious amounts of sex."

“You want to fuck the depression out of me?” He shook his head. “That’s not how depression works.” His eyes traveled over her. She wore a white dress, light and flowy—a far cry from the elegant prom dress he had seen her in but a big step up from her workout clothes. “But it’s a treatment method I’ve never tried before.” His lips curled at the corner. She had only seen this smile when he looked at her. Never when he hung out with his friends or played music or anything like that. No. It was reserved for her.

She grinned. “For science.” He crossed the space towards her, but she put her hands to his chest. “First, shower, then we can fuck like bunnies all night long.”

Davin’s face darkened, like he had gone someplace else. “Is that really why you’re here? Just for the sex?”

She ran her hands over his chest and around his neck, keeping her thumb on his chin. This was her spot on his body. She liked touching him there; it was intimate, like she could control where he looked, his attention, and maybe even his thoughts.

“I’m here because I like you and I’ve been worried. You weren’t answering your phone, and this was the best possible option,” she whispered as he shut his eyes, pressing his cheek deeper into her hand. “I like you for many reasons. You’re sweet, smart, and incredibly talented. You are constantly thinking about my needs, and for some insane reason, you can’t see how wonderful you are.” Her voice lightened. “So, it falls to me to inform you.”

He tried to break away, to run, so she lifted herself onto her toes and pressed her lips to his. His arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her into his body. “You make everything so much harder,” he groaned.

Kinsley pressed her waist against the bulge in his fly. “Oh, I’m aware.” She nodded. “Let’s go upstairs... for science.”

“Well, if it’s for science.” He laughed, and laced his fingers with hers, and dragged her upstairs.

A few hours later, he had been cleaned and dirtied again. She lay naked, draped across his chest, as his fingers traced the smooth curves of her lower back. “Do you want to talk?”

“It’s only going to ruin this perfect moment.” As his fingers worked up her spine and played with the curls in her hair, she traced the lines of the phoenix on his chest. “Tomorrow. We can talk tomorrow.”

She gave a little yawn. “Promise.”

“The nighttime is for quiet confessions and dreams, whispers in the dark without consequences. The morning, that’s for reality.”

“No wonder why everyone hates mornings.” She squeezed him closer.

He wrapped his index finger around her hair. “If we get up early enough, there’s a cute ma and pa place nearby. They make the best homemade donuts.”

“They better be worth getting out of bed for, Graeloch.”

He was silent for a second. “I guess they are; I don’t know; I’ve always woken up alone. Tomorrow will be a totally different experience.”

“Do they have chocolate donuts?”

“Dark chocolate,” he countered.

“Well, you’re gonna have to be pretty freaking great to beat dark chocolate donuts. I’m talking morning snuggles to the extreme.” She listened to his heart and the steady rhythm that had slowed over the course of the night. “I’ve never woken next to someone, either. You’re a first for me.”

He wasn’t the first guy she had sex with, but he was the first one she enjoyed it with. He was the first one who wanted to be with *her*, not just her body.

“Were you trying to dump me after prom?”

He sighed and rolled his head back on the pillow. “I don’t know what the hell I tried to do. There was so much I wanted

to say, but none of it would come out. Things that shouldn't come out."

Kinsley understood. The words constantly seemed to catch in her throat, but she never wanted them to fall out because the ramifications would have been far too intense.

But the nighttime was for confessions, as he had said, so she admitted quietly, if only in a whisper, "I don't want you to go."

If he heard, he made no motion. He gave no hint that he knew what she tried to say or what she had said.

Instead, he kissed her forehead and said, "Let's just go to sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning."

True to his word, with her belly filled with dark chocolate donuts and a coffee in the morning light, Davin told her what was happening.

"The lead singer of Autumn Foxes wants me to come on tour with him for a couple of weeks. The bass player hurt himself, and their regular fill-in guy can't do it, so he called me."

But before Kinsley could gush with pride and excitement, he put up his hand and dipped his head. "The thing is, I don't have a reason to come back once I'm out in LA." Her heart sank to her feet. *She* wasn't a reason for him to come home? Of course not. Why would she be? He continued. "I'm just going to stay there. I can't be at home anymore. My dad, well, we got into a fight."

"Yeah, I saw the hole in the wall at your mom's house." Until this point, Kinsley had never actually asked any of the hard questions, but how could she truly love him and not know all of him? "So, the violence, that's you."

"I'm a myriad of various mental health issues. Between the depression, the anger, and the anxiety, I'm a giant ball of a mess, and my dad has never helped the situation. We're not even oil and water; we're a match and lighter fluid. I'm every one of his flaws wrapped in one body. Anytime he sees me, he sees the son that I'm not." Davin's words sound hollow, like

he'd been playing the words over and over in his head. "My dad wishes I was my brother, but since Brandon died six years ago, I'm a constant reminder of the life he will never have. I have no desire to be the heir to my father's auto shop and because of that, I'm a source of disappointment. So, when this opportunity came up, I had to take it. It's my one chance to get out."

Kinsley drummed her fingers on the table. "Did you sign any of the contracts yet?"

Davin shook his head. "Not yet."

"Let me see what kind of money I can help you get. Don't take their first offer, and don't sign anything until I've read it."

Over the course of the morning, the contents of the donut box vanished. First it was the glazed, then the sprinkled, and finally the raspberry-filled. Once the box was empty, Davin finally turned and said, "Thank you for coming. I don't know if I would have made it without you."

Kinsley wrapped her arms around his waist and placed her head on his shoulder. "But I'm not enough of a reason to come back..." The words burned her throat, and he said nothing. His silence was more than a thousand daggers to the heart, but this was her own fault. This was a grave she had dug because she had stuck to her rules.

They spent their last day watching Netflix. When it was time to leave, they packed silently, and Kinsley followed Davin to the airport. She had cried all of her tears and was grateful that she drove alone in the car. She couldn't handle Davin seeing her cry like that. It would have just made the whole situation a thousand times worse.

She watched him scan his tickets and return them to her. He gave her one last kiss. There were a thousand words on his lips, but none of the words would escape. He walked into the security line, and a family with Mickey Mouse ears and matching sweatshirts stood behind him. The adorableness was a stark contrast to how her insides were melting and dying. She made the biggest mistake of her life asking Conroy to

switch her partner. That had been the moment that changed her life forever. Worst of all, she'd stuck to all of her rules and it had gotten her nowhere besides just standing in an airport, heartbroken, and crying the last of her tears. What else had she missed out on? What other amazing moments did life have to offer than just checklists and rules?

She headed back to her car. This part of the airport didn't have a Starbucks, and she wasn't in the mood to wait in line for five-dollar off-brand coffee. All she wanted to do was crawl back into bed, go to sleep, and then wake up when high school was over.

There was a commotion. The family of twenty Mickey Mouse super fans had yelled as they shifted back and forth in the line. Something stirred. Davin burst out of the line like a rat coming out of a sewer pipe.

He called her name, "Kinsley! Wait!" He pushed past the crowd. She froze. It was one of those moments out of a romantic comedy that she'd dreamed of but never actually thought would happen. And in real life, there were a lot more people pushing and shoving.

He panted, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. The timing is awful, and nothing about this is fair. I'm leaving and it's not fair to lock you down, and a long-distance relationship is hard. But if I don't say it now, I'll regret it for the rest of my life." He took a deep breath and blurted out, "I've been in love with you since homecoming when you knocked me on my ass."

Kinsley laughed and kissed him. "I felt the same way too. It's just that I didn't want to mess up my plans, but life happens. Life happens the best when your plans go awry."

If you liked Long Term Plans, it would help me out if [you left a review](#).

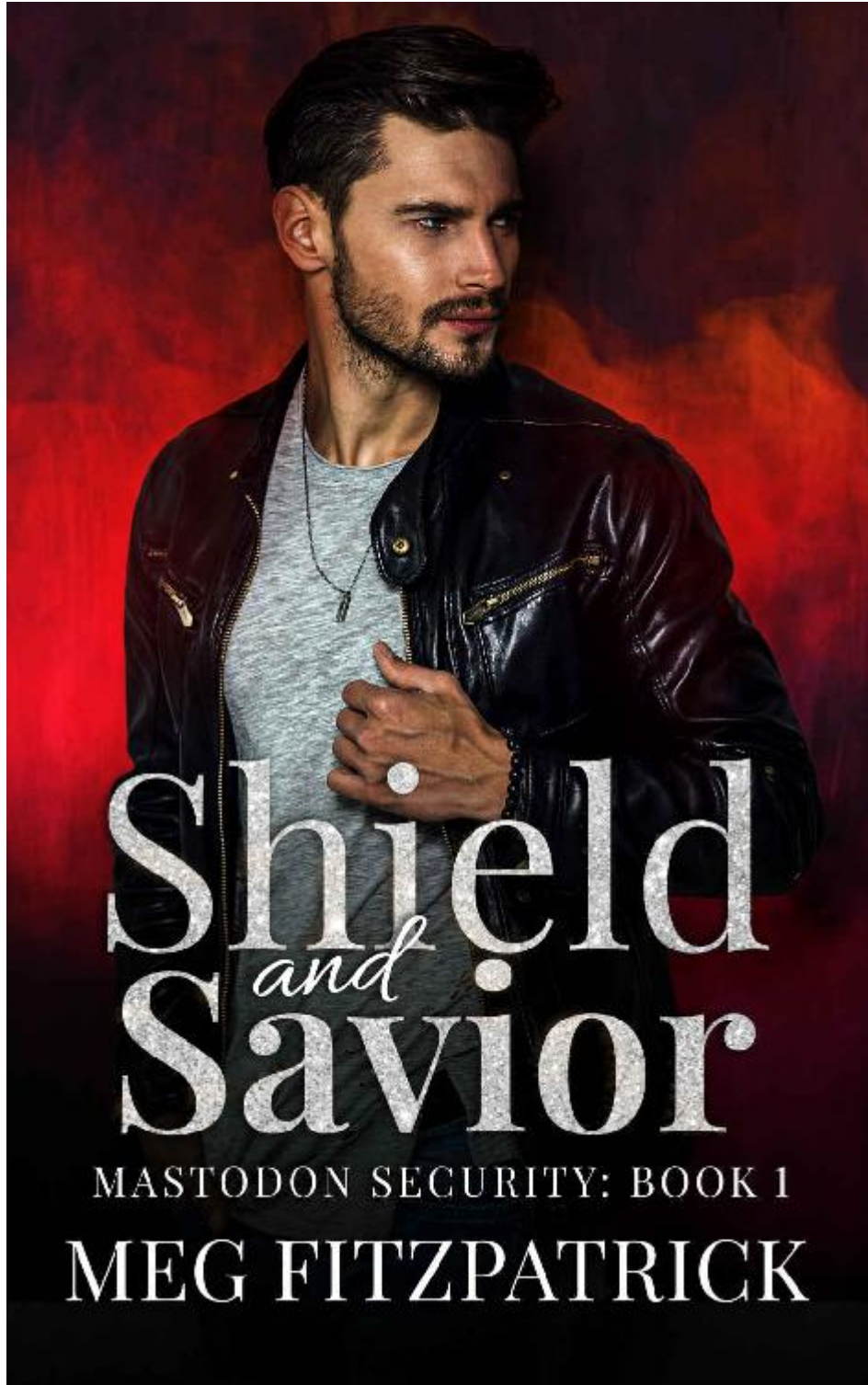
Lastly if you join [my newsletter](#), you will get access to a free song written by Davin and tons of digital content.

This is Meg Fitz's final book for the foreseeable future, but if you like more adult romance, check out the Mastodon Security Series by Meg Fitzpatrick.

Shield and Savior- Single Mom, bodyguard, Mafia romance.

The only thing more dangerous than Izzy's family, is my feelings for her.

Coming March 2024



Shield
and
Savior

MASTODON SECURITY: BOOK 1

MEG FITZPATRICK

Author Notes and Acknowledgments

Back in December 2022, I knew all my ideas for The Plans series were going to come crashing down. The Plans series was slated to be a seven-book series, with a time jump. But I had a reader and cover problem and so I pivoted. Long-Term Plans, my last goodbye to Kinsley and Davin was born.

Jayden was originally two distinct characters: Jayden the jock and Matt Trudge, the friendly neighborhood drug dealer. I liked Matt a lot. He gave Davin's character more depth, and he had all the best lines. But he and Ginny took up about 10K extra words in Best Laid Plans, so I made some tweaks and changes. Matt was supposed to save Kinsley at Todd Richardson's party. And instead, I thought it was more powerful if it came from one of Todd's teammates. So, Matt and Jayden got smooshed into one character.

Ginny has always been the same between drafts.

I thought how annoying it must be to have both Kinsley and Davin as your classmates. The two, who from the outside seemed to have it all together, but as readers, we know they are messed up. Nothing about Kinsley or Davin's high school experience was close to mine. Without the sick father, my insecurities were closer to Ginny's.

About the spice in this book, or the lack thereof. When I write spice, I connect to what feels right with the character's relationship. Jayden and Ginny seemed so personal that I didn't want to share their most intimate moments.

Enough about that. I need to thank my ARC team and my editors, Amber and Sandra.

Christi Barth from MRW for pointing out the flaws with my original plans. Without your guidance, I would have jumped headfirst into a dinosaur size turd pile. That one ten-minute conversation changed the entire path of my career. The Maryland Romance Writers group has been the best source of support I've ever discovered. (BTW, all our meetings are hybrid, so if you don't live in Maryland you should still check it out)

Valerie, you are my rock, and I can't thank you enough
for all your support.

