



NEIGHBORLY MISCONDUCT

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Neighborly Misconduct

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Neighborly Misconduct

The sizzling, new story by *USA Today* bestselling author Elizabeth Lynx is a neighbors-to-lover, sports romance that causes fireworks but not how you might expect. What happens when a hockey player buys his very first home only to discover his beautiful new neighbor isn't so neighborly?

I threw a housewarming party and accidentally blew up my neighbor's yard.

Some hockey players may be known for being rough or partying a lot, but not me. I understood that you have to work hard to make your dreams come true.

My dream was to own my own home. And I just made that happen. But I made a mistake and the housewarming party I threw got a little too out of hand.

Now my beautiful neighbor hated me. I tried to make it up to her but that didn't go well either.

Fine. If it's war she wants, it's war she'll get.



CHAPTER ONE



Emmanuel

“**T**his house is unbelievable. You know, my parents used to live right around the corner from here when I was growing up. I met the old woman—your neighbor—a few times.” Aspen hoisted his filth-covered shoes onto my pristine, and recently purchased, wooden coffee table.

I glared in horror as he snatched up the remote to switch on my wide-screen television. With the other hand, he held a bottle of beer that he shamelessly grabbed from my refrigerator without a word. As he prepared to take a swig, his clumsy fingers caused the golden liquid to miss his mouth and run down his neck. In shock, he pulled the bottle away, causing its contents to cascade onto my expensive wool couch.

My nostrils flared. “It is, and I’d like it to stay that way, so get your shoes off my table and clean up that beer you’ve just spilled.” I folded my arms over my chest as I stood, blocking the television.

His eyebrows rose, and he sat up, placing the bottle on the table. “Sorry, dude. I just thought—”

“You just thought what? That I’d be the nice, easy-going guy you know from the ice rink?”

Aspen sheepishly nodded. “Yeah.”

I smiled, but I wasn’t happy. “On the ice, we’re a team. I put up with body slams and bruises. I do what I’m told, and I do it well. But this small plot of land and all the contents on top of it, like this home, are mine. I own all this. We are not a team under this roof; you are my guest. I will feed you and hopefully provide a good time tonight, so you will leave happy later. But know that I have no problem kicking you out if you take advantage of my hospitality.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just a couch—”

I took a breath and cut him off quickly, “Says the man who had a couch growing up. There’s one thing you should know about me, Aspen. It’s that I worked my ass off to make money so I could have all the things I never had when I was little. One of those things was a house. And I’m not saying I grew up in a cheap apartment; I’m saying sometimes my mom, my little sister, and I slept outside. Sure, my mom called it camping so my sister wouldn’t be the wiser, but I knew what it was. We had been kicked out of our crappy, tiny apartment again. I never had the luxury of a couch or a dining room table or a backyard or a garden out front. These things may be normal to you, but they were just a dream to me. And now that I have them, I plan to keep them in pristine condition.”

He sat there, slack-jawed, and stared at me. After a moment, he nodded. “Got it. It’s about time for the International Games

team to send out scouts. I heard you were interested?”

I took a step closer. “Don’t change the subject. There’s a sponge in the kitchen. Why don’t you get to cleaning up your mess?”

He hopped up and walked swiftly to the kitchen. There was a knock on the door. When I opened it, I smiled. And this time, I meant it. “Cillian. Glad to see you came.”

He held out a pizza box in his hand. “A gift for the new house. It’s not really a home until we have christened it with a pizza from Joe’s.”

Grabbing the box from him, I waved him inside.

Both Aspen and Cillian were hockey players on our team, the Devils, but they were also my friends. I only invited a few of the players over for fear they’d mess up my new place.

It had been a dream of mine to buy a home. I had been playing on the team for a few years and finally saved enough money to pay for it in full. Cash. Watching my mom struggle to pay the bills, I knew being in debt—even if it was a mortgage—wasn’t the life I wanted. Banks were evil, and I stayed as far away from them as possible.

Most of my teammates spent lavishly. We were national league players, so they paid us well. They bought cars and houses and fancy clothes while I invested and saved.

It wasn’t as if they paid cash for any of it. So, they had high monthly bills while I did not.

I knew nothing was certain about life. At any moment, I could be suspended or expelled, or even be in an accident that would prevent me from playing. That was why I made sure I didn't owe money to anyone, especially a bank.

While they lived it up and slept around, I focused on my dream. I watched my mother get burned by men who stole from her and bosses who took advantage of her. I knew if I wanted my dream to come true, then I had to avoid distractions and focus.

Even now that I had my home, I knew being with the wrong woman could cause it to slip through my fingers. I only had to look at my teammate, Jackson, to know that was true.

Maybe that made me boring, but I had a roof over my head and lived a good life because of it.

As I went to the dining room to drop off the pizza, Cillian took off his shoes in the entranceway. He understood. He was the oldest guy on the team and was much more relaxed about life. And since he got engaged, he was a lot less grumpy too.

"This place is great. Who else is here?" Cillian asked right as Aspen came out of the kitchen with a sponge in hand.

"Aspen." I waved over at him.

Cillian winced. Not that Cillian didn't get along with him. It was that Aspen was the youngest player on the team and also the most immature. I figured he'd spill something, so I made sure all my cleaning supplies were on the kitchen counter, ready to grab.

Cillian leaned in and whispered, “Do you think that was wise? You’ve got a lot of nice stuff here.”

“It’s fine. I’ll make sure he’s never left alone... unless he’s outside, of course.”

Cillian chuckled. “Yeah, what sort of thing could he do outside?”

We all had been witness to Aspen’s many adventures. From breaking a table at a fancy restaurant to somehow winding up naked on stage at an awards show, you never knew what would happen with Aspen.

“I know, right? It’s not like he has ever destroyed something outside before. It’s usually something inside. Like the vase at the White House, or the toilet at the Denny’s.”

“Which Denny’s?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know... all of them. He has a thing about taking gigantic craps at those diners.”

“You know I can hear you two.” Aspen turned his head toward us as he bent over the couch, wiping up the stain.

“We’re only stating facts.” Cillian moved into my living room.

I had fresh white paint on the wall, and all my furniture was brand-new. I wanted my first home to be perfect. While I wasn’t super rich, I could afford quality things. And since they were nice, I would do anything not to ruin them, even if that meant treating my teammate like a kid who needed to be watched.

My house, my rules.

“You all need me in your life.” He straightened and pointed the sponge at us. “You’re too much like a grumpy old man, and you’re too uptight. You need someone relaxed in your life. Ready to show you all the joys of the world.”

Cillian rolled his eyes.

“No, thank you,” I snorted. “I’ve seen enough of the joys of life. I’m happy to live my life, working hard doing something I love and then returning to a comfortable home. Simple, but perfect.”

“Sounds nice,” Cillian said.

“Ugh, it sounds boring. You’re what, thirty?”

I frowned. “Twenty-eight.”

“Whatever. Same thing.” He shook his head. “What I’m trying to say is you’re young. Get out there and do something fun and exciting. Take a chance at life. Whenever you’re at a party, Emmanuel, you always have one beer, stay about an hour, and then leave. It’s like you have a checklist for social events, and once you’ve checked all the boxes, you’re done.”

Heat crawled up my neck. I would say nothing, but Aspen was right. I actually did have a checklist for everything, including parties.

“Hey, don’t pick on him in his own house.” At least Cillian would defend me.

“You really shouldn’t say anything. At least Emmanuel goes to parties; you’re all work and no play. You know what they say about that?” Aspen smirked.

“Yes, I do. And I’ll have you know, I don’t need to act like a fool to have fun. I brought the pizza, didn’t I?”

Aspen waved his hands in the air. “Whoa, pizza. Such a party animal.”

“Look, it’s supposed to be a quiet night in with the guys. We can watch a movie and eat the pizza Cillian brought over. At the table, of course. Food is only eaten in the kitchen or dining room.”

Cillian nodded, but Aspen looked as if he was about to explode.

“Dear God, do you hear yourself? Maybe the team is going to have to nickname you *Old Lady*?” Aspen pushed his hands on his hips.

“What?”

“Since Old Man is taken.” Aspen waved at Cillian.

I wasn’t that bad, was I? I glanced over at Cillian, who had earned the nickname of Grumpy Old Man. I loved the guy, but he was a grouch.

Maybe Aspen was right. I made my dream come true—I bought my first house with cash—so maybe it was time to relax. Live a little.

“Fine. I’ll make an exception to my eating rule. The popcorn I’ll make while we watch a movie can be eaten on the couch. See, I can relax too.”

Aspen groaned. “You’re sadder than I thought. That’s your idea of relaxing, Emmanuel? I wasn’t going to do this, but I brought something I think might help.”

My heart picked up its pace as Aspen moved toward the front door. “What are you planning on—”

Aspen waved me away. “Don’t worry, I won’t even bring it into the house. Just give me a minute and then come outside.” He shut the door behind him.

“What do you think it is?”

I glanced over at Cillian. “I don’t know, but if he winds up naked, I’m never inviting him over again. There are community guidelines I have to adhere to now. And I was warned when I moved here that they dole out some hefty fines if I break any of their rules.”

I pulled back the pale teal curtains and watched Aspen dig into the trunk of his car. He pulled out some big colorful packages, but I couldn’t exactly tell what they were as it was getting dark out. He went near the neighbor’s fence and set the packages down on my grass.

“I’m both curious and frightened at the same time,” Cillian whispered behind me.

He was watching through the window too. I wanted to go outside and stop him, but I also didn’t want to come across

like the old lady he nicknamed me. I had some self-respect. If he told all the players about how I acted and his nickname for me, that was it. I wouldn't live it down.

Why did I invite Aspen to my housewarming?

There was a spark of light.

“Is that a match?” Cillian asked.

“I think so...” And then it all came to me.

The big colorful boxes from his trunk. The matches. And the reason he was placing them on the lawn.

Aspen was setting off fireworks. And from the looks of them, they were going to be big.

I ran to the door, not caring that I was barefoot, and tried to yell at him to stop.

But it was too late. The first firecracker went off, and it was loud. I covered my ears to drown out the deafening whistle as it took off into the air. Moments later, it sounded like a sonic boom had exploded as blue and green lights burst into the air overhead.

I glanced around and saw a few of my neighbors coming out. Shit. I read the neighborhood guidelines. It was confusing at first since I never lived in a place where rules were to be followed or I could be fined. But I guess it made the place more aesthetically pleasing.

I remembered the rule that fireworks were a big no-no, unless I got permission ahead of time. Which, obviously, I

didn't.

I ran over to Aspen and pulled him back. I knew he wouldn't hear me since it was so loud, so I shook my head at him.

He shrugged and waved at the six huge cannisters of fireworks sitting in a circle on my front lawn. They were all lit.

Both of us ran back to the front doorway. Most of them set off into the air. I say "most" because there was one... I don't know how, but it got knocked over. And when it went off, it shot, not into the darkening sky, but through my neighbor's fence and into their garden.

And that was where it exploded.



CHAPTER TWO



Lydia

My pulse raced as I cautiously approached my mailbox. There it was, the small red flag standing tall, a sign that something important was waiting for me.

Or was it?

Ugh, I never thought I would be this nervous over mail. I wasn't even this nervous when I tried and failed to get into five different universities. I knew then that higher education liked to say they were open-minded about learning disabilities, but not when it came to actually letting in students.

With a trembling hand, I reached in and grabbed all the envelopes inside, my heart pounding as I held onto the mail. Dusk had settled upon the town, making it difficult to read the words on each envelope.

Desperately searching for one particular piece of mail, I silently begged for it to be there. The first few envelopes were nothing but junk or coupons, but then suddenly, there it was.

The heat moved up to my eyes, and my vision blurred. Was I about to cry? Yes, I was, because I had been waiting weeks for the invitation. Every neighbor I talked to had already gotten theirs.

Was I being ignored because I was new to the neighborhood? But I wasn't really new. This was my grandmother's house. I helped her every year at the event. Her neighbors knew me.

When she passed away last year, she left me her house. And a note that, to me, was more valuable than the home.

She asked me to do something for her upon her passing. My grandmother meant the world to me, and I'd go door to door on my hands and knees if I had to, just so I could fulfill her wish.

"Did it come?" Daisy, my best friend, yelled from the front door.

"Still looking," I called back.

My eyes scanned each piece of mail as if I was studying for a test. I muttered a curse as I flipped to the next-to-last envelope when the piece of mail behind it caught my eye. The last letter in my hand was pink.

My lips curled. It was here. I'd make my grandmother proud.

I turned and held up the envelope, letting all the other mail tumble like a waterfall to the ground.

"It's here." I felt like a girl who just won the lottery.

Daisy's brown eyes widened as she jumped up and down.

I raced over to show her. “Isn’t it gorgeous? They go all out. And this year, I get to design it exactly how I want.”

I loved my grandmother, or Nan, as I called her. She was the one who raised me after my parents were killed in a car crash when I was just a kid. I had to move from New York City to the small mountain town of Castle Ridge, Virginia. It was the opposite of what I was used to, but Nan helped me see all the beauty of the place. She taught me about plants and nature. And if it wasn’t for her, I’d never own my landscaping business.

But the letter in my hand wasn’t about my business; it was about the annual town event, the Garden Gala. The gala was a competition where each homeowner in Castle Ridge could showcase their gardens, and the winner would be awarded a prize.

Nan had won the competition five years in a row before she passed away, and now it was up to me to continue her legacy.

Daisy looked at me with excitement, and I smiled back nervously. “I don’t know if I can do this,” I said, feeling overwhelmed by what was in my hand.

But Daisy was quick to reassure me. “Of course you can! You have your Nan’s green thumb, remember?” She gave me a playful nudge.

I hadn’t told Daisy, but I had already imagined what I’d do to the front garden if I got invited.

Nan's garden was full of exotic plants she had collected from all around the world. I wanted to keep her legacy alive, but I also wanted to put my own twist on it. So, I decided to incorporate some of my own ideas into the design.

"Why is the envelope pink?" Daisy stepped back into my house, and I followed behind her. "Wouldn't it be green, or at least have flowers printed on it?"

"Nan told me when they first started it thirty years ago, the pink envelopes were the cheapest, so it's been a staple ever since."

My fingers slid over the bold black letters on the front of the envelope, which stood in stark contrast to the bright pink background. They affixed a golden seal underneath, making it look like an official letter of great importance. On closer inspection, it appeared to be a gold foil sticker from Rose's Paper and Gifts shop over on Fitzlee Street.

After running into the kitchen, I sat on one of my grandmother's old wooden dining chairs. They always reminded me of something I'd see on an old ship. Since she passed, I hadn't had the time to update her furniture. It wasn't like I was making much with my business, so even if I felt like getting some new pieces, I couldn't.

While I loved tending to Nan's garden, her house was a different story. She left a lot of things behind, and I felt overwhelmed with it all. A part of me just wanted to stick a For-Sale sign in the front yard and walk away.

But then, I'd be leaving her garden behind, and I just didn't have the heart to do that.

Daisy had wondered if I should just sell the place, then invest that money into my business. It was an idea, but for right now I wanted to focus on the envelope in my hand.

Daisy came over and sat next to me. Her beautiful diamond ring glinted from the light coming through the window. She was engaged to the captain of the local hockey team, the Blue Ridge Mountain Devils.

At first, I didn't like him—and neither did she—but she smoothed out his rough edges. And he treated her like a queen, so that made him alright by me.

Gaining the courage, I slid my finger through the top of the envelope, tearing it open. Taking a deep breath, I pulled out the letter.

The paper was just standard white, but I didn't care how it looked. It was what was typed on it that mattered.

“Dear Ms. Norton,

We formally invite you to be a participant in the thirtieth annual Briar Woods Community Garden Event. We will hold it on May tenth at noon until three o'clock in the afternoon. All entries will be judged by a panel of three yet-to-be-determined judges. The winner will receive a check for one thousand dollars and a chance to compete in the Mid-Atlantic Flower and Garden Show. Blah, blah, blah.” I held out the paper with a grin as if it was a prize.

“Wow. A thousand bucks. That’s a lot of money.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t the money I was after; it was the chance to compete in the Mid-Atlantic Flower and Garden Show. If I won the Mid-Atlantic show, then I had the chance to compete nationally. For a landscaper, that meant more business and bigger clients.

And, dare I hope, a chance to get my own show on the Garden and Home Network. I put the paper to my chest, closed my eyes, and sent a silent prayer to Nan: may she be looking down on me with a smile and her encouraging wink.

If I won, then I wouldn’t even have to think of selling my grandma’s home.

“Should I leave you two alone?”

I opened my eyes and chuckled. “Maybe.” I shook my head. “No, but seriously, this is a big deal for me.”

Daisy narrowed her eyes. “Are you going to win, get a big head, and tell me you can no longer landscape the farm?”

Daisy was a veterinarian and used a farm as a veterinarian clinic to help local pets and farm animals. Since we lived in the middle of nowhere, her clientele were a lot of farmers and their livestock.

I helped her get the property in shape by landscaping the place. Mainly getting rid of old, rotting trees and pulling weeds.

“Of course not. Hey, if I win, then you can tell everyone that an award-winning company landscapes the farm. It’s a win-

win.”

She nodded. “We should go out and celebrate. Cillian is out for the evening.”

“Really?” My right brow rose.

“Emmanuel is having his housewarming tonight.”

I nodded. “That sounds like fun. Where did he move to?”

She waved her hand around. “I think somewhere close by, but I don’t know exactly.”

“I guess you’re glad he’s finally getting out and having fun with his friends.”

Cillian was a bit of a homebody, but Daisy told me she was encouraging him to get out more.

“I am happy. And Emmanuel is such a nice guy. I’m glad Cillian has him as a friend.”

Right at that moment, there was a loud explosion.

“What was that—” Daisy asked, only to be cut off by lots of whistling sounds and more explosions.

“It sounds like they’re coming from outside.” I moved to the window in the living room.

“Has my ex-boss finally lost her mind and decided to kill me with explosives?” Daisy snorted.

“It looks like fireworks. I think my new neighbor is setting them off. Oh no. I hope they got board approval. The board loves to fine people.” I turned my back to the window, ready to find my grandma’s folding chairs so Daisy and I could sit

outside. It might have been a mistake on my neighbor's part, but it didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the show while it lasted.

I opened the front closet door when I turned to find Daisy's expression going from joyful surprise to wild fear. She pointed over her shoulder, and I ran back to the window to see what she was pointing at. In the few seconds I had stepped away from the window, someone had set my front yard on fire.

The flames leapt and caught hold of a beautiful lilac bush Nan had planted the year we found out she had cancer. She told me that everything in the garden was a piece of her, and that it would live on as long as her loved ones cared for it.

But all I saw in that moment was the fire dancing across the yard, destroying her memory.

I was about to run and get the fire extinguisher, but the fire soon disappeared. Which would have been a relief, but in its wake was something even worse.

Burnt, smoldering dead bushes and plants.

In a matter of a few minutes, all my Nan's work had burned to ash.

Daisy and I rushed outside. The heat was so intense, I could feel it emanating from the charred remains of the garden. I was crying, my heart filled with unbearable pain. Daisy tried to comfort me, but it was no use. Everything Nan had left for us was gone, and all that remained was a pile of blackened debris.



CHAPTER THREE



Emmanuel

When the last of the acrid smoke dissipated, the full extent of the destruction became clear. I felt my stomach churn, and a wave of nausea overcame me as I stumbled toward the rose bushes planted at the edge of our porch.

I leaned over and puked into my rose bushes.

“Sorry, Emmanuel. I really didn’t think that would happen.” Aspen scratched the top of his head.

After a few dry heaves, I straightened, hoping the nausea had passed.

“Here’s the thing, Aspen. Nobody ever expects to destroy their neighbor’s yard when setting off fireworks, but there is always a danger of it happening. Especially when there isn’t enough space for those types of fireworks.”

With my stomach settled, my blood took over the churn. Anger bubbled to the surface, and all I wanted to do was beat the hell out of my teammate.

As I breathed heavily to calm myself down, my mind conjured up images of all the ways to make him pay for what he had done. I tucked a few ideas back in my brain for a later date.

He'd pay; he just didn't know it yet.

"I spent a lot of money on those things. Like I said, I hadn't planned on setting them off tonight, but since this party needed something extra, I thought you deserved the best."

My nostrils flared. "The best," I whispered to myself as I watched the orange glow wane from my neighbor's burning yard.

With my heart thundering in my ears, I tried to come up with ideas to fix this. Maybe my neighbor wasn't home. I scanned the front door of their house, and no one had come outside yet.

Perhaps I was in luck. I could ask some guys on the team to come over first thing in the morning and help me fix up the yard.

I'd explain to the neighbor that there was an accident, and I did my best to fix it, but if they wanted to hire a gardener, I'd be happy to pay for that.

I had little money left over after buying the house in cash and all the new furniture, but there was probably enough for a gardener.

"Oh, shit." Cillian stepped past us and moved farther into the yard. "I hope no one lives there because their garden is totally demolished."

I grabbed my head and tried to will the night away.

I hadn't met my neighbor yet. I wanted to get my house fixed up before inviting them over. It seemed stupid now, but I planned to invite all the neighbors over and have a neighborhood get-together at my place.

I doubt they'd want to come now.

Aspen slapped my back. "Look, I'll fix it. I promise. It doesn't seem like anyone's home. I'll get to it right now, and by morning, no one will know what happened... Oh, too late. There's someone there."

My head snapped up, and I saw two dark shapes emerge from the house next door. For a moment, I thought about running into the darkness. Abandoning my home and letting my friends deal with the problem. That was what my dad did.

But I vowed never to be like my dad. So, I puffed up my chest and moved toward the smoking fence as my mind raced with ways I could make it up to my new neighbor.

My teammates would help me. That was what I'd tell the neighbor. That I could get an entire hockey team of guys here first thing in the morning to do whatever they want.

I nodded at myself as if my plan was brilliant. As if my neighbor would believe having their front yard obliterated by fireworks was the best thing that could have ever happened to them.

"My garden. It's destroyed." I heard her before I could see her face.

Now was my chance. I slapped on the biggest smile I could to sell the shit out of my hockey team saving the garden plan. “Look, this is my fault. I had a party, and it got a little out of hand—” I was about to offer to pay for all the damage and mention the team, but she stopped me.

“It’s gone. She’s gone.” She coughed as I suspected the smoke was filling her lungs.

“As I was about to say, I’m more than willing to pay for all the damage.”

She snorted. “Do you think that makes up for what’s happened?” The bitterness that laced her words was enough for me to be thankful I couldn’t see her face.

“It’s not like the fireworks damaged your house,” I helpfully pointed out.

I quickly discovered I had said the wrong thing. It wasn’t the best response I could have given, but my nerves were shot.

Normally, things like this happened to my teammates. They’d get themselves into terrible situations, like Cillian secretly dating his enemy’s sister, or her brother being fake engaged to her best friend. Or pretty much anything Aspen did.

But things like setting a neighbor’s yard on fire never happened to me. I made sure my decisions in life were sound and utterly safe.

Why did I invite Aspen? That wasn’t sound or safe, but I had achieved my dream in life. I thought one little risk would be

okay.

I was incredibly wrong. I was smoldering-front-yard wrong.

“Let me guess. You’re one of those people who walk on the keep-off-the-grass signs or pick flowers out of people’s yards?”

“What?”

I understood why she was upset, but I apologized and offered to pay. It wasn’t as if I was being unreasonable, and now she was accusing me of childish behavior.

That was the one thing about me, I was never immature. If anything, it was my teammates who came to me for help and advice. I may not have been the oldest on the team, but I was like the father figure.

This woman took one look at her yard and made up her mind about me. “These were living things.”

I held up my hands and took a step back. “Yeah, they’re plants, I get it. But it’s not like I committed murder.”

I heard Aspen chuckle from behind me. Turning my head, I glared at my teammate. Now was not the time for him to chime in. He should be thankful I was taking the blame as the plant-lover ripped into me.

“Didn’t you, though?” I could feel her gaze pierce right through me, even if I couldn’t see it.

“Are you comparing the murder of a human being to ruining some flowers?”

Was the woman that far gone? Rubbing my forehead, it dawned on me.

My neighbor was one of those eco-warriors I had heard about. The type of people who seemed to prioritize the preservation of a plant nobody would ever see over the needs of a family who struggled to put food on their table.

I never thought much about them before, but I was betting this woman hadn't ever struggled for money in her whole life. If she had, she wouldn't be throwing around the word "murder" for a bunch of dead marigolds.

"No, I did not commit murder. If this is how you're going to act over some plants, then maybe I won't pay for their replacement. I'll fix the fence, but anything on your property is on you."

I closed my eyes and took a breath. I let my anger get to me, and that wasn't right. My mother raised me better than that. I opened my eyes and my mouth, preparing to say that I didn't mean what I said to her a moment ago.

I wanted to say that I'd pay for everything and whip her up some of my mom's one-pan chicken and rice, but she started talking before I could.

"That was your plan all along, wasn't it? Refuse to do anything about the destruction you caused. You must be used to doing whatever you want, and someone else takes care of it for you. The person who lived in that house before you didn't do a thing for upkeep; it looked like a jungle and was littered with old rusted and broken lawn decor. He was rude to anyone

who even waved at him. But I'd take him as a neighbor any day over you. At least he left my property alone."

My whole life, I was judged. My family was judged, and we were seen as wanting. We were always less-than, not worth the effort or the help we sought.

When I got on the team and became a Blue Ridge Mountain Devil, I vowed to be grateful for the chance to prove I was equal to everyone else on the team. That was how my teammates always treated me, as an equal.

Maybe I became soft and got used to that treatment. Forgetting that, outside of the Devils, there were many people who still only saw me as less-than... people like my neighbor.

Gloves were now off.

"That guy sounds great. At least we agree on something." I smiled, though she probably couldn't see my face.

"I never said he was great."

"No, about how you would prefer him over me. I'd prefer him as a neighbor too. Over you. At least he wouldn't be out here, crying about his overgrown weeds."

She growled, "I'm not crying."

"Aren't you, though?"

Her growl grew louder. I guess she didn't like her own words used on her. She was one of those people who was happy to judge everyone around them, but the moment someone put a mirror up to her face, she threw a fit.

“You are such a... a... jerk.”

“I’d tell you what you are, but my mother raised me better. Perhaps your mom failed you.” I folded my arms over my chest in pride as I sucked in a breath.

There was silence. And for a moment, I wondered if I had gone too far. But then I remembered she called me a murderer over some plants.

She turned and walked back into her home without saying a word, and the second person followed her.

Aspen came over and slapped me on the back. “That worked out. Now you don’t have to fix up her front yard at all.”

“Yeah, it worked out,” I said with trepidation.

That wasn’t right. No one walked away from something like this without expecting a solution. And the way she was acting, I knew she wanted something from me.

It obviously wasn’t an apology she was looking for, because I already gave it to her. Then what was it?

I was worried about what it might be.

“I’m still going to fix the fence.”

“Yes, of course,” Cillian said from my front doorway.

I glanced back at him as he rubbed his arms. It was spring, but as the sun set, a chill crept into the air.

“I guess we should go back inside. The pizza’s getting cold.” I moved toward Cillian, who nodded about the pizza.

“It’s good of you to fix the fence. I mean, it’s the absolute least you could do, considering what happened,” Aspen said as we moved toward the door.

“No, it’s the least *you* could do, considering what *you* did.” I pushed my finger into his shoulder.

“Right. Right. I’ll totally help you.” Aspen scratched the back of his head.

I sighed. Aspen had a habit of making lots of promises he never followed through on. The last thing I wanted to happen was to see my neighbor again. If I was out fixing a fence, I was sure to run into her.

“No, you’ll be fixing the fence yourself. It was your fireworks that caused this problem to begin with.”

“Of course. You’re my teammate; I’d do anything for you.”

We stepped inside and closed the door. As I watched Cillian fawn over the pizza, I wondered if my dream of owning my own home was turning into a nightmare.



CHAPTER FOUR



Lydia

I came into my home and sat on Nan's worn recliner with the soft, frayed fabric. Daisy scurried over and sat on the corner of the couch.

"That jerk," she muttered, sticking her chin out defiantly. I kept my mouth shut as fury boiled inside of me.

Was he a jerk, though? No, he was so much more. A caveman.

That man was as thick and ugly as a fossilized turd. I bet he smelled bad too.

"He had the audacity to blow up your yard and then complain about you?" Daisy's voice rose in disbelief before she snorted.

I was silent, not uttering a single word.

My friend gave me a questioning look as she chewed on her lower lip, expecting some sort of response from me, but I stayed silent.

She tried another tactic to get me to open my mouth. She chuckled. “You know, you’ll be laughing about this one day.” Then her brown eyes widened. “Oh my god, wouldn’t it be hilarious if you two got married?”

That caught my attention, but I still wouldn’t speak. I stared blankly at Daisy, taking in her words. I knew she was trying to lighten the mood, but her comment only made me feel worse. My mind was still racing with everything that had happened.

“I’m not saying you’re attracted to him. I couldn’t even see his face, really. But it’s like something from a Hollywood movie. Where the neighbors hate each other, but then fall in love in the end...” At the sight of my gaping mouth, her words evaporated into nothing.

Anger boiled in my chest as my eyes flashed. Even if I had wanted to speak, my throat had closed up, and all I could do was glare.

It took a few calming breaths, but I muttered, “That’s a terrible plotline.”

Daisy frowned but nodded. Her mouth opened a few times before she finally said, “It was just something that popped into my head. Stupid, really. I, uh... So, the Briar Woods Garden thing. That’s exciting.”

My eyes watered, and my hardened lips softened into a frown. The Briar Woods Community Garden Event. I had completely forgotten about it because of my molten front yard.

“Oh, no.” I stood and ran over to the front door, swinging it open. “No, no, no,” I whimpered.

A few of the neighbors stood in their front yards, whispering to each other and pointing at my yard. I didn’t have to hear them to know what they were saying.

I was sure they would never let me be a part of the community garden event now. My reputation would be ruined, and I felt a wave of shame wash over me.

Everyone had admired my grandmother and her garden, and now, I was just the screwed-up grandchild in their eyes.

There was no way the Briar Woods Community Garden judges would allow this. There was no coming back from this. Some plants that were destroyed took my grandmother a decade to grow to their magnificent height. Those same neighbors who were pointing had always salivated in envy at her gorgeous plants.

And it only took a few minutes for those lush plants to turn to ash.

“Crap, I’m sorry, Lydia. I wasn’t thinking... when I mentioned the garden event.” Daisy placed her hand on my back for comfort.

But there was no solace. It was all gone, everything my grandmother had worked on for years. It was like he had annihilated her.

“It was everything she loved.” I waved into the darkness. “I don’t remember a day when Nan wasn’t out in the yard,

working on something. Even in the winter, she'd clear dead leaves and diseased plants, sharpen tools. Anything that needed to get done before spring. She told me gardening can teach you everything you need to know about life."

Daisy reached around and pulled me into a side hug. It felt good. Despite my anger, she was my friend, and I was so thankful she was at my side.

"What do I have left of her now?" I mumbled.

"You have this house."

"I suppose, but it's not the same. It's just not."

A cool breeze caused me to shiver. There was no point in standing in the doorway, breathing in the smoky air and wallowing in my sorrow.

Daisy suggested we go back inside, and I agreed, following her lead. I closed the door, feeling embarrassed and ashamed. We sat back down on the couch, and she patted my knee.

"It's going to be okay, Lydia. We'll figure out a way to make it right. I'll help you replant everything, and it'll be even better than before. I'm sure."

I sighed. "I appreciate your optimism, Daisy. I really do. But, at this point, it's not even about the plants; it's about what they meant to Nan. Of course I can plant again. I work in landscaping; it's my job. I know what to do. It's all the memories that are lost."

Daisy's phone chirped, and she pulled it out of her pocket. "Hey, it's Cillian. I wonder if he heard the explosion and..."

Her words drifted away as she read his text.

Her eyes grew wide, and she glanced up at me and then back at her text. She typed a response before her phone chirped again.

I watched her, wondering what was going on. Daisy was never the type of person to ignore friends if someone texted her.

After a few minutes, she put the phone on my chipped wooden coffee table and swallowed.

“Are you okay, Daisy?” I hoped nothing happened to Cillian.

She grinned and nodded, but it wasn't a normal smile. There was nothing relaxed about her. The smile was stiff and unusually wide, and her eyes were round, like she just witnessed her loving memories be blown to bits.

“Uh, do you know who your new neighbor is?”

“No. Obviously, he's a man. I couldn't really see him since it was dark out. But I do know he's a very spoiled man who can't handle admitting when he's made a mistake.”

She laughed, but it was weird too. The chuckle was high-pitched and sounded like she was ten years old.

“But is he spoiled?” She tilted her head.

My head shot back. “You saw how he acted, Daisy. You heard what he said. Sounded like a pampered man-baby to me. Someone used to getting his way.”

She laughed. And again, it was strange. “All I’m saying is, you don’t really know him. Like, really know him.”

“I suppose. But he sure acted like he knew me... telling me how my mom failed me.”

The guy’s words drilled into my chest like a spike, every syllable filled with malicious intent. He was right; my parents had failed me in the cruelest way imaginable, by dying and leaving me to be raised by my grandmother.

A woman who showed me love and care. Taught me about life through her garden. A garden he felt nothing about destroying.

But I wouldn’t let his words break me. I steeled myself against his hateful absolutism and kept my silence.

Daisy frowned. “Yeah, that wasn’t very nice.”

She snatched her phone from the table and started texting again. After a few responses, she nodded and put the phone back down.

“It wasn’t.”

“He’s new to the neighborhood. Maybe you should give him a break.”

My eyes widened, and she winced. “I don’t mean he didn’t mess up. He did. He *so* did. But he doesn’t understand how things go around here. He needs a trusty neighbor to take him under her wing.” She winced again.

“Under her wing? Daisy, who are you texting?”

When she didn't answer, it hit me. "Do you know my neighbor?"

Her mouth fell open as if she was about to answer, but then it just hung there with no sound. If she were a computer, I would've had to reboot her.

Finally, she said, "Yes. And so do you. Kind of."

I shifted on the couch to face her. "Well?"

She nibbled on her lower lip and took a few breaths. "Okay, so you know how Cillian went to Emmanuel's housewarming party tonight?"

I nodded, but she didn't continue. It took a moment for my brain to put it all together, but once I did, I was shocked. Then angry. And then, well... I went through all the stages of grief, but for when you discover a friend screwed you over.

"Emmanuel was the jerk?"

Daisy nodded. "But that's not true. Emmanuel isn't a jerk. You've met him a few times. He's a nice guy."

Memories of Emmanuel fluttered through my mind like images through a slideshow. I had met him, and he seemed kind, but did I really know him?

People showed you one side of themselves when they were in a situation where they wanted to impress. But when they didn't feel the need to impress you, their true colors appeared.

Having worked in landscaping for years, there were many times the landowner believed themselves better than me and

my workers. They saw us as nothing and treated us accordingly. But once I ran into them at a shop or somewhere in public, they were all smiles and kind words.

I remember too well when my parents died, all their friends, my friends, said how much they cared. How they would come and visit me every chance they could.

None of them ever came for a visit. No phone calls. No texts. Nothing.

People pretend to be good and caring, but I learned early to only ever believe their actions. Their actions spoke the truth.

“Is he, though?” I witnessed the real Emmanuel tonight, even if Daisy didn’t want to admit it.



CHAPTER FIVE



Emmanuel

The thick scent of sweat and body odor hung heavily in the locker room, permeating everything in its wake. A faint trace of laundry detergent lingered on the fabric of the benches, combining with the familiar smells of sweaty clothes, musty lockers, and the musky scent of leather, creating a unique odor.

It had been a week since Aspen blew up my neighbor's front yard, and I hadn't seen him until today.

Aspen had promised he would fix the fence he ruined in my neighbor's yard, but he still had done nothing, not even a single step to make it right. I had grown tired of hearing his empty promises, and I was going to confront him and find out what was really going on.

I could feel the anger boiling in my veins as I scanned the room for Aspen, but he was nowhere to be seen. I was just about to give up and head back out when I heard someone chuckle from the corner of the room. I spun around, my eyes settling on an unmistakable figure.

It was Aspen, lounging on a bench and looking far too pleased with himself. He was wearing a navy-blue windbreaker and was stuffing a towel into a duffel bag with a smug smirk on his face. His wavy brown hair was a mess, and there was a glint in his green eyes that made my heart pound even faster.

A hand reached out and grabbed my shoulder before I got to Aspen. “Stop. Whatever you’re about to do, just stop.”

My head swung around. It was Jackson, one of the oldest players on the team.

Jackson and Cillian used to be enemies, but it came to a head when Cillian started secretly dating Jackson’s younger sister. But Jackson had some problems of his own with his ex-wife, so the thing with Cillian died down.

I glared at my teammate. “Let me go, Jackson.”

Jackson’s brows rose. “Look at you. You’re usually the calm and rational one, yet here you are, about to go after Aspen.”

I took a breath and turned to face Jackson. “How do you know I was about to do something to Aspen?”

He chuckled and waved his hand. “The entire team knows about what happened last week at your housewarming party. Which, I might add, they aren’t so happy you didn’t invite them.”

I held up my hands. “My house isn’t big enough for the whole team. I just wanted something small, so—”

Jackson slapped my back and pulled me toward the showers. “It’s fine. I’m just messing with you. But I would invite a few of the teammates over in the future.”

I sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I was planning to invite people over, just slowly. Which was why I invited Aspen with Cillian. I figured Cillian is so straight-laced, he’d be able to help if Aspen got too wild.”

“Makes sense. I was wondering why you invited Aspen, knowing how he is.”

“I know...” I rubbed my face. “Now I’m hiding from my neighbor—”

“Lydia.”

I tilted my head. Lydia was Daisy’s best friend, and Daisy was Jackson’s sister.

“What about Lydia?”

Jackson’s eyes widened. “That’s your neighbor. The one who now has the destroyed garden. And since she’s a professional gardener, she’s super pissed.”

My vision blurred as I felt the blood rush from my head. I reached for a bench, desperate for something to stabilize me.

“Wow, I didn’t think skin could turn that color.” Jackson frowned.

“I need to sit.” I found the end of a bench and flopped down, nearly falling off. Jackson sat next to me, his hand resting on my back.

Now it all made sense. Why my neighbor said all those things to me. It would be like if she came here and blew up the rink or took my gear and threw it in a fire.

Plants were something she was passionate about, and I killed her passion.

More like Aspen killed it, but it might as well have been me with what she knew.

“Didn’t Cillian tell you? I thought he told you since he called Daisy right after it happened, and she told him that was Lydia’s front yard.”

My head fell into my hands as my shoulders sagged. “Oh god.”

That was why Cillian abruptly left right after.

Even if I avoided my neighbor for the next ten years, there was no way I wouldn’t run into her at parties or dinners or some type of social gathering. I had planned on only ever leaving the house late at night or before the sun rose in the morning, but now I might have to go live in a cave for the rest of my life.

“I’m so screwed.”

Jackson patted me on the back. “Aren’t we all?”

I nodded. Jackson’s ex-wife was trying to take his son away from him, so my neighbor thing felt like nothing compared to his problems.

“I have to make this right.” I stood.

“Just talk to Aspen. But talk—fighting won’t help, trust me,” Jackson said before he got up, turned, and walked toward his locker.

Jackson was right. Aspen may be an accident waiting to happen, but he was a good guy and teammate.

I took Jackson’s words to heart and decided to approach Aspen and have a calm conversation with him. I knew fighting would solve nothing and only make the situation worse.

I went over and tapped Aspen’s shoulder.

He jerked around, and when he saw it was me, his face softened. “Oh, hey, Emmanuel.”

I sighed and shoved my hands into my pockets. “Look, I need to talk to you about my neighbor’s garden.”

Aspen scratched the back of his head and looked away. His silence spoke volumes. “I’ve been so busy—”

“Cut the crap, Aspen.” I came to sit next to him on the bench. “It was Lydia’s front yard. She’s my neighbor.”

Aspen’s eyes widened. “Oh shit. I screwed up. Ugh, I feel like such a jerk.”

I shook my head. “You aren’t a jerk. As my mom always told me, we’re all human. We all do stupid stuff sometimes. But people respect you if you work hard to fix the mistakes you make, instead of running from them.”

“Your mom is a good person.”

I frowned. She was a good person. I wish she had lived long enough to witness me buy a house. That was her dream.

I nodded, still not entirely sure how to make things right with Lydia and her trampled garden. “We need to fix this.”

Aspen looked around as though searching for a way out of the conversation. I could tell he was feeling embarrassed about the whole situation.

“I think you’re a good person, Aspen. That’s why I know you’ll show up tonight to help me fix Lydia’s yard.”

“Tonight?” Aspen winced.

“Yes, tonight. We need to make this right ASAP. And I’m not taking no for an answer.” I stood, my determination fueling me.

Aspen nodded slowly as a look of concern crossed his face. “Okay, I’ll be there. But are you sure you’re okay with this? I mean, Lydia’s a landscaper. What if we mess it up even more?”

I let out a deep sigh. “We’ll just have to be extra careful. They’re plants. What could go wrong? But we have to try. It’s the least we can do.”

Aspen nodded again, his expression softening. “Alright, I’ll see you tonight.”

I felt a renewed sense of purpose as I watched him gather his things and head out. Until I heard Aspen talk to some players in the hallway. I moved closer to the door that led to the hall and listened.

“Dude, we’re hitting up the bar Castle Moat tonight. You in?” Liam, one of the newer hockey players, asked.

I could always pick out when Liam was talking because he had a weird accent. He was from Europe, but I couldn’t place the country the accent came from.

“I have plans with Emmanuel tonight,” Aspen responded.

I smiled. For a moment, I thought Aspen would flake on me, but, surprisingly, he proved me wrong.

“Not another one of his parties…” someone else said before they all started laughing. “I love Emmanuel, but he’s more boring than Grumpy Old Man.”

My smile faded into a frown. Aspen was right when he told me at the housewarming that the team made fun of me.

“I totally see why you set off those fireworks,” Liam said.

“See? You get it. Emmanuel was so angry, and now he’s making me help clean it all up.”

“What are you, five? It was an accident. They happen. That’s what homeowner’s insurance is for,” someone else said.

No, that wasn’t what homeowner’s insurance was for. They sure didn’t cover the destruction of plants from fireworks.

I was about to burst through the door and school them when I heard Aspen say, “The last thing I want to do is manual labor right before the International Games Committee watches us at practice. I want to relax tonight.”

“That’s why we’re going out. Just a few drinks and some fun. We all plan to turn in early.”

I couldn’t hear Aspen’s response, and by the time I pushed through the door, they were all the way down the hall.

Everyone on the team thought I was the nice guy, the guy who would put up with anything. It was time to prove them wrong.

If Aspen didn’t show up tonight to help me, then he was going to have competition getting on the International Games team. I wasn’t interested on being on that team, but now, I was suddenly making it my new goal.



CHAPTER SIX



Lydia

“It happened. It actually happened.” I cupped my hands around the warm paper cup, trying to hold back my tears.

Melanie put down her coffee cup and sat up in her seat. “Henry Cavill showed up naked at your house?”

“What? No. Why would you say that?”

She shrugged and sat back in her chair. “You’ve had a recurring dream about him showing up naked where you live for as long as I’ve known you. And you kept saying you felt it was so real that you knew it would happen one day.”

It had been a week since the destruction of my front garden, and I had been so busy with work that I hadn’t had time to fix anything.

But it still needed a lot of work. That was what I had been spending most of my free time doing.

I invited my friend Melanie out for coffee, hoping she could help me move past what my new asshole neighbor did.

We were at our usual hangout, Hard Grind. It was a cozy café in the middle of our small mountain town of Castle Ridge, with warm wooden walls and quaint furnishings. The window looked out onto Fitzlee Street, where the sun was shining brightly. Blooms of lilacs, and hydrangeas lined the street, adding a burst of color to the day. The sun glinted off the dew-covered leaves and sparkled in the breeze. A gorgeous day, yet I felt like it wasn't my garden that was blown up by fireworks, but me.

“I wish he had shown up naked. But, no, the opposite of that happened to me.”

“What is the opposite of a hottie showing up naked at your house?”

“My new neighbor blowing my front garden to bits.”

Melanie's gray eyes widened. “Oh, no. That's not good for resale value.”

I tilted my head. “Why would I care about resale value?”

She shrugged. “I know you were complaining the house was a lot for you. I just figured you might consider selling.”

I shook my head. “I can't leave Nan's garden behind.”

Her brows went up. “But it's blown up now.”

She was right. That just made me feel even worse.

Melanie noticed my unhappiness. “Never mind what I said. It's your place now, and no neighbor should destroy any part of it. What the hell happened?”

I spent the next five minutes explaining in excruciating detail the exact events that occurred last week—even how my neighbor called my mom a failure.

“That scumbag,” Melanie muttered, her eyes blazing with fury. “I can’t believe he would do something like that. How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay,” I said with a small shrug. “It’s just frustrating, you know? That garden meant so much to Nan, and now it’s all destroyed.”

“I know,” Melanie said sympathetically. “But don’t worry; I can help you. We’ll fix it up together. We’ll make it even better than before.”

I smiled weakly, grateful for her support. “Thanks, Mel. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” she said, reaching out to squeeze my hand. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

She leaned over and placed her hand on mine. “I’m so sorry. I know what that garden meant to you. Do you have anything left of her?”

She was talking about my grandmother. It really wasn’t my garden; it was hers. While I wanted to add to it, I would never change what she did. It was a part of her, and every time I looked at it, I thought of her.

“Technically, the house is hers. But she always spoke about how the house was too much for her. There was usually something that needed to be repaired, and it was tough keeping

it up. I asked her once why she didn't move, and she told me she could never abandon her garden."

We sat in silence for a moment.

"That's why I really wanted to enter the garden into the Briar Woods Community Garden Event. It meant so much to her, and now there's no hope. It will be the first time since the start of the event that my grandmother's garden won't be in it."

"I'm sorry, Lydia, but this wasn't your fault. If your grandmother was still alive, this still would have happened."

I nodded, trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to spill over. Melanie was right, but it still hurt to know that something so important to my grandmother was destroyed. I couldn't help but wonder what she would have thought if she saw the state of her once-beautiful garden.

I nodded. "Maybe you're right. But that doesn't make it okay that Emmanuel did this and hasn't done a thing to fix it."

Melanie's head jerked back. "Emmanuel? You mean, the guy on the Devil's hockey team?"

I nodded.

"Is he the goofball or the giant?"

Melanie hadn't met many of the players—only Cillian and Jackson. Every time the team did something, and Daisy invited us out with them, Melanie usually had work or was studying. She spent a long time working on her license to become a physical therapist. Melanie was one of those people who

wasn't happy just getting a license. She had to learn everything there was to know about the human body.

Yes, she went and got a medical degree just so she knew everything about how the human body worked. The woman could become a doctor and have so much more money, but she really wanted to be a physical therapist.

“No, he was the nice one, or so I thought.”

“Doesn't sound very nice to me.”

“Right?” I sighed. “I waited a week for him to at least apologize, but he's done nothing. I haven't even seen him.”

“Maybe he's avoiding you.”

“If that's true, then he's a coward on top of being a jerk.”

Melanie leaned back in her chair, taking a sip of her coffee. “Well, you know what they say about men who act like that.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “What do they say?”

“They say they have small dicks.” She lifted her pinky finger and wiggled it.

I choked on my coffee, coughing and sputtering. “What? No, that can't be true.”

Melanie just shrugged and smirked. “Hey, I'm only telling you what I've heard. And I studied medicine, so you know it's a fact.”

I rolled my eyes and couldn't help but laugh. “Well, if that's the case, I guess he's got a lot to make up for.”

“Exactly. And if he doesn’t apologize soon, I say you take matters into your own hands.”

My eyebrow rose again. “What do you mean?”

Melanie grinned. “Well, I think you need to give him a piece of your mind. Show him you’re not afraid of him.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

She leaned in and lowered her voice. “You know those firecrackers he used to destroy your garden?”

I nodded slowly, not sure where she was going with this.

“Get some of your own and give him a taste of his own medicine.”

I hesitated for a moment, but then a mischievous grin spread across my face. “I like the way you think.”

She placed her hand on mine. “That’s why we’re friends.”

My mind raced with possibilities. I couldn’t do big fireworks like he had; otherwise the committee would be after me.

“Do you want to come over tonight to help? It could be fun.”
I smiled.

“I’d love to, but my new co-workers are taking me out to Castle Moat tonight.”

She had just gotten her first job as a physical therapist at a group outside of town. Daisy and I took her out to celebrate a few weeks ago when she got the job.

“Of course. Maybe Daisy will help me.”

I frowned because I knew Daisy wouldn't do anything. She was a great friend, but she never broke the rules. It was one reason her old boss and ex-boyfriend took advantage of her. They really believed she would put up with such poor treatment.

They were wrong.

“Where would I even get fireworks this time of year?”

Melanie leaned closer, as if she was about to spill the hottest secret. “You need to ask Sophia. Her father always buys fireworks after the Fourth of July when they are on sale. He then opens a small stand just outside of town in June to sell them at jacked-up prices. It's one of many side hustles he has.”

I knew Sophia and her family had always scraped by. Even as a kid, she told me she would pretend to be selling cookies for a nonexistent club. She'd buy packs of cookies at discount stores and then go door-to-door and upsell them to people.

The woman was a born seller. It was in her DNA.

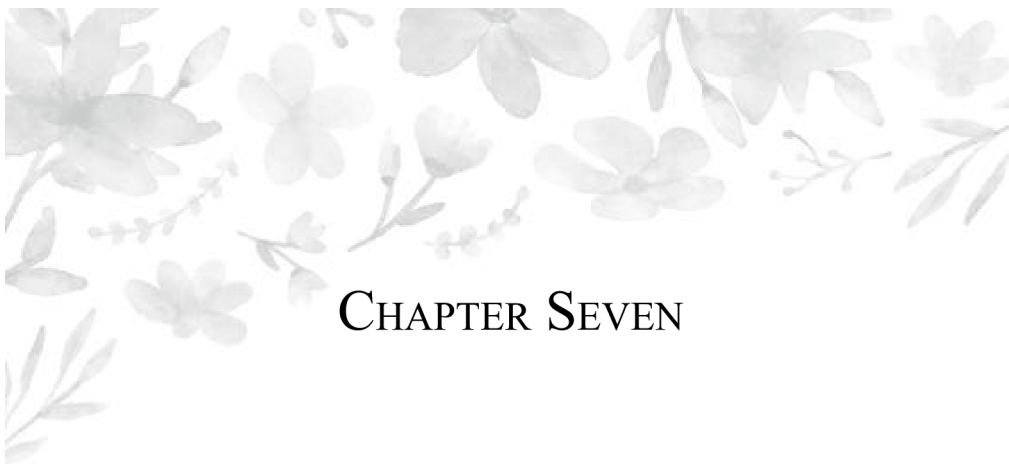
I nodded. “Yeah, I'll ask her.”

Tonight, Emmanuel would have to come out and face me. Once his front yard blew up, he'd know what it was like to have your property destroyed.

The plan was forming in my mind as I drove home from Hard Grind. I had texted Sophia to find out if she would help me acquire the fireworks.

I'd finally get revenge on that smug, entitled prick.

I arrived home and quickly sent Sophia a message explaining the situation. Within minutes, she replied with a thumbs-up emoji and the address of her father's home. Perfect.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Emmanuel

S*omething has come up. Can't help you fix neighbor's yard.*

I gawked at the text from Aspen for what felt like a lifetime. It was only a moment, but I felt anger mixed with disappointment seep out of my pores with every second that passed.

If I went over to Castle Moat, I bet I'd discover what that something was—probably a woman and a bunch of beer.

That jerk. I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for him.

Cillian was right; I could never count on Aspen. He was an outstanding hockey player and a fun guy to hang out with, but when shit got hard, he was the first one with an excuse as to why he couldn't help.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. Then another. And another.

Nope, no clarity.

It always worked in the movies. A fantastic idea always came to people if they just breathed.

Now I got a garage filled with plants, bags of mulch, and a few gardening tools that would be left to rot.

I scratched my head. *Maybe I could go over to Lydia's and give them to her?*

But she would still have to do the work.

I could help her, but... I bet she wanted nothing to do with me.

Ugh, the idea was perfect. Wait until dusk and start working on fixing her front garden without her knowing. Then, when she came outside, all would be fixed. It would be like it never happened.

I texted Cillian about Aspen flaking on me. It didn't take long for him to respond.

That's not surprising. Just fix it yourself. It may take longer, but you've got muscles. Use them.

I nodded. He was right. It may take longer, but how hard could it be to dig a few holes and toss some plants in them?

It wasn't like I wasn't used to physical work.

I threw on some old sneakers and headed out the door. As I made my way to the garage, I noticed a few of my neighbors peeking out their windows at me. I guess they were wondering what I was up to.

Mentally preparing myself for the work ahead, I grabbed a shovel and some gloves and started making my way toward Lydia's house.

When I arrived at her front yard, I suddenly became overwhelmed by the mounds of dirt and dead plants that lay before me. Just cleaning it all would take a long time.

But that was what I had to do. I went back to my garage and grabbed my brand-new wheelbarrow.

Once I was back in her yard, I got to work. After a few minutes, I stood and wiped my brow. While it was tough work, I was enjoying getting my hands dirty.

It surprised me how much I liked it.

I crouched in Lydia's garden, sweat beading on my forehead as I dug into the rich soil. Suddenly, my shovel hit something hard, and I paused, wiping the dirt off my hands before reaching down to uncover the obstruction.

It was a small wooden box, ornately carved and clearly old. It reminded me of a tiny treasure chest. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should open it, but curiosity got the better of me. Inside, nestled in a bed of velvet, was a breathtaking diamond ring. It was huge and had to cost a small fortune. My eyes widened at the sight, realizing it must be a valuable family heirloom belonging to Lydia.

I didn't want to leave it lying around, so I kept it safe until I could return it to her. I slipped the ring box into my pocket,

making sure it was secure, and continued working on the garden.

“What do you think you’re doing?” a man’s voice came from behind.

I turned and smiled. “Hi, I don’t think we’ve met. I just moved—”

He was an older man with stark white hair—not that he had much left on his head. He wore a suit and leaned against a wooden walking stick. But as he looked over at me, he frowned. “This isn’t your house. Does Ms. Norton know you are messing with her garden?”

“Actually, no, she doesn’t. I kind of want this to be a surprise. You see, I moved in a few weeks ago—”

“What you are telling me is you don’t live here, and Ms. Norton doesn’t know you are digging up her front yard?”

I scratched my head. When he put it like that, it sounded bad.

“Well—”

“And what’s in your pocket?” He raised his eyebrow skeptically. “Look, I’m Dan Marks. I’ve lived in this neighborhood for thirty years and have been on the Briar Woods Community Board for the last ten years. I’ve never seen you before now. When I was out for my nightly stroll, I noticed you digging in Ms. Norton’s yard, and you put something in your pocket.”

My heart sank as I realized he must have seen me earlier with the ring in my hand. “It’s nothing,” I said quickly, but it

was too late. Dan had already reached into my pocket and pulled out the wooden box.

“Hey, give that back!” I protested, but Dan opened the lid and gasped at the diamond ring inside.

“Did you steal this from Lydia?” he demanded, turning to face me with accusing eyes.

“No, no, of course not.” I held up my hands in defense. “I found it while I was working, and I was planning to return it to her.”

“Right,” Dan snorted sarcastically. “And I’m supposed to believe that you just happened upon an expensive-looking ring while doing some gardening?”

“Look, I know it looks bad,” I said, feeling increasingly frustrated. “I’m a Devil.”

He frowned. “I wasn’t going to call you a name, but yeah, you sure are acting devilish.”

I shook my head. “No, what I mean is, I’m a hockey player. I am on the Blue Ridge Mountain Devils.”

“Why are you stealing jewelry from other people if you’re a professional hockey player? Don’t they make lots of money? I had a family living next to me once, and their son became a hockey player. That kid was terrible. I guess hockey attracts the worst sort of people.”

My nostrils flared. It didn’t matter what I said, this man had made up his mind about me. I shook my head. It was nothing new. With a name like Emmanuel Martinez and my not-so-

white skin, I had encountered my fair share of people who assumed the worst of me before I even opened my mouth.

“What I meant to say was, why would I steal from my neighbor if I made enough money as a professional hockey player? That makes little sense. What makes sense is I found it and was planning on returning it to... Wait, what are you doing?”

He held up his finger and talked into his phone. “Yes, I am calling because I have someone here stealing from my neighbor.”

My eyes widened. That son of a bitch was actually calling the police on me. I tried to stop him, but he turned away from me. I noticed a piece of paper had fallen from his pocket, so I picked it up and waved it at him. He continued to ignore me, so I held up the ring box and said, “Here. Take it. You give it to—”

A loud explosion from the back of my house cut me off.

I turned to look. Smoke was billowing up from behind my house.

“I have to go.”

I shoved the ring box back into my pocket and ran. I heard Dan shout after me, but I didn't stop. As I got closer to my property, the smell of charred wood hit me, and my heart started pounding harder in my chest.

When I turned the corner, what I found was a scene of complete chaos. Dirt was everywhere, with large chunks of

grass in random piles. And in the middle was my grill. Well, what used to be my grill.

But it was now engulfed in flames.

“What the hell happened?” I yelled as I grabbed my head.

It was at that moment when I saw something move. At first, I thought it was a burnt tree, but it was human. I mistook the person for plant life because of all the soot and bits of lawn attached to her.

Lydia.

Her head turned my way, and I gasped. Half her body was blackened by the explosion, and the other half was completely untouched. It was as if it made a perfect line right down her middle.

“I can explain,” she said, then coughed.

I moved closer and scanned her body. The way the soot covered her, I worried she might have been burned. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

“What happened here?” Dan’s voice came from behind.

“Oh, hi, Dan.” Lydia smiled, and it looked ridiculous with her half-darkened face. “It’s funny you should be here because I wanted to thank you for inviting me to the Briar Woods Community Garden Event.”

My mouth hung open. Why was she bringing up a gardening event now? Maybe she had a concussion.

“Look, I think you should sit down—” I reached out for her arm, but she yanked it back.

“No.” Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “I won’t go. You can’t do this to me. It was only a little revenge.”

A little revenge? I gazed at my destroyed backyard and realized what she had done.

She was getting me back for blowing up her front yard.

That was when I did something I never thought I’d do in a situation like this. Not that I ever thought I’d be in a situation where someone destroyed my yard because they blamed me for ruining theirs.

But in the past, I had reacted in many ways to people trying to hurt me. Anger. Sadness. There was even one time when I tried to rise above it and forgive the person.

But this time, I laughed. My head fell back, and I let out a loud chuckle.

Lydia’s eyes darted between me and Dan. The corner of her eyes wrinkled as she tilted her head. “This is funny to you?” She waved behind me.

My laughter slowly faded as I nodded. “Come on. You have to admit, this is a little funny. You think I blew up your yard, so you blow up mine? It’s like something out of a cartoon.”

She frowned and shoved her hands on her hips. “Which cartoon was it where everyone laughed because the cartoon character gets arrested?”

My head shot back. “Arrested?”

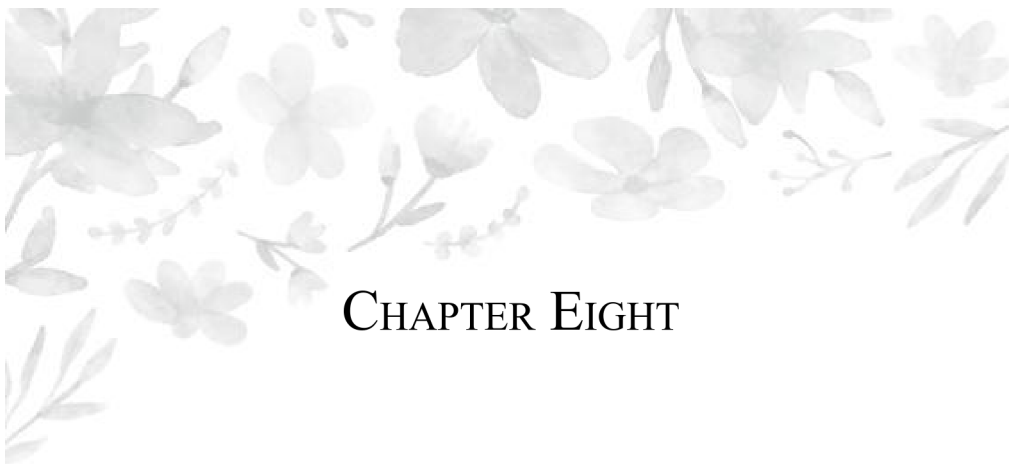
She nodded and pointed behind me. I turned to find Dan talking to a police officer and pointing at us.

I sighed and turned back to Lydia. “This is not good.”

Right at that moment, the officer came over and arrested both of us. I was being arrested for theft, and Lydia for the destruction of property.

As we both sat in the back of the police cruiser, I tried to lighten the mood. “I could really go for some barbecue right about now.”

Lydia narrowed her eyes and groaned. So much for fixing my relationship with my new neighbor.



CHAPTER EIGHT



Lydia

“You look like a mess.” She twirled the end of her long, dark braid between her fingers as she stood from the bench at the front of the police station.

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking.” I gave a hard smile.

“I’m sorry.” She frowned and raced over, hesitating before placing her hand on my non-soot covered arm. “I just wanted to help. Is there anything I can do?” Her gray eyes searched mine with sincere concern.

I took a deep breath and tried to let go of the horribleness of the past week. “Actually, yes. There is something you can do.”

“What is it? Anything.”

We strolled out of the station and into the early morning sun. I shivered at the chill of the spring air.

“You can never give me advice again, especially if it involves seeking revenge.”

She winced. “I didn’t actually think you’d go through with it.”

That was when I came to a stop.

“Do you need to sit?” She frowned in concern.

“So let me get this straight.” I tapped my finger against my lips. “You said things like, ‘take matters in your own hands,’ and ‘give him a taste of his own medicine.’ You even told me to go to Sophia to get the fireworks.”

She rubbed her head. “Okay. Okay. I’m sorry.”

Melanie wobbled, and I grabbed her arm as it looked like she was about to fall over. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “I may have had a little too much last night, but I hooked up with a total hottie.” She winked.

As terrible as my night had been, I was happy for my friend. She needed to get laid. Maybe that was the reason for her awful advice. Perhaps now she wouldn’t be so bad at helping people.

“I think I need that story right now. Let’s go over to Hard Grind so I can warm up with their amazing coffee while vicariously living through you as you dish about the hottie.”

“Sounds great. I desperately need a caffeine pick-me-up pronto. And I really am sorry. You really aren’t the type to actually do something like that. I just thought you needed to let it out and fantasize about destroying his yard. That sort of thing.”

I understood what Melanie was saying. How I acted last night really wasn't something I normally would do. And, in truth, Sophia swore the fireworks were the weakest they had.

If those were the weakest, I'd hate to see what would have happened if I had the strongest.

"It's fine. I'm just exhausted and want some coffee."

We made our way down the street and turned the corner where our favorite hangout was on Fitzlee Street.

The door clicked open, and the rich, thick smell of coffee hit me like a wave. My muscles relaxed, and I smiled. This was exactly what I needed.

Comfort and a good friend.

But as I set foot inside, it felt like my stomach fell to the floor. Standing there with a paper cup filled with coffee was a man with a scowl on his face. A man who was the reason I sat in a jail cell all night long.

Emmanuel.

And right behind him was Dan Marks. The one who held all the power for the Briar Woods Community.

"Fuck," I blurted out.

I wasn't the type of person who cursed very often. I just felt there were more colorful words and phrases that got the point across, and were, in my opinion, more amusing to say. But in this instance, "fuck" fit perfectly.

“Ms. Norton, just the woman I wanted to see.” Dan smiled because he wasn’t the one in desperate need of a shower to clean the stench of burning lawn and jail cell off him.

“Mr. Marks, I wanted to apologize for what occurred last night.”

Before Dan could respond to my apology, Emmanuel’s eyes widened. “Oh my god, I’m standing right here.”

I blinked. “I know.”

Emmanuel gasped.

“Ms. Norton, I was just discussing with Mr. Martinez about the community rules and—”

Emmanuel held up his hand to stop Dan. “You purposely destroyed my backyard, got me thrown into jail, and then you say you’re sorry to *this* guy?” He threw his thumb over his shoulder.

“I didn’t get you thrown in jail. You got yourself thrown into jail for destroying my yard.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Melanie. “Maybe you two can talk it out at home—” I cut my friend off.

“No, this is a perfect time to discuss our new neighbor.”

“*Your* new neighbor; I don’t live there. Thank God,” Melanie mumbled the last part.

Emmanuel narrowed his eyes. “You should listen to your friend. She seems to be a lot more rational than you.”

I snorted. “Really?”

“Look, I’ll admit, it wasn’t Lydia’s fault about the fireworks. She was talking to me here yesterday and—”

“No, Melanie, you don’t need to explain anything to this brute.”

“Brute?” Emmanuel’s head jerked back. “Wow. So you’re going to go there, huh? Well, at least I’m not a stuck-up prude who claims to care about plants, but then goes around blowing them up.”

I sucked in a breath a little too fast because it started a coughing fit. Melanie was slapping my back, and Dan looked over in concern.

My brutish neighbor, of course, did nothing.

Why would he? He was a modern-day Neanderthal.

“I was just giving you a taste of your own medicine.”

My eyes scanned down his body. I noticed he wasn’t wearing the same clothes he had on last night. He must have gotten bailed out a while ago. Must be nice to be a rich, spoiled hockey player who can easily get out of anything, even jail.

His blue flannel shirt fit his torso perfectly. I couldn’t help but notice his thick muscles underneath the fabric. Despite my anger toward him, I couldn’t deny Emmanuel was attractive. Something about his rugged demeanor was intriguing.

Emmanuel cleared his throat, bringing me back to reality. “That’s how you deal with problems? By acting like a child?” He tilted his head.

“Well, when someone is childish to me, then, well...” I was realizing how bad I sounded.

This was ridiculous and needed to end.

“You know what? I’m done with this. I shouldn’t have even bothered trying to make peace with you.” Emmanuel took a step forward to brush past me, but I reached out my hand to stop him.

Only I didn’t latch onto his arm. I got a hold of his cup.

It wouldn’t have been bad if my body hadn’t thought it was a good idea to snatch the cup from his hand. I swear, it was like my body took over. Instead of pulling my arm back, I doubled down.

And that was when the coffee went flying.

Maybe it was my heart racing so fast that it seemed like slow motion, but I thought for a moment I could catch the coffee. That somehow, grabbing a flimsy paper cup with scalding hot liquid inside as it floated through the air was doable.

It was not.

The bottom edge of the cup hit the back of my hand and, *poof*, the top popped off. The black liquid flew through the air like a dangerous waterfall.

No, it did not land on the ground—because that would be the best outcome. Since I had the opposite of luck lately, it should have been obvious to me that anything I did would end in misery.

That coffee made contact with a yellow button-up shirt and navy jacket. Then it dripped down to khaki pants and pooled in and around brown leather loafers and a walking stick.

My hands flew to my mouth as I watched Dan get covered with Emmanuel's coffee.

"Oh. My. God," Melanie gasped behind me.

I froze. My mouth hung open, and I wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

It was over. Any chance I had at winning the Briar Woods Community Garden Event was over. Even if I fixed my front garden in time, Dan would convince everyone to vote against me. He had always hated our garden and would sometimes stand near Nan's house and stare at her garden as if he were plotting its destruction.

I felt two hands on my shoulders pull me back out the front door.

It was probably the cops again.

I didn't even want to look. The fight in the shop, the way I looked, and now throwing coffee on a customer. The owner must have called the police on me.

"Run," a deep voice said as they dragged me to the street.

My head whipped around to find Emmanuel standing there and pointing. He had dragged me out, along with Melanie, who stood on my other side.

"Come on, Lydia, we've got to get out of here."

I looked back as the Hard Grind door flew open. There stood Dan and several other people, pointing at me.

“Where? Oh, no, this is one of those pitchfork moments in life, isn’t it?”

Emmanuel grabbed my hand and pulled me up the street. He stopped by a cobalt-blue Kia. The lights flickered, and he said, “Hop in.”

I nodded and got into the front passenger seat while Melanie hopped into the back. We sat quietly as the car sped off.

Once we were on the road, Emmanuel was the first to break the silence. “What the hell is a pitchfork moment?”

“Huh?” I tilted my head.

“You said back there that this was one of those pitchfork moments in life. What is that?”

“You know, like in movies where everyone goes after someone with pitchforks. That sort of thing.”

Emmanuel blinked before erupting in laughter. His grin was captivating, and I couldn’t help but feel a little mesmerized by it. His chuckle was deep, and it sent a shiver down to my core.

I tore my gaze away from him, feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment. Melanie was giggling in the back seat, obviously amused by my comment. I couldn’t help but join in. His laughter was infectious.

“I think we’re safe. Last I checked, there were no pitchforks at Hard Grind.”

I hadn't realized it, but I had been staring at Emmanuel for almost the entire ride. It wasn't until he said, "We're here," that I realized he had driven me home and pulled up in my driveway.

"Oh, right, yes. Thank you." I opened the door and heard Melanie get out of the back. "You know, you could have just parked in your driveway, and Melanie and I would have walked home. We live next to each other, after all."

He smiled, and my breath hitched. "I wanted to make sure you made it home safe. Wouldn't want anybody with a pitchfork to get you."

I smiled and shut the door, standing there as he pulled away. Then, I watched him park right next door and wave as he got out of his car.

"Oh, girl, I know that look." Melanie leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Maybe your time with a hottie is about to come too."

My cheeks warmed, and I knew there was no hiding it. I was attracted to Emmanuel, but that didn't mean I had to give in to the attraction.

The body wants what the body wants, but the mind is always more powerful than the body.

I hoped.



CHAPTER NINE



Emmanuel

“**W**hat do you think?” I waved my hand around the living room.

My sister, Ana, stood there and nodded. Every few seconds, she’d turn a few degrees and nod again. No words, not even a grunt.

She did this for five minutes.

“I like it.”

I folded my arms, waiting. There was always something. I loved my sister, but she was the pickiest person I knew.

“But,” she held up her finger, “that back yard is a mess. I hope you got a discount because of all the work you’re going to have to do.”

I rubbed my face. “It wasn’t like that when I bought it.”

“Wait.” She turned, and her long, brown, wavy hair fluttered through the air. “What? Did you do that on purpose?”

“No, it’s a thing between me and my neighbor.”

She pointed toward Lydia's house. "You mean the one with the trash front yard?"

I held up my hands. "It was an accident, Ana. I invited Aspen over for a housewarming—"

"Say no more." Ana held up her hands. "That man is a five-year-old trapped in a twenty-five-year-old's body. I'm surprised nothing in the house got broken with him around."

Ana was still mad at Aspen for standing her up three times. I wasn't happy about it, but Aspen showed interest in Ana when they first met. I begrudgingly said it was fine if he wanted to ask her out, but he needed to be respectful.

He was not. I don't mean he just slept with her and never spoke to her again—he never even got that far. Aspen kept making plans to take her out, but each time he stood her up.

She finally blocked his number.

"Anyway, things got a little out of hand with the fireworks —"

"Dear god, Em. What were you thinking? This is your neighbor. You know what Mama always told us?"

I nodded. "Treat your neighbors with respect because you never know when you'll need their help."

She folded her arms. "You are so lucky. You get all this, and then you invite that man-baby over. If he weren't on the team, I'd tell you to stay away from him. I hope you apologized to your neighbor."

I frowned.

“Are you kidding me?” Ana came over and grabbed my arm, pulling me into the kitchen. “Right now. You do this right now.”

While Ana was my little sister, she sometimes acted more like my mother. I think because Mom was dead, she felt she needed to be the motherly figure in my life. She felt she had to take care of me.

Ana told me I was lucky to have all this. The money. The career. The house. But what I felt most lucky about was that she was my sister.

“It’s going to take me a while to cook it.”

Ana wanted me to make Mama’s tacos. She would always make it whenever we would move into a new place and give some to the neighbors. It was her way of being friendly to them.

“It takes, like, five minutes to make. I know you have some chorizo around. You always do.”

I sighed. It wasn’t like I didn’t think it was a good idea to give Lydia my mother’s tacos, but I was embarrassed by all that had happened.

Lydia was smart and beautiful, and I screwed everything up. She hated me, and I didn’t blame her.

As much as I didn’t want to fix my back yard up, it impressed me that she blew it up. Not that it was a smart

move, but most of the women I had met would just complain and give me the silent treatment.

She went bold, and it blew up in her face. That took some guts.

Even being halfway covered in soot four days ago, there was something about her that was alluring. Was it weird that it turned me on to see her covered in dirt?

I shook my head, trying to focus on grabbing the ingredients from the refrigerator.

As I started cooking, Ana looked over my shoulder, giving me pointers on how to get the flavor just right. She always had a knack for cooking like Mama did.

As I was cooking, Ana watched me intently. “You like her?” she asked with a sly smile on her face.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course not,” I lied. But deep down, I knew she was right. There was something about Lydia I couldn’t shake off. Maybe it was the adrenaline rush from the explosion, or maybe it was her fiery personality that attracted me to her.

I finished cooking the chorizo and put it, with the rest of the ingredients, into a storage container, ready to take it next door to Lydia’s house. After I covered all the food, Ana hugged me as I was heading out and whispered, “Go get ‘em, tiger.”

Nervously, I walked over to Lydia’s house, wondering if she would even answer the door. To my surprise, she opened the door and looked at me with suspicion.

She looked amazing in a black T-shirt and high-waisted jeans that hugged her curves in all the right places. Her hair was pulled back into a messy bun, but it only added to her effortless beauty.

“A peace offering: my mother’s chorizo tacos with homemade corn tortillas.” I always made my own because store-bought tortillas were crap.

Her sparkling eyes widened. “Wow. Thank you. Why don’t you come in?”

My eyes grew as I took a deep breath, feeling my heart pound against my chest. Every time it thumped, it seemed like it was about to burst out of its cage. I smiled weakly in response, suddenly feeling very vulnerable.

I stepped inside and was surprised at what I saw. I didn’t know what to expect, but I hadn’t expected grandma-chic. Everything in the home looked like it had been here for at least fifty years.

“You, uh... have a pleasant home.” I smiled.

“It was my grandmother’s, but she died last year.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She took the container from me, and we headed into the kitchen.

Lydia sighed as she placed it on the beige-tiled countertop. “She was old and had a good life. Sometimes it’s hard. This place reminds me of her so much, especially the garden.”

My brows shot up. “What?”

She turned around, leaving the food unopened, and leaned against the counter. “That’s why I was so upset when the garden was destroyed almost two weeks ago. I know it was an accident.” She gave out a watery laugh. “But it was the garden that held so many wonderful memories of her. If you had destroyed the house, I don’t think I would have been as upset. But the garden, well... that was her love.”

I felt like the worst person on Earth. I wanted the ground to open up and let me fall thousands of feet until I couldn’t fall anymore.

“Lydia, I am so sorry.” I rubbed my face. “Damn, those tacos seem pathetic compared to the damage that was done.”

No wonder she called me a killer that night. I had murdered her grandmother’s work.

I headed for the doorway. “I understand if you never want to speak to me again. While I can’t replace the love and care your grandmother put into her garden, I am happy to pay for anything you want.”

She took a deep breath. “It really isn’t about the money.”

While I understood what she meant, I didn’t think she fully understood what I was saying.

“I’m not saying money will replace her beautiful garden, but understand that, where I grew up, having an outdoor space of any kind was a luxury. Having more than one bedroom was a luxury. I had wanted a home of my own since I was a kid. To

me, money would have fixed everything. These tacos are my mother's memory I share with you. The money I offer is something that's important to me. I may not have set off those fireworks, but I will take responsibility for them. They came from my front yard, and I own that."

She smiled and grabbed my hand, holding it in hers. "Will you share those tacos and your mother's memory with me?"

"Yes."

She pulled me back into the kitchen, where she sat me at her wooden kitchen table as she served me food.

"So, that Dan guy. He's a dick," I said, trying to break the silence in between bites.

Her eyes widened, and for a moment I regretted opening my mouth. But then her head fell back as laughter erupted.

"You're not wrong." Lydia put down her taco and sat back. "Ugh, and he's been like that as long as I've lived here. My Nan told me right before I moved here that a neighbor of his accused him of cheating with the garden event."

"Mr. Do-Everything-By-The-Rules? That's crazy," I said with a snort.

"I think that's why he is so particular about it. Nothing came from the accusation, but Nan told me he's been picky ever since."

"He's got nothing on you."

Her head shot back. "What do you mean?"

“Before things blew up,” I threw my thumb over my shoulder toward her front door, “I thought your front garden was amazing. Before I knew you were my neighbor, I was going to ask who your landscaper was.”

Her cheeks darkened, and I thought she had never looked more beautiful. “Thank you.”

We spent hours talking before I realized how late it had become. As I left Lydia’s place and took the thirty-second walk back to my home, I realized I hadn’t been that happy and content since my mother was alive. Since my mama would insist on Sunday dinners with my sister and me.

That time in Lydia’s kitchen felt like home.



CHAPTER TEN



Lydia

The purple blurred in my vision as I inhaled. Lavender. I smiled as the sweet aroma of lavender filled the air with its calming scent. It was a beautiful plant and perfect for what I was about to do.

It was a vibrant mix of purple and white flowers, each petal as delicate as gossamer. Its stems were tall and thin, reaching toward the sky in a graceful arch. The green ceramic pot was plain but beautiful, its glaze reflecting the sunlight like a shiny emerald.

“Keep staring at it long enough, it just might say yes,” Melanie came up behind me and whispered in my ear.

“Huh?” I shook my head and turned to face her.

She waved at the lavender plant nestled in the green ceramic pot. “You look like you want to marry it.”

I chuckled. “Maybe I should. It smells better than most of the men I’ve met.”

Except Emmanuel. I nibbled my lower lip. I hadn't been able to get Emmanuel out of my head for the past two days. Not since he brought me over the tacos.

Melanie noticed the change in my expression and nudged me with her elbow. "What's going on with you?"

"I don't know," I admitted, feeling a flush creep up my neck.

Melanie smiled knowingly. "Looks like someone has a crush on their hot neighbor."

I rolled my eyes, hiding my blush. "It's not like that. It's just... he's different."

"Different how?"

I paused, trying to find the right words. "He's kind, and funny... and he listens. Really listens. Like, he cares about what I have to say."

Melanie's grin softened into a smile. "Sounds like you've got it bad."

"I don't!" I protested, but even I could hear the lie in my voice. "In fact, I bought this plant to take to him as a peace offering, nothing more."

Her lips thinned like she didn't believe me. I didn't believe me either.

"From what I heard from Daisy, Emmanuel is a really nice guy. He is so supportive of the other players on the team. He's hot, a hockey player, and a good guy. Not bad, if you ask me."

Melanie was right, but there was a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that told me to keep my distance.

“I’m sure he is a great teammate, and I know he’s nice, but I really need to focus on getting my grandmother’s house in order and fixing her yard.”

I was still undecided if I should sell the place. Daisy had suggested it so I could take the money and get a place to grow my landscaping business. But I hated the thought of letting go of this place. It held so many memories.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself. I’ve got to run. Got to work on one of the Devils.”

I grinned. “That’s right. You started with the Devils this week as their new physical therapist and masseuse. How is that going?”

Melanie radiated with excitement. “Amazing. I have only worked on one player so far, Cillian, but I already knew him. He was very nice, despite Daisy warning me he was a grump.”

“That’s so great.” I gave her a hug and waved Melanie off as she left.

Turning back to the lavender, I took a deep breath. “It’s not a marriage proposal; it’s just a plant.” I gave myself a good shake before picking up the pot and heading out to Emmanuel’s house.

“He might not even be at home,” I mumbled to myself, trying to calm my nerves.

Right as I got to the front door and lifted my fist to knock, the door swung open. There stood a shirtless, dripping wet Emmanuel in nothing but a white towel that did little to hide his naked body.

My jaw dropped as I stared at him in shock and awe. He was even hotter up close than I imagined, his muscles rippling underneath his skin as droplets of water cascaded down his tanned chest. My eyes couldn't help but wander down to the bulge under his towel, imagining what it would be like to have him entirely to myself.

What was I thinking?

He was my neighbor, and I was bringing him a plant. Nothing more.

“Oh, I thought you were Aspen.” He frowned.

“Your teammate with the fireworks?”

Emmanuel nodded.

“Do you normally hang out with him in nothing but a towel?”

Maybe I had this whole thing mixed up. Perhaps I wasn't his type... I guess Aspen was his type.

He rubbed his brow and chuckled. “No, it's something he did. Anyway, not really appropriate to discuss here.”

Yup, I was barking up the wrong tree. Not just the wrong tree, the entire forest.

“Ah...” I nodded and winked, letting him know I understood. “I get it.”

His brow wrinkled as he tilted his head. “Okay. Uh, can I help you?”

There was a pause for a moment when my brain stopped working. Not that my brain wasn't functioning—because it was—it was just that my brain was more focused on Emmanuel's dripping, very naked chest.

“Yes. Yes, uh, this.” I pushed the lavender toward Emmanuel. “I wanted to offer a truce. A peace offering in the form of one of my favorite plants, lavender.”

His smile widened. Then he did something I hadn't expected. Emmanuel reached for the plant with both hands. The same hands that had, just seconds ago, been holding up the only piece of cloth between my eyes and his very sizable cock.

That wasn't even the strangest part. What caused me to freeze in place was that he didn't realize he dropped the towel.

Bringing the plant to his chest and cradling it like a newborn, Emmanuel said, “Thank you so much. It smells wonderful and looks even better.”

I nodded and tried my best to keep my gaze latched on to his, but it was proving difficult. It felt like his large member was a magnet pulling my eyes to it.

Let's call his thick meat candy Tom. Tom really wanted my attention.

“Looks amazing.” I nodded as my eyes strained to stay straight.

Then a thought hit me like a punch to the chest. What if he knew his towel had fallen this whole time, and he was messing with me? Another way to get back at me.

I pursed my lips and thought two could play at that game. Why else would he answer the door in only a towel? No one does that.

“Right,” I said and proceeded to unbutton my blouse.

His smile soon faded the lower I got on my top. Each button that popped open caused the crease between his brow to deepen.

“Uh, do you normally start taking off your clothes when delivering plants?”

I smirked. I was on to his games, and he knew it.

“Do you normally stand naked when answering the door?” I unfastened the last button and peeled off my blouse. Only my lace bra stood between him and the ladies being on full display.

“Naked? I’m not—” He looked down, and that was when he saw what I had been looking at for the past minute.

“Oh my god.” Emmanuel bent down and quickly snatched the damp towel from the floor.

He fumbled and did his best to hold the towel over his fat sausage with one hand while balancing the plant in the other.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

I stopped unzipping my jeans and tilted my head. “Why didn’t I say anything? I thought you realized you were naked. I mean, who wouldn’t notice they were completely bare with the cool breeze blowing?”

His mouth hung open, and he shook his head.

“And, on top of that, you seemed perfectly okay with answering the door in nothing but a tiny towel. A towel, I may point out, that does very little to hide your John Hamm, if you know what I mean.”

“My John Hamm... I don’t know whether to be angry or impressed with the mental gymnastics you had to do to conclude that I wanted to stand naked while talking to my neighbor at my front door. Where anyone walking past could see me.”

Well, when he put it like that, it seemed like a bit of a stretch that he purposely wanted to be nude.

And now I was standing in front of him with my top off like an idiot.

“You may be right—”

“May be right?” he cut me off. “I am right. No, I did not know my towel had fallen. My teammate, Aspen, was just here, and he tried to help me fix a leak in my shower. And by help, I mean, make it worse. I should have learned from the fireworks incident that I just shouldn’t let Aspen in my home anymore, but I did because he needed my advice. Anyway, he

tried to help, but, of course, he made things worse. Then, he made the excuse that he had to go to the rink and left.”

I nodded and tapped my chin as if pondering life’s greatest quandary. “That makes sense.”

“You think?” he asked in a way that made it obvious he thought I was an idiot too.

I took a moment and gathered my thoughts. Once again, I went overboard and made myself look like a fool. Why was I so bad at life?

“So, I made a mistake and jumped to a wildly inappropriate conclusion. And for that, I am sorry.”

His eyes slowly drifted down to my chest and bare stomach. “You do that a lot,” Emmanuel murmured, though he was still staring at the ladies.

I came here to make up for my mistake, and I only made things worse.

“I understand if you don’t want to see me anymore.”

He smirked and finally lifted his gaze to mine. “I wouldn’t say that.”

I waved my hands and shook my head. “No, it was completely wrong of me to assume the worst of you after you went out of your way to make me those delicious tacos. It won’t be easy, but I will do what I can to avoid you while leaving and coming home. If I am arriving and see you outside, I’ll hide in my car until you are gone—”

“Lydia, stop.” He bent down and put the plant on the floor before standing. He reached out and placed his hand on my bare arm.

His touch was like a spark, and warmth radiated from the tips of his fingers and into my skin. “That isn’t necessary. We both messed up these past two weeks. I have an idea of how we both can work off our mistakes.”

He smiled, and I could feel my heart skip a beat.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



Emmanuel

“**E**mmanuel, this isn’t what I thought you had in mind.” Lydia chuckled as she pushed the shovel into the dirt with the bottom of her boot.

I stood, wiping the sweat from my brow. “Before you blew up my back yard, I wanted to surprise you by fixing your garden.”

Even in dirt-covered jeans and a hoodie, Lydia looked beautiful. She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and leaned on the shovel. “Well, you definitely surprised me,” she said with a hint of mischief in her eyes.

When she took off her top an hour ago, I didn’t want her to stop. She was more stunning than I imagined—and I had fantasized about her a lot the past week.

Lydia’s tongue slowly traced the curve of her bottom lip. Every ounce of me wanted to rip off the gloves. I wanted nothing more than to cradle her face in my palms and take her lips in a searing kiss.

“Then I’m glad I thought about it.” I shook my head and tried to focus on fixing her front yard.

Lydia grabbed a hand shovel, bent over, and started digging. “You know, my nan told me once that she had buried treasure here. I think that’s how she got me to garden with her. She told me if I dug deep enough, I’d find it. I never did, but I don’t think there was anything here.”

The diamond ring. With all that had happened, I had forgotten about it.

“You know, when I was attempting to fix your garden, I found something—”

“Back at it, I see.” Dan stood on the other side of the fence with a frown.

“Yes, only this time, she knows about it. So there’s no need to call the police.”

Lydia dropped her shovel and stood. “Wait, you were the one who got us arrested?”

Dan pushed out his chin and narrowed his eyes. “Of course. Both of you were being highly suspicious. Especially you, Ms. Norton. I’d expect better because of your grandmother, but, given your past, I’m not surprised.”

What the hell? This guy was being a jerk. It was terrible enough he got us arrested, but then to say that to Lydia was completely disrespectful.

“Hey.” I took a step forward, getting in between Dan and Lydia. “You need to apologize to her.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” he scoffed. “I’m on the Briar Woods Committee, and I have to look out for people like you.”

“What did you just say to him?” Lydia stepped around me and pushed her hands on her hips. “It sounded like you said, ‘people like you.’ What exactly did you mean by that?”

Dan rolled his eyes. “I meant, people who go around breaking the rules. He’s a hockey player, and they are the worst sort of people.” He sneered as he stated my profession. “You know how people who play sports for a living are. It’s not like it’s a proper job. Give me a stick to hit a puck on ice and pay me lots of money. Talk about a silly job.”

Wow, this guy had a serious hangup about hockey players.

“You know it requires skill and physical strength. And based on your walking ability, Mr. Marks, you would last five seconds on the ice.” Lydia pointed at his walking stick.

“Whatever, Ms. Norton, I am not here to talk about sports. I came by to tell you that the committee has agreed that you will no longer be allowed in the Green Briar Community Garden Event. And we are banning you for life from it.” He grinned as if he had already won the event.

Lydia’s eyes grew wide. She was angry, but I could tell she was holding back tears. She had told me all about this garden event when I brought over the tacos, and I knew it meant everything to her.

“Isn’t that just perfect?” Lydia pushed her finger into Dan’s chest. “You’ve wanted this garden out of the garden event for

years, and now you've gotten your wish. Congratulations. Now that my grandmother is gone, you have total control."

He pushed her hand away. "I'll have you know the committee wanted to just email you, but I told them that's too impersonal. I would tell you myself, for courtesy's sake."

I took a step back, otherwise I would have been knocked over. Lydia started jumping up and down as if she was doing some old-time dance. "La-de-freaking-da. Nan always told me to monitor you. That you had tried to get her garden kicked out of the competition for a decade, but you couldn't get anything on her. And since the committee loved her—heck, the entire neighborhood loved her—you could never convince people to remove her."

I noticed Dan said nothing.

"I assume I'm not allowed into the event either." I folded my arms.

Not that I cared, but I felt he was the type of guy who didn't want anyone involved who didn't think exactly like him.

Dan grinned and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a pink envelope. "On the contrary, Mr. Martinez. Since you are new to the neighborhood, it took a while to get your invite. Here you go. It's good I caught you both together, or I would have had to make two different trips." Dan strolled off once I took the envelope.

Lydia stood there with her mouth hanging open.

I knew the event was important to her. I may not have been into gardening, but I bet this was like losing a hockey game. It always felt terrible.

“Lydia, I’m so sorry.”

“That son of a bitch,” she spit out through clenched teeth.

“He’s a terrible person; we can both agree on that. Is there a way I can just give you the envelope? I’m not really interested in joining the event, so maybe you could join for me?”

Her shoulders sank, and she turned to face me. “You’d do that?”

I nodded. “Of course. Like I said, I’m not much of a gardener, and I need to focus on hockey. Don’t really have time to plan and create a show-stopping garden.” I chuckled.

She didn’t laugh.

Instead, Lydia stepped closer to me, her eyes searching mine. “Thank you.” Her hand reached up to rest on my chest. “You have no idea how much this means to me. It’s not just about the gardening, Emmanuel,” Lydia said with a solemn expression. “The garden competition is one of the biggest events in our community. It brings us all together, and it’s a chance for me to showcase my passion and hard work. I’ve been preparing for this for months with the hopes I’d be invited.”

A jolt ran through me at her touch, and I couldn’t help but think about how soft her hand was against my skin. I cleared

my throat, trying to push those thoughts aside. “No problem. Happy to help.”

Lydia smiled again, this time with more warmth. She squeezed my arm gently before releasing me, her hand sliding away to reveal a blush on her cheeks. “You’re such a sweetheart,” she said with a hint of shyness in her voice. “I was so wrong about you. When the fireworks destroyed my garden, I thought you were a spoiled, selfish jerk. But you aren’t that at all.”

A warmth spread through my chest at her words, and I had to take a deep breath to steady myself. I wanted nothing more than to reach out and pull her in for a hug.

So that was exactly what I did.

I stepped closer, my hands coming to rest on her arms. Lydia looked up at me in surprise, but she didn’t pull away. I met her gaze, and I could see the surprise and admiration in her eyes. Slowly, I leaned in and brushed my lips against hers. It was a gentle kiss, but it sent sparks flying through my veins as if I had been electrified.

Lydia closed her eyes and leaned into me, slipping her arms around my neck. We stayed there for a few moments, our lips moving together in a gentle exploration. When we finally pulled away, Lydia looked up at me with a soft smile, and that blush of hers now traveled down her neck.

“I probably shouldn’t have done that.” I realized in that moment what she must have thought. That I expected a kiss in return for the envelope.

“I’m glad you did.” She nibbled on her bottom lip.
“Actually, I was hoping you would.”

“Really? Okay. That’s, uh, good.” I’m sure I had a goofy smile on my face, but all I could manage at that moment was awkward small talk.

Lydia laughed, and the sound was like a balm to my nerves. “Let’s just say I’m so relieved you’re not such a jerk, and you *are* willing to help me out. I’m truly grateful.” She reached up and kissed me one more time before stepping away. “Come on, Mr. Martinez. Let’s get this amazing garden of mine ready for the competition.”

I nodded, and right at that moment, something crazy happened. A car pulled up right outside my house, and then another car pulled up in front of Lydia’s house.

A woman jumped out of the car in Lydia’s driveway. “Lydia, I think we need to talk. I need your advice.”

“Hey, Melanie. Why don’t you head inside? I’ll be just a minute.”

Melanie scurried inside as if she was hiding from someone.

“It looks like we have to postpone our gardening session. Are you busy tomorrow?” she asked.

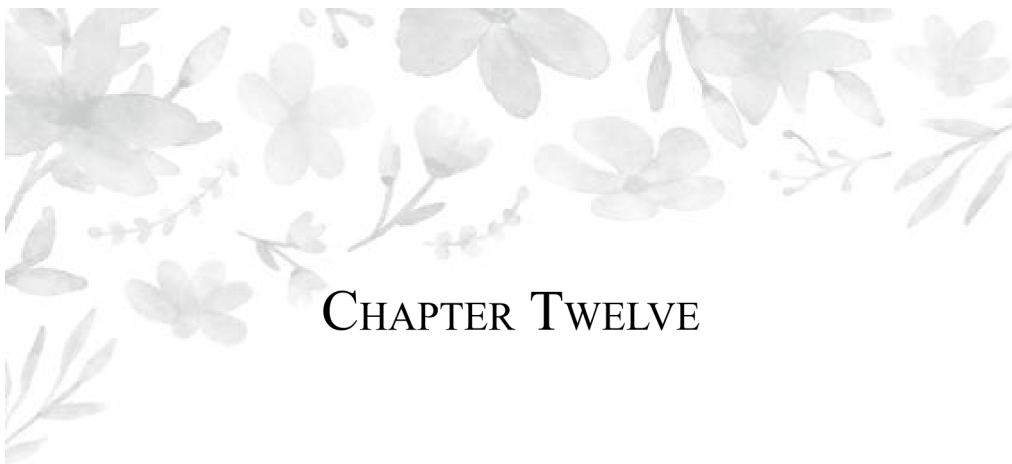
“I’ve got practice, which ends about four. I can help after.”

She nodded, and Aspen stepped out of the car in front of my place. “Emmanuel. I have a big problem.”

I ignored my teammate for a moment, watching Lydia's ass sway as she made her way back to her home. Once she was inside, I turned to my friend. "Perfect timing, Aspen, as always," I said sarcastically.

Aspen smiled. "Great. Everyone always says that about me. It's one of my many talents."

I shook my head and waved him inside. Taking one last look back at Lydia's, I was excited to spend time helping her with the garden, and maybe even more.



CHAPTER TWELVE



Lydia

***M**aybe this isn't a good idea.*

I tap send on my phone and chew on my lower lip. Standing in the hallway outside the locker room, I wait for Emmanuel.

It's a great idea. Did you wear the skirt?

Sighing, I read Daisy's reply before I tucked the phone back into my bag. I had told her yesterday after we worked in the garden that I planned to surprise Emmanuel by meeting him at the rink today. I wanted to take him out to dinner, as thanks for giving me his invitation.

She ran right over, and, along with Melanie, they picked out the outfit I should wear—which wound up being a very short skirt and almost sheer blouse. It was quite revealing and not something I would normally wear.

Melanie had come over to discuss an issue she had with her new job, which was just that she didn't like one player. I

explained that everyone has to deal with a co-worker they don't like. She wasn't happy, but she understood.

But now that I was here, I was second-guessing their advice on the outfit and even coming here to begin with.

Yesterday when he kissed me, I was over the moon. I had been dreaming about that for a few days, though I worried he just saw me as a friendly neighbor—going as far as offering to help with the garden and giving me his invite—but when he kissed me, my worry melted away.

But today I woke up with a sense of dread. Maybe I was moving too fast. Or perhaps Emmanuel didn't feel the same way. Maybe I was setting myself up for disappointment.

Ugh, I was overthinking this like I did everything.

Many players had come out of the locker room, but I had yet to see Emmanuel. Suddenly, Cillian appeared. “Hey, Lydia, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to speak with Emmanuel. Is he here?”

Cillian scratched his chin. “I think he might have left.”

My shoulders sank. “Oh,” I replied, trying to hide my disappointment. “Do you know where he went?”

Cillian shrugged. “I have no idea. But if you ask me, he was off his game today.” He was usually gruff and always got to the point, which many people didn't like, but I enjoyed his honesty.

“Thanks.”

“If you need to drop anything off for him, the locker room is empty now.” He threw his thumb over his shoulder.

“Okay.” I nodded as he walked away.

So much for going out to dinner. It was a stupid idea, anyway. I already gave him a plant.

I twisted some strands of my red hair around my finger and glanced over at the locker room entrance. Now I was curious about what the room looked like. And, more importantly, what Emmanuel’s locker looked like.

I hesitated for only a moment before making my way toward the locker room. Cillian said it was empty now, so it wasn’t like I was going to run into anyone. I pushed open the door and was immediately assaulted by the lingering smell of sweat and hockey equipment.

I wrinkled my nose but didn’t let it deter me as I made my way down the rows of lockers. Almost all of them were plain and unadorned, simply displaying the name of the player who used them.

There was one on the far side of the room with Emmanuel’s name printed on a metal plate. Making my way over, I reached out to touch it but stopped. Suddenly, I felt very invasive, like I was crossing a line by being in this room. I turned to leave, but as I did, I glimpsed something moving in the back corner.

I gasped.

It was Emmanuel, and he was naked. This time, there was no towel, just everything he was born with and nothing more.

But he hadn't seen me. I quickly looked around to see if there was a place I could hide. I darted behind the lockers and held my breath.

"Is someone there?" he called out.

I placed my hands over my mouth for fear I'd make a sound.

"Aspen, is that you? Come on, you know I really don't like tricks."

There was a creaking sound, and I figured he was opening his locker. I let out a breath. Maybe he was getting dressed?

He had an exquisite body—something I had thought about ever since I saw him naked yesterday. What I saw just now only confirmed that I wasn't imagining it. Emmanuel Martinez was hot.

I knew some Devils had a lot of fangirls—I believe they were called puck bunnies. From what I heard, Emmanuel didn't have as many as the other players. Which just meant those puck bunnies were stupid. He was obviously the sexiest player on the team.

I couldn't believe what I was doing. I peeked out from behind the lockers. Emmanuel's locker was still open, but he wasn't there anymore.

He must have gone to the bathroom or something. Part of me was ashamed at how much I wanted to see him naked again. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't help it.

The other part, well... she was horny. It had been a long, long time since I had been with a guy. When my grandmother

fell ill last year, my whole life became taking care of her and working, leaving no time for anything else.

I had no life, and when she passed, I focused on work.

Emmanuel was the first guy I had really interacted with regularly, outside of Daisy's brother and her boyfriend, in years. I covered my face in shame. What had I become? Just a sad, lonely woman who was a peeper to get her kicks.

"Aspen, whatever you're planning, it will not work because I'm leaving now," Emmanuel called out from somewhere in the locker room.

I leaned against the back of the lockers and sighed. Now was my chance to leave. I waited a minute and listened to make sure he was gone.

There was silence.

Right, time to go. I took one step around the corner to the main locker area and saw Emmanuel standing there, his hands on his hips, glaring at me. Fully clothed.

"Hi. Funny running into you here," I said with a nervous chuckle.

He didn't appear amused. "Lydia? Were you spying on me?"

"Spying is not really the right word."

His brows shot up. "Peeping. Is that the right word?"

"Yes." I held up my hands. "But in my defense, I really thought the locker room was empty. When I saw you coming, I hid because I didn't want to embarrass you."

He ran his hands through his damp hair. “Embarrass me?”

That was when Emmanuel strode forward like he was charging me. He was a bull, and I was the red flag.

I backed up until my back hit the wall. He came right up and stopped with only an inch between us.

Emmanuel was towering over me, his body heat radiating onto my skin. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, and my breaths became shallow.

He leaned in close, his face inches from mine. “You like watching, Lydia? Is that why you were spying on me?”

My heart raced as his breath brushed against my lips. Was it weird that I did like watching? Yes, it was. But I couldn’t tell him any of that.

“No,” I whispered, trying to keep my voice steady.

He smirked, and it was the sexiest thing I had ever seen. It was as if he saw right through me and took pleasure in teasing me.

God, he hadn’t even touched me yet, and I was already creaming myself.

“I don’t think it’s fair.” Emmanuel’s eyes slid down my body.

“What?” I squeaked.

“You’ve seen me naked twice, but I haven’t seen you naked.”

I swallowed hard, feeling a hot flush creep up my neck. Emmanuel's gaze was intense, and I couldn't look away. His words sent a shiver down my spine, and, despite my embarrassment, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement.

Anyone could walk in and catch us, but deep down, I knew what I wanted.

“Here?”

Emmanuel lifted his brow and, just like that, my mouth watered.

“Yes. Here.” He took a step back and folded his arms. “It would be the neighborly thing to do.”

I snorted. “That's not true.”

He sighed. “Look, I get it. I'm not about to pressure you to get naked. We can leave here and go back to just being neighbors and never speaking about this again. But there will always be that awkwardness between us, knowing you've seen me naked, that you spied on me. Over time, that weirdness between us will turn to resentment, and we'll get into small fights about petty things and—”

I held up my hands. “Alright. I'll take my clothes off.”

His eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes, but on one condition.”

He tilted his head. “What?”

“That you get naked too. I know you’ve already been naked twice, but I would feel more comfortable if I wasn’t the only one standing here in my birthday suit. The more the merrier, so to speak.”

I winced at that last part. There went my brain overthinking things again.

He rubbed his chin. “Fine. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

And before I could respond, he pulled off his sweater. I was surprised by how quickly he was removing his clothing. Maybe he thought of it as a race.

Bring it on.

I tugged at my top, which was obviously too small for me. It took longer to get off and got caught on my nose. Thankfully, Emmanuel was there to help.

Once that was off, and I could see again, I noticed he was only wearing boxer briefs and socks.

Crap. I had to catch up. Quickly, I unzipped the skirt and let it pool by my feet.

We both looked at each other and saw we only had our undergarments left.

I narrowed my eyes as he hitched his thumb under his waistband. He may only have had one piece of clothing left, but I had dedicated years to removing my bra as quickly as possible. My one-handed technique even impressed my female friends.

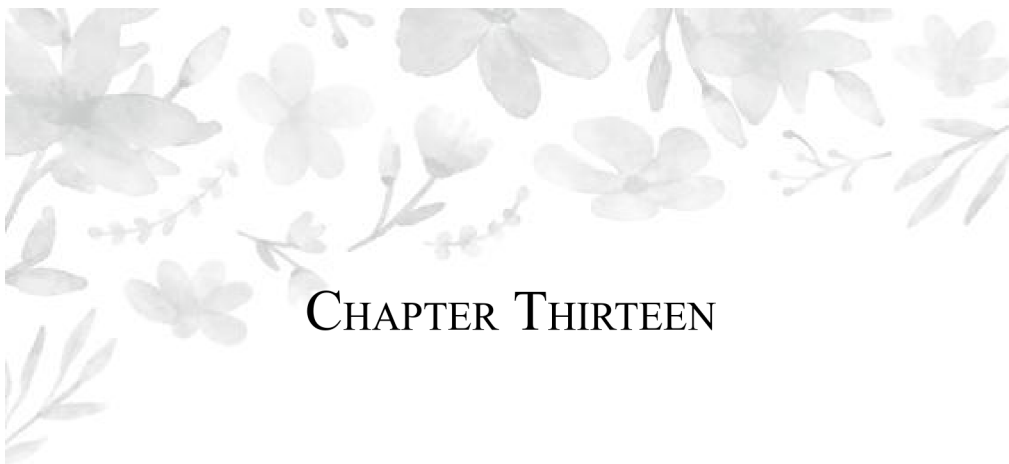
“Go,” I blurted. I was going to win this, even if it meant I fell to the hard tiled floor, bruising myself, to remove everything before him.

Thankfully, I didn't fall, and we both got the last of our clothes off at the same time. I clapped my hands and hooted, proud of how quick I was, but he didn't smile.

Was he not happy with our timing?

Then I realized why there was no grin on his face. He was staring at my naked body.

Not only that, but his unusually large penis was growing bigger as the seconds ticked by.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Emmanuel

Lydia was so gorgeous, and as I gazed upon her perfect body, my chest ached.

I didn't even know if perfect was the right word. It had flaws like any other body—small scars, a tiny mole just under her right breast, and a few faint stretchmarks on her hips. It was all those things that made her perfect, though. If she were flawless, I would have been disappointed. Unreal. Like a plastic doll.

But me and my cock knew Lydia was completely real.

All I wanted to do was place my hands on her hips and slide my fingers over every perfect imperfection. The way she was excited to race me to remove her clothing was adorable.

How had I never realized until now that Lydia was the perfect woman? She was stunning, clever, hardworking, and funny in a not-so-obvious way.

God, I wanted her.

“So, what now?” Her radiating smile slowly fell as she stared at my cock, which only made it grow. I’d be rock-hard in no time.

“What do you think we should do?”

I wanted her to say it, to admit she wanted me as much as I desired her.

Maybe she didn’t. Was this all a weird competition for her? If so, she needed to tell me. I wasn’t about to make her do something she didn’t want to do.

But if she wanted me, I’d make sure she left this locker room with the biggest smile on her face.

I listened to the other players on the team go on and on at how many women they fucked. It was always about their own pleasure. They were idiots. They didn’t realize, if you made sure the woman was happy, then she would make sure you had the best time.

I may not have been with many women recently, focusing on playing hockey and saving for the house instead, but I had been with enough to know what to do. It also helped that I heard my sister and her friends complain about guys and what they did wrong.

Lydia sucked on her lower lip as her eyes fluttered up to meet my gaze. “Touch each other?” She sucked in a breath, waiting for my response. She was so cute.

I took a step closer, feeling the heat of her body radiate with every breath. “Where do you want me to touch you first?”

Her eyes scanned the room, refusing to look directly at me. “Um, maybe you could, uh... touch me here.” She pointed at her shoulder. Lydia was nervous, and it was time to put her at ease.

I reached over and placed my thumb on her shoulder, and her nipples hardened. Her body was sensitive to my touch. I slowly drew circles over her shoulder.

“Wow, that feels fantastic. I never expected someone touching my shoulder to feel like that.”

I pulled my hand away, and she frowned. “Now it’s my turn. I want you to touch me right here.” I touched the dip at the bottom of my neck.

“Okay.” She started to lift her hand but stopped.

Right when I was about to remind her that she promised to touch me, Lydia leaned forward. My breath caught in my throat as her fragrant floral aroma engulfed me. She tenderly kissed my neck, her lips lingering against my skin like a gentle caress of velvet that sent shivers of pleasure down my spine.

She slowly pulled away, her eyes locked onto mine—a mixture of desire and eagerness written in them.

“Where?” I cleared my throat. “Where should I touch you?”

She pointed to her lips, and, within seconds, I leaned into her, capturing them with mine in a passionate kiss.

Her lips were soft and inviting, my body igniting with every second that passed. I moved away ever so slightly, my tongue

running along her bottom lip. My hands found her waist, pulling her closer as I deepened the kiss.

We moved together, the intensity of the moment building until I could feel electricity sparking between us. I ran my hands up her back, feeling her soft curves against my palms. She moaned into my mouth, her body pressing against mine as she lifted her leg, hooking it around my waist.

Lydia felt better than I imagined.

My hand slid down to her breast, and I pinched her hardened nipple between my thumb and finger. She sucked in a breath before releasing it with a moan.

My cock twitched with need.

Everything inside me was screaming to throw her down onto the cool floor and fuck her until neither of us could move.

But I resisted.

It was time to hear her cry out my name. I trailed my kisses down her neck and chest, giving each adorable pink nipple a kiss. When I got to her stomach, I hooked her leg over my shoulder.

Her fingers tangled into my hair, sending shivers down to my cock. I couldn't wait to taste her. I licked her inner thigh, leaving a trail of fire on her delicate skin.

I was so close, I could feel the heat radiating from between her legs, and I dove headfirst into her as she gasped. My tongue found her clit, and I settled into a rhythm. Her body

trembled as I circled my tongue around her clit, her moans music to my ears.

“Emmanuel,” she cried out my name.

I continued to lick and press my tongue against her, exploring every inch of her, pushing her further. I knew it wouldn't be long before I made her come.

Taking two fingers, I slid them inside her core. Lydia fisted my hair as she pulled me tightly against her sweet pussy.

“I'm coming,” she whimpered as I felt her walls tighten around my fingers.

My tongue didn't stop until the last wave of her orgasm had left her body. I stayed in between her legs until I felt her body completely relax.

When I pulled away, Lydia's eyes were still closed, her soft skin still warm from my tongue.

“That was amazing,” she breathed, still in a trance.

I smiled when I stood up, bringing her with me, and kissed her forehead.

“I want you to touch me again,” she panted. “But this time, I want you to do it with your cock.”

Then Lydia did something that surprised me. She bent over, placing her hands on the bench, and pointed at her swollen pussy from behind.

She wanted me to fuck her.

“Are you sure?” I asked because we were still in the locker room. And now that we fooled around, I would have thought she’d want to move this somewhere else.

She gazed back, biting her lip. “Yes, please.”

I wasn’t about to ask twice. Grabbing her hips with one hand and placing the tip of my cock at her opening, I rubbed it around those sweet lips.

She pushed back, eager for me to fill her.

And that was exactly what I did.

I thrust my hips forward ever so slowly, allowing Lydia to adjust to my size. Her moans grew louder and louder. I pumped my hips, each thrust faster and more intense than before. She was so tight, so perfect around me. I wouldn’t be able to last much longer.

And when she gazed back at me with her hooded, desire-filled eyes, I wanted to stay like this forever. She reached between her legs and played with herself.

“That’s it, neighbor. Make yourself come all over my cock.”

She moaned as she pleased herself. Within moments, her walls tightened around my shaft as she screamed out in pleasure.

That was my cue.

I pushed deep inside her, going harder and faster. Within a few minutes, we were both screaming in pleasure as we came together.

We stayed like that for a few minutes, completely lost in the moment, before I eventually pulled away. Her legs wobbled, so I grabbed her hips, helping her sit on the bench before I sat beside her.

She leaned against me, resting her head on my shoulder. We sat like that for a few minutes, catching our breath.

The moment felt fragile, and I gently pulled away from her and stood up.

I wanted to take a shower, but I couldn't make myself do it. I didn't want to wash away the memory.

Lydia smiled at me, her eyes still full of desire. "That was amazing," she said in a whisper.

I smiled back and nodded. "We should do that again sometime," I suggested, my mouth going dry with anticipation.

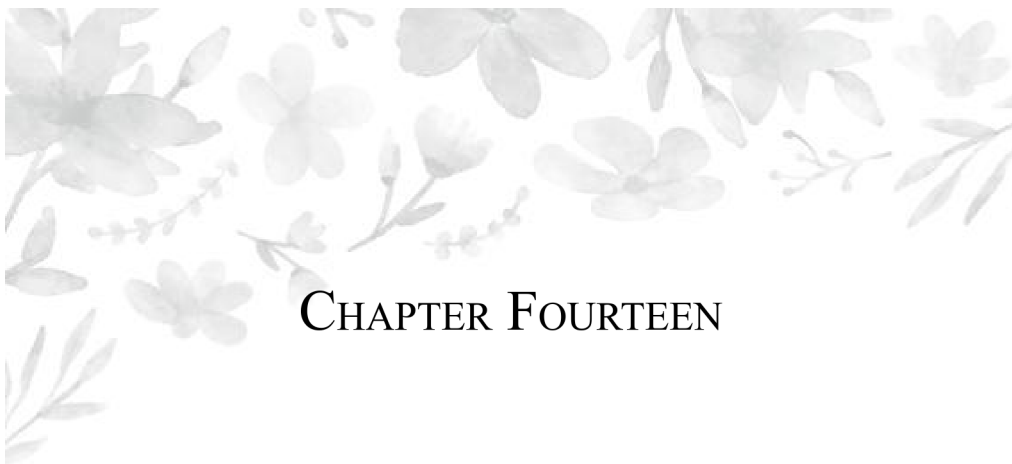
She gave me a mischievous smile and nodded. "I'd like that."

I reached out my hand, and she took it, coming to stand.

"Why don't we take our time in the shower, touching each other all over again?" I asked with a wink.

She nodded. "Sounds like the neighborly thing to do."

She chuckled, and my heart skipped a beat. Not only had I made my wish come true by buying a house, but now I was living next to the best neighbor in the world.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Lydia

“I’m an idiot. Why would he do that?” I stood there, staring out my window.

“What’s wrong?” Melanie came up behind me, eating potato chips from a bag.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Is something wrong?”

The woman was a health nut. I had never seen her eat a chip or cracker before in my life. If it wasn’t good for you, she wouldn’t ingest it.

“Work. Just work stress.”

I’d ask more, but I had my own issues to deal with.

I waved my hand toward Emmanuel’s front yard. “Do you see that? Look at the way he’s touching her.”

Emmanuel was working in his front yard planting some bushes, but he wasn’t doing a wonderful job. I’d help him, but it seemed he had some other beautiful woman helping him. And based on how he was placing his hand on her arm or her

back or just touching her any chance he got, I suspected she was more than the local gardener.

“Why don’t you go and ask who she is?” Melanie mumbled with a chip-filled mouth.

I rolled my eyes. “Sure, I could do that. But why embarrass myself like that? Some desperate neighbor being nosy.”

Melanie placed the bag on the coffee table and dusted off her hands. “From what you told me about your locker room sexcapades several days ago, I doubt he’s already hooking up with someone else. Based on what I know about Emmanuel, he doesn’t seem like the type of guy who flirts with a lot of women. Just go talk to him.”

I folded my arms. “If he’s such a great guy, then why haven’t I heard from him?”

That wasn’t entirely true. He dropped a letter into my mailbox yesterday asking me to dinner tonight, which I thought was sweet. It had been exactly three days since we screwed in the locker room, but who was counting?

While I thought the envelope was a romantic gesture, I had hoped he’d stop by. Now that I thought about it, I could have dropped by to see him.

“He’s a professional hockey player. I am sure he’s busy.” I turned to face Melanie and pointed at some crumbs she had on the side of her mouth. She quickly wiped them away. “You work for the Devils. Are they particularly busy right now?”

Her eyes widened. “Uh, yes. Totally. Some people from the International Games are watching practices to recommend for the team.”

That sounded important, though that still didn’t explain why he was touching her so much. “I just think it’s weird that he’s touching her like that.”

Melanie groaned. It was loud and very unusual for her. She had been acting strange ever since she started working for the Devils. “If you don’t go out there and talk to Emmanuel, then I’m going to do it.”

“Fine. I’ll do it. But if I find out he’s a dick, then I’m coming back in here and telling you I told you so.”

“Blah, blah, blah. Do what you want. I’m going to watch *Judge Judy*.” She went over to the couch and grabbed the remote control.

I made a mental note to get to the bottom of whatever was causing Melanie to act that way.

I took a deep breath and stepped outside. The sun was shining brightly, and the air smelled like fresh soil. Emmanuel was still in his yard, and the woman was right beside him. They were now crouched down, examining a small flowering bush.

He looked up when he heard me approach, and a smile spread across his face. “Hey, Lydia!”

“Hi.” I kept glancing over at the woman.

She was even prettier up close with her long, wavy brown hair. She wore jeans and a fitted purple T-shirt with a pale yellow baseball cap. The woman looked like she could roll around in the mud and still be the most beautiful woman in the room.

“So you’re Lydia.” She stood and took off one of her gardening gloves, extending her hand. “I’m so glad to finally meet you. I’m Ana. Emmanuel’s sister.”

All the jealousy melted away, and I felt like a fool. Melanie was right. If I had gone outside when I first saw them, I never would have wasted my energy being suspicious.

Why do I do that?

Even my nan would tell me curiosity is a good thing. Always ask questions. It’s how we learn.

I used to be a curious girl. But then, I asked about what happened to my parents when I was young, and I didn’t like the answer. After that, I learned that questions sometimes brought terrible answers.

I always thought I was protecting myself. But after the past few weeks of jumping to ridiculous conclusions and getting myself in trouble because of it, I needed to learn that it wasn’t asking questions that caused pain. It was just that life sucks sometimes.

And sometimes life could be amazing, like locker room sexcapades.

I took her hand in mine and shook it. “I’m Lydia, your brother’s neighbor.”

She smirked as she let go of my hand. “Yes, I heard you were the best neighbor.”

“Ana.” Emmanuel stood with wide eyes.

I suspect he told her. I just hoped it wasn’t too much detail because that would be weird.

Ana chuckled, then turned to me. “Don’t worry, Lydia. My brother has only good things to say about you. He mentioned nothing about your locker room shenanigans.”

Emmanuel let out a nervous laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Ha, ha, hilarious, Ana.”

She smirked at him, then turned back to me. “So, what brings you over here?”

I shrugged. “Just taking a walk and wanted to say hello.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.” Ana gestured to the surrounding garden. “Emmanuel has been telling me all about his talented neighbor. Maybe you could give me some tips on how to make his garden look good?”

I grinned, happy to be included. “Of course! I’d love to help.” We spent the next hour walking around the garden as Ana peppered me with questions, and I gave her advice on everything from pruning techniques to the best plants to grow in the area. Emmanuel even joined in, showing off some of his own gardening skills. I realized I had to get back to Melanie and told them I was heading inside.

Ana turned to me with a smile. “Thank you so much for your help, Lydia. I am so glad I got to meet you. My brother is lucky to have a great neighbor like you in his life.”

“No problem. Anytime. I should probably head back now, but it was nice meeting you, Ana.”

“Likewise, Lydia.” Ana gave me a hug.

I turned to Emmanuel. “We also need to fix up your back yard.”

He nodded eagerly. “Definitely!”

As I walked back to my house, I heard Emmanuel yell out at me, “Lydia!” before he jogged over.

I stopped right in front of my door.

“I know I haven’t been around much, but I want to take you out to dinner. Would tomorrow night be a good time?”

“I got your letter. That was nice. And I’d love to go out tomorrow night.”

He leaned in and kissed my cheek. I felt a shiver run down my spine as his lips touched my skin. Emmanuel stepped back, his eyes locked on mine.

“Great, I’ll pick you up at seven p.m.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Emmanuel gave me one last smile before turning and walking away. I almost tripped over the front step before I opened the door and stepped inside. Melanie was sitting on the couch, engrossed in the show she was watching.

She looked up as I walked in and clicked off the television.
“How was it? Is she another fling?”

“No. She’s his sister,” I said, still feeling a bit dazed. “It took so long because we were talking about gardening.”

Melanie raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“And he asked me out to dinner tomorrow night.”

Melanie’s eyes widened. “What?! You’re going on a date with him? Lydia, that’s amazing! He’s so hot!”

I laughed. “That’s not the only reason I’m going on a date with him, Mel. But, yeah, I’m looking forward to it.”

Sure, Emmanuel was sexy, but he was also a great guy. The last guy I dated was at university, and he, like most guys at that age, was young and only interested in having fun.

Melanie pulled out her phone. “Well, I’m going to text Daisy to let her know so we can start picking out an outfit. We’ll help you find the perfect thing to wear again since it worked so well last time.”

I ran over to her and plucked the phone out of her hand.
“No.”

“What? Why not?” Melanie asked, confused.

“You both don’t need to do that, Mel. I can pick out my outfit.”

Melanie pouted. “But it’s so much more fun when we help you. And besides, we want to make sure you look amazing for your date with Emmanuel.”

I couldn't help but smile that my friends cared so much about my happiness. I felt lucky to have them in my life. Then I remembered what happened with me, jumping to the worst conclusion about Emmanuel and his sister.

I needed to not just ask questions, but to be open about my thoughts and feelings. It was obvious that I was a terrible communicator, and it was time I fixed that.

"The reason I don't want you two to pick out my outfit is because what you chose last time just wasn't my taste." I tried to be as delicate as possible.

"It was kind of slutty, wasn't it?" She sighed. "We wanted you to get laid, and it worked." Melanie stood, and some potato chip crumbs fell to the floor.

"I don't think it was the outfit that did it." My eyes slid to the side, remembering Emmanuel and me racing to get undressed.

"How about this time we help you pick something out you like and makes you feel good?"

I ran over and gave my friend a hug. "You're the best. That sounds perfect."

This communication thing wasn't as bad as I thought. Why had I been holding back all these years? Everything seemed to work out great when I opened up and asked questions.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Emmanuel

“**L**ooking good, Emmanuel,” one teammate called out.
“Going to a wedding?” another teammate asked.

I shook my head and adjusted my tie in the small mirror stuck to my locker door. Practice had ended, and I was about to go out on my date with Lydia.

I smiled at my teammates. “No wedding, just a date with Lydia.”

“Ooh, Lydia,” one of them whistled. “You better impress her, man.”

I chuckled as I zipped up my bag. “I plan on it.”

As I walked out of the locker room, my heart was pounding with excitement. Lydia was breathtakingly beautiful, and I couldn’t believe she had agreed to go out with me.

As I left the locker room and made my way into the hallway, there was a man standing there, tapping on his phone. I had seen him in the stands for the past two weeks during practice.

Aspen told me he was a USA Team scout for the International Games. I knew how important it was for him to get on the team.

“Emmanuel, just the man I wanted to see.”

I tilted my head in confusion. At first, when Aspen pissed me off, I was determined to get on the team. But then I realized I was being petty, so I purposely played badly during practice when I knew the scout was watching.

“Really? Why?”

“I’ve been monitoring you, and I think you would be a perfect addition to the USA Team.” He smiled his shining white grin. His eyes glazed over, and I wondered if he could even see me.

“I’m not really interested.”

“Great, we can meet tomorrow... Wait, did you say you weren’t interested?”

Now he saw me.

I nodded. “Yup. Got too much going on. Wouldn’t be fair to the rest of the team if I wasn’t fully committed, now would it?”

He scratched his head as if he couldn’t comprehend why anyone would turn him down.

I could feel his disbelief, but I didn’t care. Being on the USA Team had never been a dream of mine. My focus had been on owning a home. And now that I had one, I thought about my

heart and family. I turned my focus toward Lydia and making her feel special.

As I walked away, I felt a sense of relief wash over me. I didn't want to be tied down by the pressure and expectations that came with playing for the USA Team. I wanted to enjoy my time with Lydia and focus on my goals.

“Suit yourself, but keep in mind this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

I shrugged. “Maybe for you, but not for me. Have a good day.” I walked away before he could say anything else.

As soon as I stepped out of the building, my phone rang.

“Hey, Emmanuel!” Lydia said as I answered the call. “Just wanted to let you know that I'm running late. Sorry!”

I smiled. “No worries, Lydia. Take your time. You know how to get there?”

“Of course. It's only my favorite place in the world.” I heard her snort over the phone and chuckled.

“See you soon.” I ended the call.

I used the extra time to plan a surprise for her. I drove to a nearby bakery that I knew had special cookies. Once inside, I glanced at the cookie display and picked the ones I wanted. After I pointed them out, the baker placed them in a white box and wrapped it up with a yellow bow.

By the time Lydia arrived—looking beautiful in a floral-print dress—I was waiting beside my car with a basket hanging on

my arm. Her face lit up when she saw me.

“Emmanuel, what is this? I thought we were just going to tour the gardens.”

I had brought her to the Virginia Botanical Garden. It was a bit of a drive for both of us, which was why I had her meet me here. She was coming from a landscaping job in the opposite direction as me. It made sense we met here for the date, or it would have been dark by the time we got here.

“I thought we could have a picnic.”

We spent about an hour exploring the gardens, admiring the different plant species and taking photos of each other, before we set our sights on the perfect spot for the picnic. We found a secluded spot near a small waterfall that ran into a stream, laying out the blanket under a tree and unpacking the things I brought with me.

I gestured to the basket. “I got something special for dessert.”

Her eyes widened as I handed her the box of cookies. “Emmanuel, you didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to,” I said with a smile. “Besides, you deserve to be treated like a queen.”

Lydia blushed at my words and took the box, peeking inside to see the purple cookies. “They look delicious. And they’re shaped like lavenders, my favorite flower.”

“They’re supposed to be fantastic,” I said, feeling a sense of satisfaction at making her happy.

We chatted about everything including our mutual dislike of Dan, enjoying each other's company in the peaceful surroundings. I couldn't help but steal glances at her as we ate. She looked radiant in the gentle light, her fiery red hair cascading down her back and glimmering in the warm sun as it hit her face. I reached out and took her hand, surprising her.

“Emmanuel?”

“I just want to show you how much you mean to me,” I whispered, leaning in to kiss her lightly on the lips.

Lydia melted against me, eagerly responding to my touch. Our kiss deepened, becoming more passionate and heated as we lost ourselves in the moment.

I ran my fingers through her hair, pulling her closer. Her hands found their way to the back of my neck, tugging slightly at my hair.

I groaned in response, the sound muffled by our kiss. We broke apart, gasping for air. Lydia's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were dark with desire. I took in her appearance hungrily, feeling a surge of possessiveness. I wanted her right here, right now.

“Emmanuel,” she whispered, her voice husky. “I want you.”

My heart leaped in my chest at her words. I reached for her, pulling her onto my lap. Our bodies molded together perfectly as I ground my hips against hers.

The damp grass tickled my skin as I held her in my arms and gently placed her on the ground. I kissed her again, harder this

time. Lydia moaned into my mouth, her fingers digging into my shoulders. I slid my hand up her shirt, feeling the softness of her skin. She arched into my touch, her body begging for more.

I pulled away from her. “Lydia, are you sure about this?”

She nodded fiercely, her eyes wild with lust. “Yes.”

I didn’t need any more encouragement. Lifting her dress, I pushed the fabric aside, revealing the soft, smooth skin of her thighs. I leaned in, burying my face between her breasts, kissing and licking at the sensitive flesh. Lydia moaned and squirmed, her hands clutching my hair.

I grinned as her body trembled beneath mine and continued my torturous exploration, finally coming to rest between her legs. I licked a line up and down her inner thighs, lingering on the wetness that pooled at her center.

She gasped and bucked beneath me, her hips grinding against my lips. “Emmanuel,” she cried out, her body shaking as I brought her closer and closer to her climax.

My fingers slipped inside her, fucking her with my hand. Finally, she fell over the edge into oblivion, her back arching as she cried out my name.

I unzipped my pants and pulled them down, climbing back up her body.

“Please,” Lydia begged as I placed the tip of my cock at her entrance.

I pushed in slowly, savoring the tightness of her body around me. I gyrated into her, loving the way she moved with me. Our bodies moved in perfect sync as I picked up speed, driving my cock deep inside her.

She felt incredible, like she was made for me. Her arms and legs wrapped around my body as I rocked into her. I never wanted the moment to end—being surrounded by nature and showing her I would do anything for her.

She whispered to me to turn over, and we rolled over until I was on my back. Lydia sat up while shifting her hips so she could ride my cock. She lifted the hem of her dress and pulled it off.

I reached up and pushed one of the lace cups of her bra aside, then I pinched her nipple. Her head fell back. Lydia's hair looked like a waterfall of flames, and I had experienced nothing so breathtaking.

“Fuck, you're so beautiful.” I couldn't keep it in anymore. With my other hand, I slid my thumb down to her clit and rubbed it as she ground into me.

I watched as Lydia moved, her body arching and her face twisting in pleasure. I wanted to savor this moment and remember it forever.

Her breaths came in pants, and just when I thought she was about to finish, Lydia leaned down and brought her lips to mine. We exchanged a deep, passionate kiss as we both came apart in pleasure. Our bodies stilled for a few moments after

our orgasms before I gently rolled us to the side, still connected.

Lydia nestled against me and sighed contentedly. I pulled her dress over her like a blanket, wrapped my arm around her shoulder, and held her close while we basked in the warmth of the setting sun.

Lydia pulled away from me and gently touched my face. “I think this is the most perfect day I have ever had.”

I couldn’t agree more. “Can you believe we hated each other when I first moved in?” I asked with a laugh.

“It was crazy. But you have to admit, it was unusual. No one expects their front yard to blow up.”

Even though I had forgiven Aspen, I was still irked that he didn’t ask me about setting off fireworks in my front yard. What person, other than a child, would consider that okay?

“Unusual is a very tame way of putting it.”

We both had a laugh.

“But then, would we be here?” She waved her hand toward the waterfall. “We might have been cordial to each other, like most neighbors are, but that forced us to go to great lengths to interact with each other.”

Maybe Lydia was right? Perhaps I should thank Aspen.

As I gazed at her golden eyes as they sparkled in the dying sun, I realized how much this woman challenged me. How much she captivated me.

I had felt every emotion for her, and yet, I always wanted to be with her. Even those first few days when I hated her, I wanted to make things right. I wanted to be in her orbit.

I loved Lydia. So, maybe she was wrong. Maybe I would have been on my knees before her, even if Aspen hadn't been so Aspen that night.

“What made you want to be a hockey player?”

Not many people asked me that. I wasn't the best player on the team, nor had I done anything noteworthy, so even when I was interviewed by reporters, they'd usually ask things about the game or other players. Not anything about me or my past.

“This isn't glamorous, but at the local ice rink they had free hockey lessons in the summer. Most kids went on vacations in the summer or hung out at the pool. The last thing they wanted was to be stuck on ice when the weather was warm and sunny outside. But my mom didn't have much. She took me to every free lesson and event there was.”

“She loved you,” Lydia said in a sad tone.

There was pain in her voice. I never looked at it like that. She saw someone whose mom went out of her way to make her kid happy. I only ever saw my friend enjoying the summer while I was stuck inside in skates.

“Yeah, but the kid in me didn't see it that way. Anyway, the guy who led the lessons seemed to think I had something. He was the only person who took notice of me. None of my teachers, or anyone really, helped me. But that guy did. He

knew my mom couldn't afford anything but the free lessons in the summer. So, he paid for everything for me if I kept up with hockey."

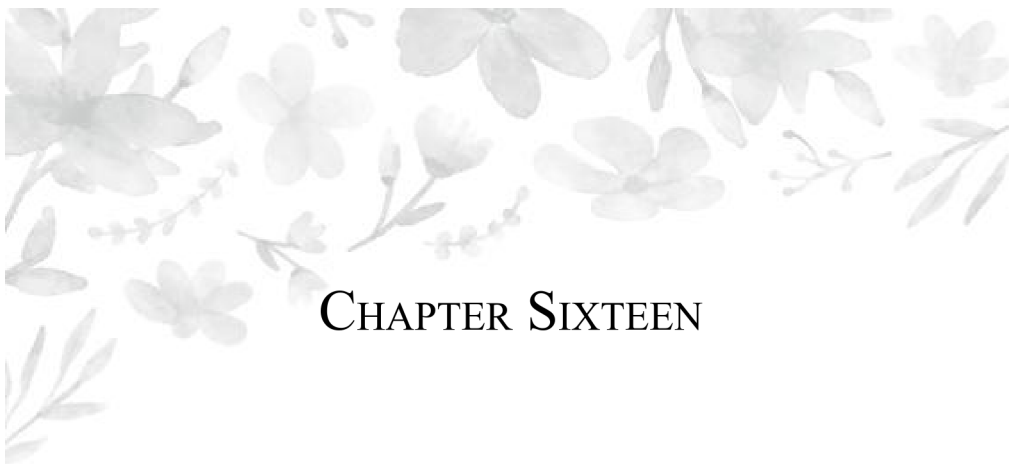
"It seems he loved you too. He was like a father to you."

I blinked. Lydia was right. I had felt so alone back then, and yet I was surrounded by love. It took my neighbor, who just last week tried to blow up my yard, to show me how blind I had been.

I was about to thank her and let her know how I felt about her when I heard a buzzing sound. Then I heard more buzzing sounds.

"Bees!" she yelled.

"Oh my god, they're everywhere." That was when I looked up and saw we were sitting underneath a beehive.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Lydia

I blinked awake in Emmanuel's bed, where his musky scent lingered on the sheets, and a small dent showed where he'd rested his head. Sunlight streamed through the windows, highlighting dust particles suspended in the air. On the pillow, I found a note taped to it.

A smile broke out on my face. This was my favorite part of staying over at Emmanuel's place. Over the past week, we had been staying at each other's homes.

On odd nights, I'd stay at his place, and on even nights, he would stay at my place. I'd always make him waffles, which he loved. I hadn't told him yet that it was the only thing I could cook.

When I stayed at his place, he'd leave me something to find, like a little treasure. Usually, it was a note telling me how beautiful I am or a tiny potted plant like a cactus he picked up.

I read the note, "Good morning, beautiful, I hope you slept well. I'm already at work, but I left some homemade pancakes

and freshly squeezed orange juice on the kitchen counter for you. Help yourself. Can't wait to see you tonight at your place. -Em."

I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have found someone like Emmanuel. He was kind and caring. It had been a long time since I felt this way about someone.

As I made my way to the kitchen, I couldn't help but think about how much my life had changed since we met. I felt happier, more content, and more hopeful about the future.

The only thing I was worried about was my heart. I was in love with Emmanuel. It was the oddest moment when I realized it.

It was when he brought me the lavender cookie at the picnic. He had gone out of his way to not only remember it was my favorite flower, but to find a baker who made those cookies.

It wasn't a grand gesture, but it meant something to me. He didn't know this, but it was my favorite flower because it reminded me of my grandmother. She always wore a lavender perfume. And when it would bloom in her garden, she'd bake a cake and decorate it with lavender stems.

After a quick shower, I threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

The plate was there, covered with tinfoil. I removed the cover and ate. Unlike me, Emmanuel knew how to cook, and he was great at it. The pancakes were delicious. He even had

fresh blueberries and maple syrup for me to use. While I loved maple syrup, his pancakes were so good I didn't need it.

Right as I was taking the last bite, there was a knock at the door. I hesitated for a moment, wondering who could visit so early in the morning. I wiped my mouth with the napkin, placing it on the table before walking to the door.

When I opened the door, Cillian and Daisy were standing there. "Hey, what are you two doing here so early in the morning? Don't you have some animals to take care of?"

Daisy was a veterinarian. She had a large farm where she helped dogs and cats, but also livestock from local farmers. Being out in the Blue Ridge Mountains, there were lots of farms that needed help with their animals.

"I'm on my way to the rink and was hoping to catch Emmanuel before he left," Cillian said, rubbing his arm.

"Sorry, he already left for the rink. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No," Cillian answered a little too quickly.

Daisy rolled her eyes. "Maybe she can. Stop being so stubborn. We found a hornet's nest by the farm door. Cillian tried to get rid of it, but one of them got to him."

Cillian leaned over to Daisy and lowered his voice. "She doesn't need to know all that."

"Stop being a baby. Hornet stings hurt. There's nothing wrong with admitting you're in pain."

“I’m not in pain.” Cillian winced and gritted his teeth.

I chuckled at the pair’s bickering but invited them inside.

“We were hoping Emmanuel had that bee sting ointment he used last week?” Daisy asked.

“I think there’s still some around. I’ll go check up in the master bathroom, and you two might want to check the other bathrooms.”

They nodded, and we spread out.

I made my way back upstairs to the bedroom. I knew Emmanuel had recently moved in, but the place was sparse. Only a bed with a dresser and one bedside table. I figured he would have collected more furniture over the years, but apparently not.

Once I was in the bathroom, I looked through the medicine cabinet and under the sink. Just some headache medicine and condoms. The condoms made me smile because I knew he bought them for me. Since that first time we had sex in the locker room, we vowed to be more careful from then on.

As I was closing the cabinet, I noticed a gardening book on the shelf next to the sink titled *The Art of Gardening*. I smiled, wondering if this was the book that Emmanuel was using to learn to garden?

He told me he wanted to learn more since it was so important to me. I opened the cover, and something fell out.

I put the book on the counter and reached down to grab the piece of paper. It was old, and there was handwriting. It didn’t

look like Emmanuel's writing.

On it was scribbled, "Diamonds buried in the Norton garden."

What? Who wrote this?

I flipped it over, and there was a map of my front garden, or what used to be the garden. The placement of my Nan's plants and multiple X's that had been erased at different spots in the garden made me wonder if Emmanuel thought my grandmother buried diamonds in our garden?

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It seemed strange that Emmanuel, who had only been living with me for a few weeks, would have a map of our garden with X's on it. Was he really looking for diamonds? My mind raced with questions about why this piece of paper was in his gardening book. I had to confront him about it.

There was some noise coming from downstairs. I pushed the map into my pocket and put the book back before heading downstairs.

"Did you find the ointment?" I asked as I saw both Daisy and Cillian standing there.

Daisy had a goofy grin on her face, while Cillian wouldn't look at me.

"Is something wrong?" While I expected Cillian to act strange, as he was in pain, I hadn't thought Daisy would act weird.

Daisy threw open her arms and pulled me in for a hug. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just so happy, that’s all.”

I pulled back from the hug, suspicious of her odd behavior. “Okay... well, I’m glad you’re happy. Did you find the ointment?”

“Oh, we found lots of things.” Daisy covered her mouth and started giggling.

“Did you find a stash of drugs?” I had to ask because that was how strange they were acting.

“No.” Daisy shook her head and gave Cillian a knowing look.

“Daisy, don’t,” he said. “Come on, she’ll find out soon enough.” Cillian took Daisy by the hand and pulled her into the kitchen. I suspected they wanted some privacy, so I ran over to my place to take out the garbage for pick-up. The garbage truck came early, so I didn’t want to miss it.

I opened the door and gasped. There stood Dan Marks, cane and all.

“I didn’t hear you knock.”

“You wouldn’t have. Since I haven’t.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, well, why are you here?”

“To make sure Mr. Martinez picks up his entry envelope before the garden event on Saturday.” Dan turned his head and sneered at Emmanuel’s front yard. “As I suspected, he didn’t

understand the level of competition of the event. Planting a few bushes won't win him any prizes."

I frowned. Dan always loved to criticize people any chance he got. He would take digs at Nan's garden all the time.

"I will say, Ms. Norton, your front garden is really coming along. I thought for sure after it blew up, you would leave it a pile of burnt earth, but I love what you did with the lavender. Oh, and those rose bushes are magnificent. They can be quite tricky."

My head shot back in surprise. Did he just compliment my garden? I had never heard a positive word leave his mouth before. Maybe because he thought I wasn't in the garden event this year.

Little did he know Emmanuel gave me the invitation.

"Thank you, Dan."

He tapped his chin and kept staring over at my front yard. "It's almost as if you got it ready in time for the garden event, but that can't be right since we have banned you."

I narrowed my eyes.

"And, as I am sure you know, Ms. Norton, no one who is invited to compete can transfer their invitation to another resident. They created each invitation for a specific address." He looked back at me with a devilish grin. "But you knew that, didn't you?"

Then he turned and walked away.

I stood there with my mouth hanging open. That couldn't be true. It was just an invitation. It shouldn't matter which garden used it.

“Lydia,” Daisy said from behind me.

I turned to face her just as tears streamed down my face.

Daisy rushed to my side and wrapped her arms around me. I sobbed against her shoulder, feeling the weight of the ban crushing down on me once again.

“I'm sorry, Lydia,” she whispered. “I'm sure Emmanuel didn't know the invitation couldn't be transferred when he gave it to you.”

I pulled away from her, wiping my tears. “It's not your fault, Daisy. I really hoped to prove myself. Show the community I knew what I was doing. Perhaps get some clients out of it. But, as usual, Evil Dan had to ruin it.”

If only those fireworks had never gone off. I blinked and remembered my conversation with Emmanuel at the waterfall. How he should thank Aspen for setting them off after I pointed out we never would have come together without them.

Daisy nodded sympathetically. “There has to be something I can do?”

“Whatever you need, Emmanuel and I will make sure it happens. That man was an asshole. He really shouldn't be on any committee. Or in charge of anything, ever,” Cillian said with a sad smile.

Then I heard it, the trash truck with its loud beeping and motor. The trash seemed so insignificant now. Instead of racing out to make the trash pick-up, I just wanted to curl up into a ball and never go outside.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Emmanuel

“**G**ood game today.” Cillian came over and slapped me on my back.

The locker room was a chaotic mix of high-pitched laughter, raucous shouts, and an occasional brassy boom of male voices. Other players walked in and out of the various doors, talking over one another in their excitement, their energy coming into the room in waves. I had just finished showering and was changing.

“Sure was.” I slapped him right back.

It was the start of the playoffs, and every player was serious about winning. I had been coming in early just to get in time on the ice. The next game wasn’t for two days, on Sunday, but that gave me more time to help Lydia get ready for the Briar Woods Garden Event on Saturday.

We both nodded at each other, fully aware of what we were thinking but would never say out loud.

Mention winning.

None of us talked about potentially winning a game or if we had won a game because that would jinx us. While I wasn't a superstitious person, I was smart enough to go along with what the team believed in.

“Getting some rest tonight?” Cillian winked.

That stopped me from tying up my shoelaces. I sat there and stared at my friend and teammate. “Did you just... wink at me?”

He shrugged. “So? Can't I wink when I want?”

“That's more like something I'd expect from Jackson, not you. I don't know if I've ever seen you wink at anyone, even Daisy.”

He pulled down his shirt and turned to me. “Maybe I'm trying to be more relaxed. Like a fun guy.”

I snorted. Cillian, a fun guy. Now *that* was funny.

But as I looked at him, I saw something different. His eyes were bright, and there was a small smile on his face. It was unlike him to be so carefree.

“What's wrong?” I stood once I got my shoes on and faced him.

He glanced up as he zipped his jeans. “Nothing.”

Then he chuckled. Cillian rarely smiled, and laughing, well... I had only seen him do that once, and that was because the team held him down and tickled him. It was a hazing ritual.

“Is your father okay?” I was very concerned.

“He’s fine, Emmanuel.”

I turned to Aspen and Jackson, who happened to be standing nearby. “Did you see that? Cillian just laughed.”

They had been talking to each other, but once I mentioned Cillian laughing, they paused and turned to stare at our teammate. “Is it cancer?” Aspen asked right as Jackson asked, “Did Daisy finally leave you?”

Cillian growled, which was reassuring. “There’s nothing wrong with me. No, I don’t have cancer, nor does my father or anyone else I know. And, no, Daisy hasn’t finally left me.” He narrowed his eyes at Jackson.

That was more like the Cillian I knew. “Then why are you acting like that?”

He sighed and turned to me, lowering his voice. “I found the ring.”

“The ring?” I tilted my head and noticed both Jackson and Aspen leaning in toward our conversation.

Cillian’s eyes widened. “Yes. You know...” he began whispering so the others couldn’t hear him, “the engagement ring.”

What was he talking about?

“This morning, Daisy and I stopped by your place, but you had already left.”

I nodded because it was important to get ready for the game, even if that meant leaving a warm bed with the woman I loved sleeping soundly next to me.

“Lydia answered and let us in. I had gotten stung by some hornets this morning and knew you had some ointment from the doctor’s office.”

My lips thinned. I was rather embarrassed about that and had told Cillian in confidence. When Lydia and I realized we had sex under a beehive, it was too late, at least for me. She got away quick enough, but I was not so lucky. They attacked me in the one spot I was most exposed: my ass.

It was difficult to sit for several days, and I went to the doctor because of the number of stings I had received. Also, the swelling. My ass became so large, I couldn’t zip up my pants.

“Yeah, I know what you’re talking about.” I glanced over at Aspen and Jackson, who were both covering their mouths, hiding their obvious laughter.

Someone must have let them know. I gazed up at Cillian and knew that guy was like a rock. He wouldn’t tell a soul, even if his life depended on it.

That only left one person. Lydia.

How could she do that to me?

“As we were all looking for the ointment, I found the ring. Unfortunately, Daisy saw the ring too. Like I said, she’s not very good at keeping secrets.”

“What ring... Oh, that ring.” It finally hit me what he was talking about. The diamond ring I found in Lydia’s front yard several weeks ago.

I sighed and shook my head. “That’s not an engagement ring.”

Cillian’s brows shot up. “It sure looked like one to me. Look, I know how you were raised, so I can’t imagine it’s a family heirloom. Where did you get it?”

I rubbed my face, regretting ever finding that ring. Perhaps I should have just left it where I found it. No, that wouldn’t have been right. Then someone without good intentions could have easily found it and took it, never to be seen again.

“I found it in Lydia’s garden when I tried to fix the fireworks mess.” My eyes slid over to Aspen who looked away as if he hadn’t just heard what I said.

“Why haven’t you given it back?” Cillian asked.

“Yeah?” Jackson added now, not even pretending like he wasn’t eavesdropping.

“I meant to, but then I got arrested. Things heated up with Lydia, so I shoved it in a drawer, and because it wasn’t staring me in the face every day, I forgot.”

Jackson shook his head. “You can’t do that.”

“What?”

“You can’t put things in a drawer. Look, I was once wild and carefree like you.” Jackson waved his hand at me as if I were

some teenager without a clue. “But then I had a kid. Then my wife up and left, and I was his only parent. Do you know how many times things went missing that I swore I had just put down?”

“No.” I frowned because how would I know that?

“Too many times to count. And every time I found the item I was looking for, it was in a drawer. Every time. The thing was, running after a little boy distracts you. I was tired and constantly being distracted, so I would shove something in a drawer to keep things out of his reach, then forget about it because of dad duty.”

“I don’t have a kid.”

Jackson sighed. “I know that. My point is, even when you are tired or distracted, don’t put something in a drawer. You were both tired and distracted, and then put that ring in a drawer. No wonder you forgot about it.”

Wow, that actually made sense. The other guys nodded in agreement. For once, Jackson was the wise one of the group.

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime.” Jackson patted my back, then he walked over to his locker.

“Now that you’re thinking about it, when you go home, give it back to Lydia,” Cillian suggested as he grabbed his shoes from his locker.

“Yes. It will be the first thing I do.”

I grabbed my jacket from my locker and headed for the door. Once I was in the hallway, I heard someone call my name. I turned, and Aspen jogged over to me.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Emmanuel, I wanted to talk to you before you left. Uh, did the International Games scout talk to you?”

Oh no. I was hoping Aspen wouldn’t ask this. I knew he wanted to make the team, so I didn’t want to tell him they had asked me to be on the team.

“Yes, he did, but I turned him down. With the playoffs and Lydia, I felt it was more important to focus on what’s important to me, which is being the best player I can be for the Devils and working on my relationship with Lydia.”

He smirked. “So, it’s serious between you two?”

“Yes.” I grinned as thoughts of her smile filled my mind.

“Do you love her?”

While I hadn’t told her yet, I didn’t mind letting my teammate know. “Yes, I think I do.”

“I’m happy for you, bro. I hope you’ve told her.” There was pain in his expression, and I wondered what that was about.

“I haven’t yet, but I think tonight is a great night to do it.”

Talk of the ring being mistaken for an engagement ring got me thinking: perhaps I should confess my love for her. Even if she didn’t feel the same, I wanted to share my feelings with her.

I had been so closed off for so long, focusing on hockey and saving for a house, but there was no need to guard my feelings anymore.

“Did the scout talk to you?” I tried hard to hide the wince.

If Aspen was asking me about the scout, then it meant he was concerned. If they had offered him a spot on the USA Team, he’d be boasting to everyone around.

“Yes and no.” He shook his head. “Anyway, I just wanted to apologize about the fireworks and not helping you fix Lydia’s yard. I need to grow the fuck up.”

My eyes widened. He was voluntarily apologizing and owning up to his mistakes—something that had never happened.

I smiled. “Apology accepted. We’re teammates, and we need to have each other’s backs. So let’s focus on the playoffs, and then maybe we can celebrate together.”

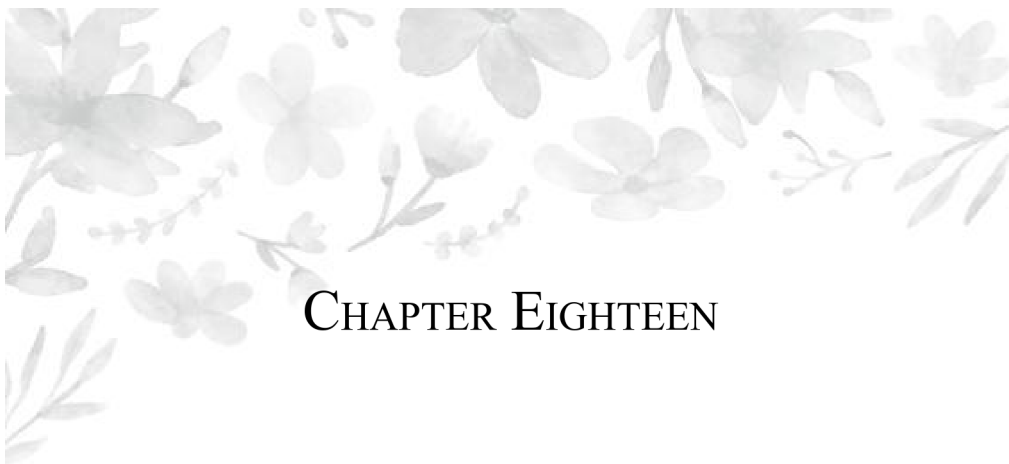
He nodded, his eyes sparkling with determination. “Yeah, let’s do that.” Then he placed his hand on my shoulder. “And if there is anything you need from me, just ask, and I’ll make it happen. Same for Lydia. I owe her a lot.”

“Thanks, Aspen. You’re a good guy.”

“I’m trying to be.”

I started walking away when Aspen called out, “And when you tell Lydia how you feel tonight, make sure there are fireworks.”

I chuckled and turned to go. I would give Lydia all the fireworks she could ever want tonight.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Lydia

I stared at my garden and then at the handwritten map. Was Nan telling the truth when she told me there was buried treasure in the garden?

And who made the map?

I didn't think it was Emmanuel's handwriting, but I couldn't be sure. It wasn't like I had known him long enough to know his handwriting by sight. I compared it to the notes he had left me, and it seemed a little different.

I knew for sure it wasn't my grandmother's handwriting. Her script was slanted, and this wasn't slanted at all. I nibbled on my lower lip and picked a spot, then got down on my hands and knees to dig.

As I dug deeper into the soil, my heart raced with anticipation. What if there really was buried treasure in my garden? I couldn't believe my luck, and I couldn't wait to find out what riches were hidden beneath the earth.

My excitement grew with each passing moment. The soil was still cool from the morning dew, but I hardly noticed as I continued to dig. Sweat beaded on my forehead, but I wasn't about to give up now. If there was treasure to be found, I was going to find it.

By the time I had dug a few holes, I wiped my brow, ready to take a break.

That was when Emmanuel's car pulled up. He smiled as he got out of the car. "Working on the garden?"

I stood and pulled off my gardening gloves. "Sort of."

He held up his finger. "Give me one minute. I have to run inside to grab something, and then I'll come out and help. The gardening event is tomorrow, so I'm happy to help with all the last-minute touches."

Before I could explain there was no point, he ran into his house.

He had been so kind handing over the invitation and offering his help to get the garden ready, especially after I was heartbroken when I found out I couldn't actually compete.

He would be upset too.

We may have had different passions in life—mine was gardening, and his was hockey—but we both shared two passions. One was for each other, and the other passion was our hatred of Dan Marks.

That weasel was just itching to hurt me. It was as if he had an intense obsession with Nan's garden. He never acted that

way with the other neighbors—and I knew this because I had asked around.

Sure, he would flaunt his garden and act like he was the best. The neighbors complained about his conceit, but he was never hostile toward their gardens.

“What are you looking for?” the devil himself asked from behind me.

I turned to discover Dan walking on the sidewalk right in front of my house. His brow was raised, and he peered into the holes I had made.

“Just getting ready to plant.” He didn’t need to know what I was really up to.

“Suit yourself, but remember, you aren’t allowed in the event tomorrow.”

I gritted my teeth. “And that just makes you so happy, doesn’t it? You’ve been trying to get Nan’s garden kicked out of the Briar Woods Garden Event for years. Now you have your wish. Congratulations, you spiteful little man.”

His mouth hung open in surprise, as if he never realized how horrible he had been to our family. “I would never call someone names like that,” he blustered.

I rolled my eyes. “Because you’re such a saint. Having people arrested for just existing.” I walked over and pushed my finger into his chest. “I know what you are. You may pretend to be a good neighbor, but you’re just a snob and filled with jealousy.”

“What’s going on here?” Emmanuel walked through our fence and came over to my side.

The one thing that had yet to be fixed from the fireworks was the vast hole in the fence between our front yards. I was upset at first, but since we had grown close, I liked to walk through our yards to his house.

“Ms. Norton is just calling me names. Wouldn’t expect anything else from her.” Dan lifted his chin.

“Come tomorrow, you’ll be calling her a name too,” Emmanuel said with a smile. “You’ll be calling her the winner when she smokes your garden in the competition.”

Dan chuckled as he watched my face fall. “Oh, goodness, he doesn’t know, does he? I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but she can’t participate in the Briar Woods Garden Event because she’s banned. And no one who has been invited to the event can transfer their invitation to her. It’s against the rules.”

Emmanuel frowned and glanced over at me. I nodded.

He wrapped his arm around me in a side hug. “I’m sorry, Lydia. I really thought you could get in that way.”

“It’s not your fault, Emmanuel. I thought so, too, until Dan mentioned it this morning.”

Emmanuel glared at Dan, who seemed to savor my misery.

“Even if you can’t be at the event, I have some good news for you.” Emmanuel took a step back and pulled a ring box out of his pocket.

My eyes widened, and my heart thundered in my chest. We had spent so much time together these past few weeks, but still, it felt a little soon for a proposal.

And yet, it seemed like that was what he was about to do. When Emmanuel opened the box, a brilliant flash of light glinted off the diamond, radiating and sparkling in all directions. The diamond itself was huge and sparkled in a rainbow of colors. The ring was set in gold and had tiny little diamonds surrounding it that caught the light and enhanced its sparkle.

“Oh my god,” I gasped, unable to hold back my shock.

“I can’t believe you are actually doing that, Mr. Martinez. Using the ring you stole to propose to Ms. Norton. I guess it’s a good way to cover your deceitful tracks,” Dan sneered.

I tilted my head. “Stole?”

“I didn’t steal it,” Emmanuel groaned. “I told you that when you had us arrested.”

I gasped and held up my hands. “Wait, you stole this the night we went to jail? Is that why you were arrested?”

“Yes,” Dan blurted out. “He took it from this very yard. It obviously belongs to your grandmother, and he went digging for it that night. I knew he was up to no good, so I called the cops. And I was right.” He pointed at the ring. “And when I asked to hold it for you, Mr. Martinez refused. He even waved it in the air, taunting me.”

“I wasn’t taunting you; I was holding it out for you to take it. Geez.”

My head swirled with all the information. Why was he digging in my yard that night, and what about the ring? It made little sense. Then I remembered. The map.

I pulled it out of my pocket and looked. Emmanuel had it hidden in that gardening book.

He found the ring in my yard. Maybe it was by accident, but the sudden interest in helping me fix my garden wasn’t. And his book on gardening... Why would a hockey player, who was never interested in gardening, suddenly want to learn about plants?

Because he thought there was more jewelry in my nan’s garden.

Then another thought hit me. Emmanuel didn’t care about me; he only cared about what he could get from me.

“If you didn’t steal it, then why didn’t you give it to me before now and pretend to propose?”

His eyes grew. But I knew enough about people who pretended to care to know when they were about to lie.

He cleared his throat, but the words still came out in a stutter. “I-I didn’t propose marriage.”

“Could have fooled me,” Dan mumbled.

My chest ached as my heart cracked. “But I don’t understand —” My voice choked with emotion as the tears streamed down

my face, hot and blinding. The pain, the confusion, it was all too much to bear. I felt like I was drowning in a sea of emotions, gasping for air but coming up empty.

Emmanuel rubbed his brow. “Cillian told me how he and Daisy found the ring this morning. They thought I was going to propose too. But then I explained how I found it in your garden but just forgot to give it back.”

“Right.” I nodded with a hard grin. “They just happened to find it. So now you have to give it back, or it looks super sketchy. Because the last thing you would want to do is marry me. Can’t have them think that.”

His jaw hung open before he shook his head. “Do you even hear yourself? That is crazy.”

“Oh no,” Dan mumbled but refused to leave.

“I’m the crazy one? I didn’t blow up my neighbor’s yard.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “Uh, yes you did.”

“But that was only after you did it to me.”

“I told you it was my teammate, Aspen.”

“That’s funny because I have never seen Aspen help you fix it. You were the one coming over in the evening, which was weird. People work in their yard in the daytime, not when the sun is setting. Which also makes me think you were trying to hide something. And then you didn’t even ask my permission to go digging in my yard.”

“It was going to be a surprise. Again, I told you that.”

I was tired of this back and forth. He didn't seem to understand, and now it was time to lay it all out for him.

“You told me how it was your dream to own a home. That your mother instilled in you how to be a good neighbor, yet here you are, pointing the finger at others when a problem comes up. It was your friend that you invited to your home. You have a responsibility as a good neighbor to make it right. Yet, for a full week, you avoided me—don't think I didn't notice. You acted cowardly and like a bad neighbor.”

Emmanuel stood there silently. He knew I was right. As I learned so long ago, it was what someone did, not what they said, that told you who they were as a person.

Emmanuel lied and stole from me. The only reason he was giving the ring back was because my friend found it in his home. He knew I would have found out about it eventually.

Maybe he was using me this whole time, or maybe he thought he could get some action while also getting rich. I was sure I'd discover the truth sooner or later. Maybe he asked Aspen to destroy my front yard because he found that map. A perfect excuse.

“It's obvious you made up your mind about me.” Emmanuel frowned. “Many people assumed the worst about me based on my background. But I never thought the woman I fell in love with would be so cruel.”

Emmanuel's hands shook as he placed the ring box in my hand. I watched him turn away and walk back home. Tears streamed down my cheeks, but a feeling of dread filled my

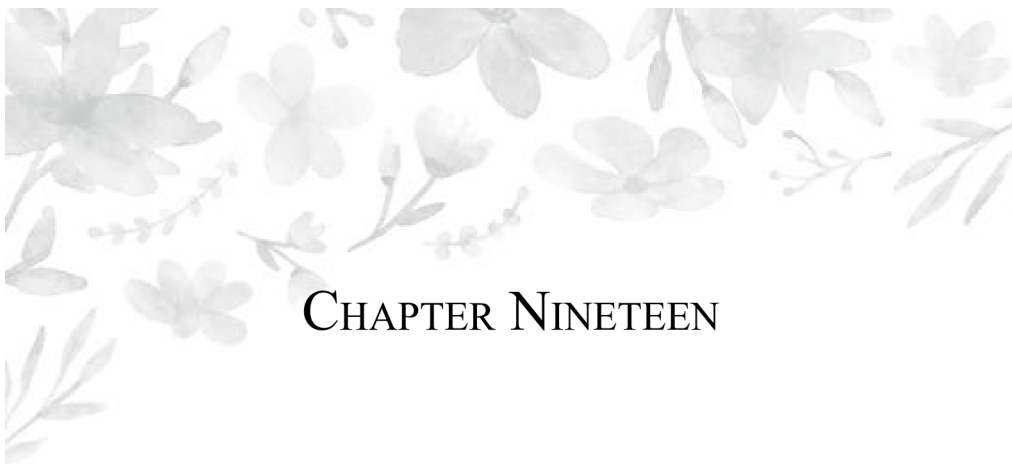
heart. Part of me wanted to shout for him to come back, while another part wanted to let him go, knowing that it was for the best.

I had never been so conflicted when I let someone go. Usually, the guy cheated or ended up being too much of a jerk for me to put up with.

But Emmanuel played his part so well. I truly grieved that sweet man who gave me lavender cookies and that pink envelope to help me.

That was what made this even more devastating.

His lies were breaking my heart.



CHAPTER NINETEEN



Emmanuel

“**Y**ou know we don’t have a game or practice today, right?” Aspen asked as he came over and sat next to me.

I stared at the ice rink and let out a puff of misty air. The cold temperature at the rink was helping me from overheating due to my anger and hurt. “I know. I’m thinking about selling my home.”

Aspen’s head jerked back. “But you just bought the place. Is that why you texted me to come meet you at the rink? Because I’m not really the person to talk to about buying and selling homes.”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t need advice on selling my home. You told me yesterday that if there’s anything I needed from you to just ask.”

Aspen nodded and waited for me to continue. Taking a deep breath, I turned to face him. “I need your help. I broke up with Lydia.”

His eyes widened. “What? You two seemed perfect for each other. Look, if this has anything to do with the fireworks that screwed up her front yard, I’ll head over right now and say sorry. I’ll do anything she wants—”

“No, it’s over. The fireworks were an accident. But the reason I broke up with her was how she assumed the worst of me. I had to deal with that all my life. Based on my background and how I look, so many people picked on me, or worse, they ignored me.”

I took a breath, trying to calm my racing heart. “But they judged me with one look or a few facts they found out about my life. Lydia was different; she knew me. We spent the last few weeks learning about each other. I never expected her to treat me like a thief.”

Aspen put a hand on my shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. “I’m sorry, man. That’s tough. But, hey, you’re better off without her.”

I gritted my teeth and nodded. He was right; I deserved someone better, someone who didn’t assume the worst. But even after hearing Aspen confirm my thoughts and feelings, it hurt.

“If she called you names and accused you of stealing for no reason, then that’s crazy—”

“Wait, that didn’t happen.”

Aspen tilted his head. “What? But I thought you said she treated you like those jerks in your past?”

“Well, yes, but not like that. What happened was, I had taken her grandmother’s ring from her front yard when I went over to fix the damage from the fireworks—”

Aspen held up his hands. “Hold up. You took her grandmother’s ring? But you gave it right back, right?”

Groaning, I ran my fingers through my hair. “Well, no, that’s why I was doing it yesterday. You see, Cillian and Daisy found the ring I had stashed in my house—”

“Again, bro, I’m going to stop you right there.” He turned to face me in his seat. “It really is sounding like she was right. Not about calling you names, but that you stole from her. And if it was her grandmother’s ring, that’s not only pricey, but probably sentimental to her. I heard from Cillian that she inherited the house from her grandma, so that ring might be really meaningful to her.”

I winced. When he put it like that, it made sense. “She didn’t call me names; she just accused me of using her and stealing.”

“But she was right.”

“No, she wasn’t. I really wasn’t stealing from her, and I certainly wasn’t using her.”

“Weren’t you, though?” His lips thinned. “She is beautiful and sweet. The woman showed you how to plant your garden. Didn’t you tell me you were both going to help each other? The perfect neighbor. It seemed like you hit the jackpot with her, but then got annoyed when she found out you took something valuable from her.”

The more Aspen spoke, the worse I felt. I called him to help me, and it all blew up in my face.

“Look, Emmanuel, you’re talking to the king of screw-ups. I’ve screwed up relationships with friends, work, and my love life. And I realized I have to swallow my pride and work on fixing those relationships. I knew I messed up with you, so when you texted, I came straight over. No more being a flake. It’s time for me to be a good friend and teammate, instead of just a fun guy.”

I let out a breath. “Thanks, Aspen. You’ve helped me see what an ass I’ve been.”

His teeth sparkled as he broke out into a huge grin. “Anytime.”

I flashed back to what Lydia said as I tried to give back her grandmother’s ring. Her tears and Dan’s smile cut at me.

Every time something would go wrong with us, Dan was always around. Even at Hard Grind, the day after we got arrested.

“Maybe instead of me moving, I should wish Dan Marks would move,” I mumbled as I stared at the ice.

There was something about that guy I didn’t like. And it wasn’t just that he was a pompous asshole; it was more than that. It was like he was hiding a secret, and it wasn’t good.

“Did you just say Dan Marks?” Aspen asked.

I blinked and looked at him. “Yeah. Why?”

Aspen shook his head and chuckled. “I know him, and he’s an ass. He’s lived in that neighborhood since I was born, and he’s always stirring up trouble. “

“But how do you know Dan?”

He gently slapped my shoulder. “Remember, I told you I grew up in that neighborhood? Dan was my neighbor. He hated me.”

My eyes widened. Yeah, Aspen told me at my housewarming party, and that must be why I was surprised he launched fireworks from my front yard. He should have been aware of the rules. But it was Aspen, and everyone knew he wasn’t the type of guy to follow rules.

“So, that guy has always been a jerk?”

“Oh, yeah.” Aspen nodded with a wink. “He didn’t like me because I made it my mission one year to sabotage his chances at the garden show.”

“The Briar Woods Garden Event? How did you do it?”

“Yup. So, the rules state you can’t pay someone to design or plant your garden. I know because my mom wanted to enter one year, but then refused once she found out you couldn’t pay someone to do the work. My mom always had grandiose ideas, but liked to take credit for other’s work... kind of like Thomas Edison.”

I chuckled at his Edison comment.

“At the time, I was a teenager and occasionally snuck out of the house at night. I noticed some people working in Dan’s

garden. I went up to one of them and asked what was going on. Who would get work done on their garden in the middle of the night? The guy told me he was part of a landscaping company hired to work on Dan's front yard."

Oh my god. Dan went on about the rules to me and Lydia, yet he snuck around, breaking the rules himself. The hypocrisy.

"I told my mom, who then went and told the committee."

"Did he get disqualified?" I was on the edge of my seat. Aspen's story was better than any Hollywood movie.

Aspen shook his head with a sad smile. "No. He had just been elected to the board that year. He told everyone that he had threatened to tell my parents I was sneaking out, so to retaliate, I made up the story about the workers."

"That asshole. Damn it, he really is an evil villain."

"But as much as he had it out for me, he really hated Lydia's grandmother. She was a nice lady, but I didn't know her that well. Being a teenager, I was more interested in teenager stuff, like girls and getting into trouble. But I'd hear him complain about Lydia's grandmother winning the garden event almost every year. Once he stopped hiring the landscapers, he had to do the work himself, and he wasn't very good at it."

I smirked. Normally I didn't revel in others' misfortunes, but Dan deserved it.

"But why would he be so mean to Lydia's grandmother?" That made little sense.

Aspen leaned over, as if he didn't want anyone to hear, even though we were the only people in the seats. We were the only ones at the whole rink. "There was this rumor going around that Lydia's grandmother had buried her family's diamonds in her garden. I don't know why or even if it was true, but everyone talked about it."

I sucked in a breath. The map...

"The night I got arrested, a piece of paper fell out of Dan's pocket. I picked it up. Something about diamonds was written on one side, and on the other side was a hand-drawn map of Lydia's front yard with various X's that had been erased. As if someone was picking spots to dig and then erasing them when nothing was found."

"I bet Dan was digging around in her front garden, trying to find the diamonds."

I rubbed my chin. "That must have been why he wanted to hold on to the diamond ring I found in her yard. He wanted it for himself."

"He's such a weasel," Aspen sneered.

A thought swirled around in my head. I turned to Aspen and asked, "Hey, would you mind helping me with something? It requires us to sneak around at night."

Aspen smirked. "You're talking my language. Just tell me when, where and what you need from me."

"I think this will require the entire team. Can you help me round them up?"

“Consider it done, Emmanuel. They love you and would do anything for you. We’re all family.”

I was taking a big risk but knew it was the right thing to do. Hopefully, my neighbor would agree.



CHAPTER TWENTY



Lydia

Today was the day.

I blinked up at the ceiling, but my eyes still burned from all the tears I shed last night.

It filled me with regret and guilt over the way I treated Emmanuel. But the way he gave me the ring was insane. Too much time had passed between him finding it in the garden and giving it back. I believed he didn't want me to find out he stole it.

Once Cillian and Daisy found it in his home, he had to make all that up to fool everyone. He liked to pretend he was a nice guy, but I knew the truth.

There was a knock at the bedroom door.

“Come in.” My voice sounded like it had been run over a few times with a tractor.

Melanie popped her head in with a soft smile. “Hey, wanted to see if you needed any coffee? I made some.”

After the blowout with Emmanuel, I texted Melanie to see if I could stay the night. She told me to come right over.

The last place I wanted to be was in my house, knowing Emmanuel was right next door, and the Briar Woods Garden Event would happen first thing in the morning.

I pushed myself up on my elbows and looked at Melanie gratefully. “Yes, please. Coffee sounds amazing.”

“Good, because I already made you a cup.” Melanie held out a ceramic mug of steaming coffee as if it were a prize. She came over and sat on the edge of the bed, looking at me with concern. “How are you feeling?”

I sat up and gently took the warm mug. “I’m okay,” I lied, taking a sip of the coffee. It was heavenly.

Melanie raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have to pretend with me, you know that.”

Sighing, I shook my head. “Honestly? I’m devastated. I thought Emmanuel was better than that. But I’ve realized he wasn’t worth my time and energy.”

Melanie nodded, looking sympathetic. “Yeah, a hot guy who tried to get you into the event you haven’t stopped talking about for six months... He was the worst.”

My head snapped back. “It’s not like that worked, anyway. Besides, I told you he stole my grandmother’s ring. He’s a thief.”

Melanie tilted her head. “Was he though?”

I placed the mug on the bedside table and turned to face my friend. “Yes. Even Dan said he caught him taking the ring the night we were arrested.”

Melanie tapped her chin. “Was this the same Dan who had you both arrested?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t—”

“And the same Dan who taunted your grandmother for years about her garden? And always looked for a way to get her kicked out of the garden event every year?”

I groaned, “Yes, but just because—”

“And the same Dan who made sure you were banned for life from that event?”

I stopped answering Melanie’s questions and just glared at her.

“Lydia,” she placed her hand gently on my arm, “everyone swears Emmanuel is a sweet guy, even Daisy—who would never lie to you. And you even spent time with him over the past month and came to the same conclusion.”

I narrowed my eyes. “He obviously was pretending just to get at my grandmother’s diamonds. He even had that hand-drawn map of my front yard.”

“Which you told me wasn’t in his handwriting. The note about the diamonds.”

I pursed my lips. “So? He could have had someone else do that to throw me off.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that Emmanuel put on a nice guy act to every person he’s met for the past five years as a hockey player? Because he knew one day he’d buy the house next to you and get access to your grandmother’s diamond ring? The same diamond ring you didn’t even know about.”

My brows rose as I stared at her in silence. Did what she say sound bonkers? Yes.

Was I digging my heels in like a child, refusing to take no for an answer? Absolutely.

“Sounds about right to me,” I whispered.

Melanie tilted her head and leaned closer to me. “What?”

I swallowed as my gaze fell to the beige carpet. “Fine. It does sound ridiculous. Okay. You happy now? Emmanuel is just a magnificent man, and I’m the crazy woman who pushed him away.”

My friend smiled and nodded. “Yes, I am happy now.”

“You’re a terrible friend, you know that?” I folded my arms over my chest.

“No, I’m a friend who isn’t afraid to tell you the truth. If I were a terrible friend, I’d just agree with you about Emmanuel because I knew it was what you wanted to hear. But I won’t do that to you, Lydia.”

My shoulders sank, and I flopped back onto the bed, my red hair splaying out behind me.

“Oh, god, I screwed up so badly. I actually believed Dan. Dan the devil. If Nan were here, she’d be so disappointed in me.”

Melanie lay down beside me and patted my shoulder. “There, there. I have a crazy idea that might just help...”

As I turned my head to face her, some of my locks fell over my eyes, and I frantically pushed them away. “What idea?”

She sat up. “What if... Now, hear me out before you tell me it’s insane, okay? But what if you go and... talk to him?” Her eyes widened.

My lips thinned as I sat up. “Wow, that was such a unique idea; I never would have thought of something like that,” I said in my most monotone voice.

“I am serious, Lydia. We’ve been friends for years, and you kind of have a problem with jumping to wild conclusions. And every single time one of your problems gets worked out, it’s because you communicated your thoughts or feelings. Every time. Yet, you’re just going to ignore Emmanuel and hope this magically goes away.”

I sighed. She was right.

“If there can be buried treasure in my garden, then I can believe in magic.”

Melanie chuckled. “I guess you’re right, but magic won’t fix this. Even if you go to Emmanuel and talk this out, only to find out he was a mastermind thief, then at least you’ll know to sell the house and get as far away from him as possible.”

I took a deep breath before letting it out. “I’ll go talk to him. But no matter what happens, I think I’m going to sell Nan’s place.”

Melanie placed her hand on my back. “I’m sorry. That decision couldn’t have been easy to make.”

It wasn’t. I sat up most of the night wondering if I wanted to get away from the house because of Emmanuel, or if I needed to move on. That place was her home, not mine. It wasn’t what I wanted in my life right now.

The only reason I held on to the place was the front garden. And it was destroyed a month ago. Maybe that was meant to happen. Not just to meet Emmanuel but for me to finally let go of Nan.

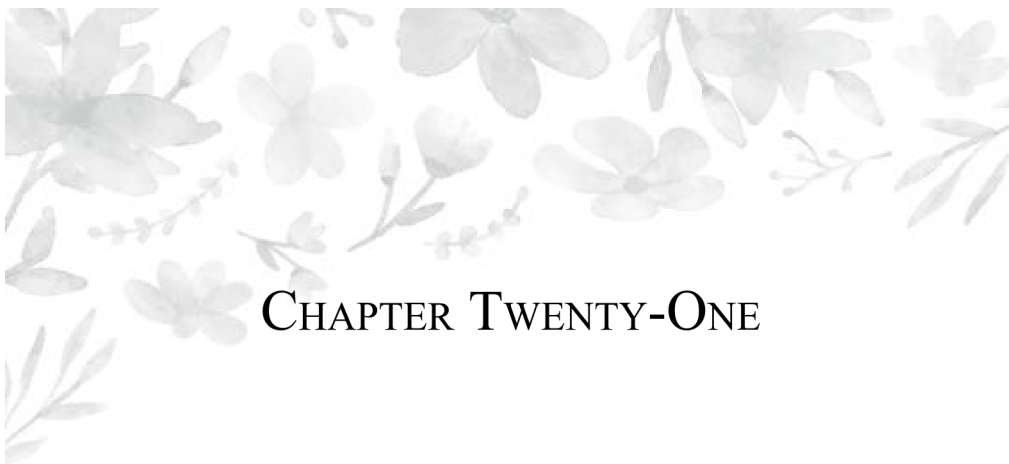
“Let someone else fall in love with the home and make it their own. I will miss the garden, but that’s okay. I can make a new one wherever I go.”

We sat in silence for a moment.

“Did you want me to come with you back to your place?” Melanie asked with concern etched into her features.

“Yes. Thank you.”

I reached over and took a sip of my coffee. I needed all the energy I could get because I was about to face the neighbor who hated me and the neighborhood that banned me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Emmanuel

I walked into my kitchen and peeked over my sister's shoulder. "It smells delicious."

"It should; it's Mama's recipe. Now go make sure everyone has water. They've done so much for you." She raised her brow at me, and it reminded me so much of our mother.

"Yes, ma'am." I saluted her.

She playfully pushed me away. Ana was right; the entire team came out to help. Aspen had helped me round up the team, and there was no way I could have pulled it off in one night alone without them.

I had found out Lydia was staying over at Melanie's last night when I went to look for her to apologize. I reached out to Cillian, who asked Daisy, who then found out she was at Melanie's place.

The plan I had come up with was to surprise Lydia with a garden that included hers in my design. That way, it would force the committee to include her garden too. Because of the

hole in our fence, I made one extensive garden for the Briar Woods Community Garden Event.

I reached out to my sister, and Lydia's friend Sophia helped make sure we got all the plants and supplies we needed.

I wasn't sure, but it felt like Sophia's family didn't always do things legally. At least her dad was like that. Sophia told me he could get me anything I wanted for the right price. Normally, I'd stay clear of anything like that, but I was working on a tight timeline.

We worked throughout the night, and my sister and Sophia, who was also a splendid cook, helped keep us fed.

And as the sun rose in the morning sky, the idea I sketched out on paper was coming to life.

I opened my front door and inhaled the warm, humid air. An audience of white puffy clouds hung above me. A slight breeze ruffled the canopy of leaves by the bed of roses and planted visions of gardens—manicured plots of earth, wild blossom-strewn fields, interlocked orchards, mossy grottos, stone paths through lush pasturelands dappled with dewy sunlight. The hint of lavender was in the air. I now understood why Lydia loved gardening and landscaping so much.

“Emmanuel, over here.” Liam, our newest player, waved me over to the fence.

I say “fence,” but it was now covered in flowering vines. It still baffled me how Sophia's father could get these plants so quickly.

“Hey, Liam. This looks great.” I slapped him on his back.

“Thanks. Um, so I’ve never worked in a garden before.”

I chuckled. “Neither had I until I met Lydia.”

My heart thumped wildly as I thought about Lydia’s radiant smile, her eyes always twinkling with enthusiasm whenever she plunged her hands into the soil.

His blond hair flopped into his face as he nodded. “Okay, so what do I do now?”

I looked around and noticed everything was done. My plan had come alive, and it was amazing. “Nothing. It’s finished.”

Liam’s perfect smile burst forth. The guys actually teased him about that. I never met a man with such perfect teeth. It was as if a surgeon had crafted them in place. The team wondered if he was a former model, but Liam denied it.

“Great, but what about my clothes?” He waved a hand at his pale linen shorts and pale blue button-up shirt.

“I told you that you would get dirty and to wear old clothes you didn’t mind getting grungy.”

He looked down at his outfit. “That’s what I did.”

Everything he wore looked expensive. “Those are your ratty clothes?”

“If by ratty, you mean old, then yes.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you rich?” I blurted out.

His mouth fell open, and he took a step back.

I took a step forward. “Where are you from, exactly?”

I knew where everyone on the team was from, except for Liam. He wasn’t American; that was for sure. The accent was nothing I had ever heard before. But every time I asked him where he was from, he would make an excuse and leave.

“Toledo,” he said with a cough.

“Toledo? You mean, in Ohio?”

His eyes scanned the yard, and then he pointed at something on the other side of the fence. “Oh, look, I missed a spot.” Then he scampered off.

Liam was a strange guy. As I pondered why my teammate kept where he was from a secret, a car pulled up, and out popped Lydia with Melanie.

It was time. I turned and nodded to Aspen, who waved for all the guys to get inside. Once they did, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and tapped it a few times.

Music played. I moved toward Lydia, who was standing on the sidewalk in front of her home, staring with her mouth hanging open.

The music grew louder, and I realized it wasn’t what I had picked. Aspen was playing “My Neck, My Back” by Khia. When the song got to the part about licking pussy, I turned to him and waved for him to shut it off.

But he turned it up. Now, the surrounding houses could hear the music, which might not have been a problem if people were in their homes, but since it was the day of the Briar

Woods Community Garden Event, most of the neighbors were outside.

I ran over to Aspen and grabbed the phone out of his hand. “How do I turn it off?” I yelled.

“Turn it up?” He shook his head. “Bro, it’s at top volume.”

“I know.” I raised my voice even more. “Shut it off.” I cupped the side of my mouth.

He shrugged, so I screamed, “How can I propose to Lydia with a song about licking pussy?”

I realized he had shut off the song halfway through my rant, and Aspen frowned. “That makes sense. Sorry, bro.”

I glanced over at Lydia, who was staring at me. I couldn’t tell if she was horrified or about to be sick.

Either way, it wasn’t good.

My feet felt heavy as I made my way toward her. I thought my idea was perfect, to surprise her with an amazing garden design for the event and then propose to her.

“You are going to propose?” she asked as she bit her bottom lip.

My hands shook, and I suddenly didn’t know what to do with them. “Uh, yes.”

“Okay.”

What? She wanted me to go through with it?

“You aren’t mad at me?”

“About the song choice? No.” She smiled, and it was like sunshine raining down on me.

“I mean about yesterday. I wanted to prove that I love you. That I haven’t been this happy in, well, forever. You made me realize that caring about living things was more important than anything else. And I messed up by not giving you back your grandmother’s ring right away. You deserve nothing but the best, and maybe that isn’t me, but I will work every day of my life to give you my best.”

I got down on one knee and pulled out a ring box, opening it for her. “This ring isn’t big and bright like your grandmother’s, but it holds just as much love in it. It was my mother’s ring. Will you marry me, Lydia?”

She covered her mouth with her hands, and I couldn’t tell if she was happy or about to throw up. I knelt there for what felt like forever before she nodded.

“Yes.” She lowered her hands and jumped up and down. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Emmanuel.”

I stood and lifted her up over the front fence, pulling her into an embrace. We kissed and then twirled in the middle of the garden, in front of all her friends and my teammates, who were clapping and cheering.

“You have made me the happiest man alive, Lydia.”

“And you have made me the luckiest woman on Earth, Emmanuel.”

Most of the clapping died down, except for one person. Dan Marks.

He walked over, along with a few of our neighbors. “Isn’t that so sweet?” he sneered.

“You going to have us arrested because we got engaged during your precious gardening event?” Lydia asked with a snort.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was just stopping by to disqualify Mr. Martinez because he didn’t follow the rules. And the other committee members will agree.” He waved to the neighbors standing beside him.

“It’s funny you should talk about the rules...” I turned to the door but already saw Aspen coming out with a piece of paper in his hands.

“Hey, Dan, remember me?” Aspen asked with a grin.

“No, I don’t remember you.” Dan squinted at Aspen as he looked up and down his body.

“I’m your old neighbor.”

Dan stood there for a moment, silent until his eyes grew in recognition. “You’re that brat who was always getting into trouble.”

“Yeah, but now I’m a professional hockey player. I play by the rules now, unlike you.” He held up a piece of paper.

“What are you even talking about? I don’t play hockey.”

Aspen chuckled. “No, you don’t—otherwise the team would tank. But you enter the Briar Woods Community Garden Event every year, and you’re on the committee. So, I find it odd that, every year for the past decade, you’ve been hiring professional landscapers to create your garden.”

Dan went pale, and I wondered if he was going to faint. “Uh, that’s insane. I would never do that. Give me that piece of paper.” Dan tried to reach out and grab it, but Aspen was too quick.

“It seems all my workouts are paying off. It’s super easy to play keep away with my old neighbor.”

Lydia snort-laughed.

Aspen walked over to one of the committee members and handed the paper over to her. “As you can see, this is an itemized bill from the past decade. Total Blue Ridge Landscaping would have included more years, but their accounting system didn’t go back that far.”

“Oh my.” The woman scanned the document. “I’m going to look into this, but if it’s true, you are disqualified, Dan.”

Dan’s color had come back with a vengeance. He was now as red as the roses in my rose bush.

“And it seems Dan is super late on payment,” Aspen mentioned. “You even asked them if they would take a diamond ring as payment, said you were going to have access to an expensive family heirloom soon, and it was worth a lot.”

“What the hell?” Lydia took a step back. “Were you going to steal my grandmother’s ring?”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer.” He turned to leave.

“Dan was going to steal it,” Aspen said as he reached over to stop the devil from getting away. “I talked to my mother this morning. It seems you wouldn’t shut up about the diamonds buried in old Mrs. Norton’s garden. Even a decade ago, you told her about it. “

I stepped forward. “That’s what the map that fell out of your pocket was all about the night you had us arrested. You were there to dig some more, but I found it first.”

“Get off of me.” He stepped back. “So what? That crazy old bat didn’t deserve that wealth. What did she do with it? Bury it in the dirt. It would go to a good cause, like my garden.” He turned and walked away.

“Can’t we do something? He was going to steal from me?” Lydia asked.

“Unless he did something illegal, we can’t do much,” one committee member said.

“I’ll find something. A man as morally corrupt as Dan has probably done some other shady stuff. I’ll find out the truth,” Sophia said from behind me.

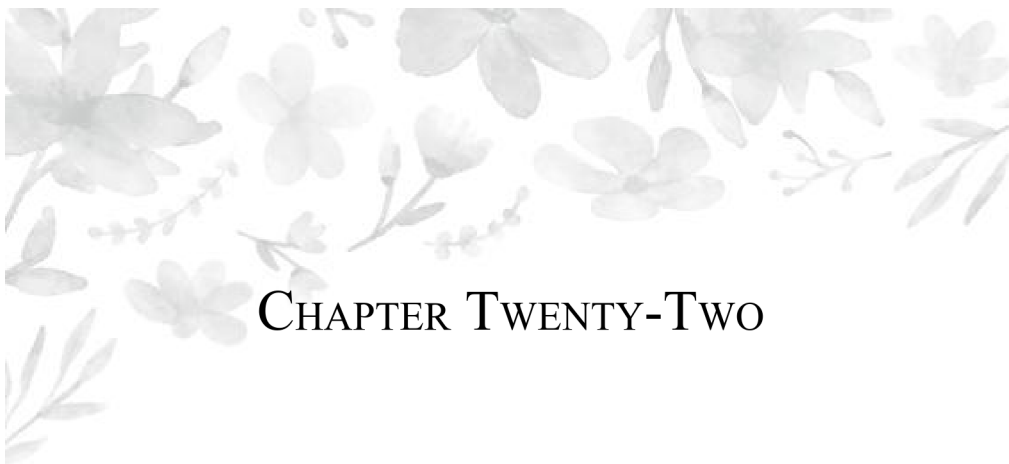
I noticed everyone had come out of the house to watch Dan get busted.

As the committee moved on to another yard, I turned to my fiancée and whispered in her ear, “You’re worth more than any diamond or family heirloom. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you. “

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “I love you. I can’t wait to see what our new life together will bring.”

“Me too, my love.” I kissed her forehead.

We walked away, hand in hand. And I knew, no matter what happened, we’d always be there for each other.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Lydia

“**W**e are so lost.” I gazed out the window of Melanie’s car and only saw trees and road.

The sky was a deep blue with fluffy white clouds that hung like cotton, and the sun bathed everything in its gentle yellow light. All around us was the quiet of the countryside, with just the occasional chirp of birds or rustle of leaves in the breeze.

“I promise you, we’re not lost.” Melanie smiled and looked stunning while focusing on the winding road.

It had been a few weeks since Emmanuel proposed, and Dan was kicked off the Briar Woods committee and banned from the garden event for life. I thought that day couldn’t get any more perfect.

I was wrong.

The committee made an exception, and our combined garden won the event. It was the talk of Castle Ridge for weeks—it even made the Castle Ridge News blog.

I got a lot more landscaping jobs because of it too.

Melanie had the side of her dark hair pinned up with a yellow peony, surrounded by sprigs of lavender. When Emmanuel proposed, and I thought about what I wanted for my wedding, those flowers instantly came to mind. I told him about it, but now it would be weird, since Melanie was in her friend's wedding with the same flower design.

I was kind of angry about it. Not that it was anyone's fault, but I always thought those flowers looked beautiful together.

"Is it near my neighborhood, because we're only a few turns away from my house?"

"You could say that," she mumbled.

She had been acting weird since yesterday. I loved Melanie, but it didn't thrill me about how cagey she had been with this wedding. She invited me last minute, and by last minute, I mean, she told me about it yesterday.

Melanie dragged me to town to help me get a dress for the outdoor affair, but insisted it was formal. I ended up with a silver silk halter-style dress.

She made me stay the night with her so I could help her the next day. And she even hired a makeup stylist and hairdresser to help her. My friend insisted they help me too. That part I wasn't upset about since I looked amazing.

But I felt like she had dragged me around the last twenty-four hours in a whirlwind, like I was the one in the wedding and not Melanie.

As we rounded the corner, I saw she had turned onto my street. And within seconds, she pulled up in front of my house.

Only, my house didn't look like the one I had left yesterday.

White folding chairs draped with peonies and lavender filled the space. A flowering arch was in the middle of the fence between mine and Emmanuel's front yards.

And there, under an even bigger arch filled with lavender, he stood in a dark gray suit that fit him perfectly. Aspen and Cillian stood beside him in light gray suits.

I recognized players from the Devils and lots of my friends in those white folding chairs.

My heart quickened as I stared in wonder at the transformation that had taken place on my front lawn. Had I been transported into a fairy tale?

"Surprise! This is where the wedding takes place." She grinned, breaking the spell and tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"What do you mean? Whose wedding?" I asked, completely taken aback.

"Honey, it's yours! You're getting married today!" she exclaimed, her eyes glittering with excitement.

I staggered out of the car in disbelief, my head spinning with confusion as I smoothed my sweaty hands down the front of my silk dress. This couldn't be happening.

"I'm not prepared." I stood there, unable to move.

She came around the car and grabbed my shaking hand. “You’re gorgeous; I made sure of it. You had dropped hints about how you wanted to look ever since Emmanuel proposed. And I remember once you said you wanted to get married in a beautiful garden. Well,” she waved her hand at the yard, “this is your grandmother’s garden. What’s more beautiful than that?”

The garden was a verdant paradise. Emmanuel had replaced a few of my grandmother’s plants, but those were made even more special with his touch. The grass was lush and green, dotted with flowering trees whose branches reached for the sky.

A tear slipped past the corner of my eye. She was right.

It was like a dream come true.

I looked over at Emmanuel, who was gazing at me with so much love and hope in his eyes. I knew I was making the biggest decision of my life, but I also knew in my heart that it was the right one.

Melanie held up her finger as I was about to walk to my front yard. “Almost forgot your bouquet.” She reached into her car and held up a simple bouquet of lavender tied with a yellow ribbon. She stepped in front of me and led me to my beautifully decorated garden and down the aisle.

I recognized some friends and family, but I could barely keep my eyes off Emmanuel.

I walked toward him, feeling the soft grass beneath my feet, the scent of lavender and peonies filling my nose, and the love of my friends and family surrounding me like a warm embrace. Emmanuel took my hand and whispered, “You look absolutely stunning.” His eyes sparkled with tears as he gazed at me. I smiled back at him, feeling my heart swell with love.

It was as if everything else faded away, and all that mattered was us, standing under the beautiful arch, surrounded by the people we loved most. The ceremony was short and sweet, just the way we wanted it. Our vows were simple, yet heartfelt, and we exchanged rings.

He gave me his mother’s ring, and I gave him my father’s, tying our families together.

As we kissed, the entire world seemed to disappear, and all that remained was Emmanuel and me, lost in each other’s love. As we turned to face our guests, they erupted into cheers and applause. We walked back down the aisle, hand in hand, feeling like nothing could ever come between us.

We didn’t have to go far, as both of our backyards had been turned into a magical reception. There were two long tables, one in each yard, covered in white cloth. The tables were adorned with fresh flowers and candles that flickered in the early summer breeze.

“How did this all happen so fast?” I leaned over to Emmanuel as we greeted the guests, though a lot of them were Emmanuel’s teammates.

“Everyone pitched in. My sister and Daisy helped so much, and of course Melanie was in charge of distracting you.”

I laughed because she did a great job of it.

“But mainly it was Aspen. I think he still felt guilty for blowing up the garden, so he wanted to do the most.”

I thanked them all over the course of the afternoon.

The reception was a blur of laughter, dancing, and good food. Our friends had truly outdone themselves with this wedding and reception, and everyone was enjoying themselves to the fullest. And as the night wore on, Emmanuel and I snuck away more and more often, stealing kisses and moments alone. Eventually, the night drew to a close, and we said our goodbyes to our guests.

I turned to my husband. “I love you, Emmanuel. You make my life richer by just being a part of it. Thank you for all this.”

He cupped my chin. “Lydia, I couldn’t stand you when we first met, but each day I learned I had been the one judging you and not giving you a chance. You helped me see that love means to not just open your heart, but your eyes and ears. I listened, I saw, and I never want to let you go. I love you, Lydia Norton Martinez. And I can’t wait to spend the rest of my days with you smelling the flowers.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Emmanuel

Two weeks earlier.

“What do you think?” I stood in front of the mirror in a dark gray suit.

The tailor got down on his knees and took measurements.

“It looks good on you.” Cillian nodded his approval.

Aspen shrugged.

What was with Aspen today? He told me he wanted to help with the surprise wedding I came up with, but today he just seemed off.

Ugh, I hope he wasn't flaking out on me.

“I was thinking light gray suits for you two.”

“Sounds good.” Cillian stood there and watched the tailor work.

I knew Cillian was a man of few words, but again, Aspen just shrugged.

“Come on, Aspen, what’s going on? Please don’t tell me you won’t help with the wedding anymore. Because if that’s true I’m going to—”

“No, I am going to help. I even went to the florist yesterday to order all the lavender and peonies like Melanie told me Lydia liked. I am just at a turning point in my life.”

Cillian locked eyes with me as if asking what Aspen was talking about. I shrugged.

“Turning point?” I turned so the tailor could get to the back.

“It’s not important.” He gave a quick smile before looking out the window of the shop.

A faint haze of sunlight covered the ground, and the air was warming. The density of trees and plants had thinned, revealing patches of sky here and there. The flowers on the trees were changing to green leaves as spring was slipping into summer.

“Sophia said she’d cook for the wedding, but we need to go to the baker for the cake. I’m thinking the one of Lake Street —”

The loudest sigh I had ever heard cut me off, and even the tailor looked up.

It was Aspen, still gazing out the window.

“You okay, Aspen?” Cillian asked.

“Fine. Just fine.”

“You sure? If you need to tell us something, then now’s the best time. The tailor may be a while.”

Aspen turned his head with the saddest frown. He reminded me of a toddler who was about to melt down. “No, this day is about you, not about me and my problems.”

Oh my god. I knew Aspen liked attention, but I had no idea he was the king of dramatics.

Cillian rolled his eyes.

“It’s not my day; I don’t own a day, Aspen. If something is wrong, then tell us. We’re your friends.”

Aspen went over to the one chair in the room and sat—more like he melted into the chair. The guy was giving off emo teenager vibes. I wouldn’t be surprised if he told us how we just wouldn’t understand.

“I don’t know,” he finally started. “You guys just wouldn’t understand.”

Called it.

Cillian’s jaw tightened, and he ran his hands over his head. I felt Cillian would make the best father until his kid hit those teenage years, then he’d fail constantly.

I made my voice sound soothing. “What wouldn’t we understand?”

“Have you ever considered giving up hockey?”

“No. Never,” Cillian blurted out quickly.

“What about USA Team? You were talking about that nonstop just last month.”

Aspen flopped his head back and groaned, “God, it’s not always about hockey, okay?”

“You just started talking about giving up hockey, so, yes, this conversation *is* about hockey,” Cillian raised his voice.

The way those two were acting, I half expected Aspen to stomp his feet and tell Cillian he wasn’t his dad.

Aspen raised his head and sat up straight. “You’re right, this conversation is about hockey. But my reasons aren’t. Does that make sense?”

“No,” Cillian said right as I answered, “Yes.”

“You’ve been a professional hockey player for two years, Aspen. There will be lots of chances to win the Cup and get on the USA Team.”

I suspected he was disappointed with his career, but at twenty-five, he was still young. He had lots of time.

He stood and shook his head. “No, I think it’s time to move on. I don’t think I’m going to renew my contract for the upcoming season.”

My mouth fell open. What was happening? As long as I had known Aspen, he loved being a hockey player.

“Don’t be stupid.” Cillian folded his arms over his chest. “You’re throwing away everything you’ve worked for. Your talent is being wasted.”

“My talent?” Aspen scoffed. “You mean, my ability to glide on ice with a stick?”

“It’s not just that,” Cillian argued, walking over to him. “It’s the passion you have for the game. It’s what makes you stand out on the ice. Don’t you remember how you felt when you got your first goal with the Devils?”

Aspen’s eyes grew distant as he thought back to that moment. “Of course I remember. But it’s...” He hesitated and looked at us as if he was about to confess something. He finally shook his head and said, “It’s just not enough anymore.”

I felt the tension in the room grow thicker by the second. Aspen and Cillian were both stubborn in their own ways, and this argument would not end without someone giving in.

“You can’t give up now,” Cillian pleaded. “We need you on the team. You’re one of the best players we have.”

Wow, Cillian had never said that to anyone before. He complimented no one. He really must not have wanted to see Aspen leave.

Aspen shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I’ve made my decision.” With that, he turned and walked out of the room.

Cillian stood there for a few moments, staring at the door with a look of disappointment on his face.

I knew he was worried about Aspen’s future, and so was I. Aspen had always been a talented player, but I couldn’t help but wonder if there was something else going on that he

wasn't telling us. Maybe it was time for him to discover a new passion, to find something that truly made him happy. Either way, I knew Aspen's decision would affect us all. The team would have to adjust to playing without him.

"I can't believe that just happened," I said as I stared at the door.

"He always made rash decisions in the past, but those involved sex or partying. Never anything serious, like hockey."

"Do you know if something happened to him?" I felt bad because I was so focused on Lydia and the wedding recently that I hadn't paid enough attention to Aspen. I felt like the worst friend.

"I don't know... but I'm going to find out."

"I want to help too." I started to move but realized the tailor was still working on my pants. "Uh, do you need me to be standing in the pants anymore?"

The older man sighed and shook his head. "Just take them off, and I'll do the rest. Go after your friend. And I'll give you a hint at what his problem is since you two are too blind. It's a woman. It's always about a woman."

I unzipped the pants and slid them off for the tailor. Aspen hadn't told me about any woman, and Cillian looked as confused as I felt.

Once my pants and shoes were on, I slapped Cillian on the back. "Let's go help our friend."

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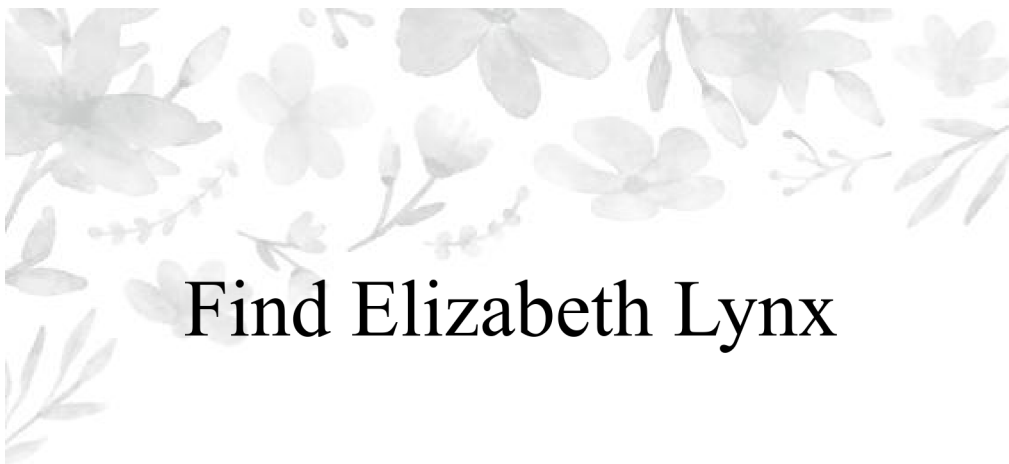
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