



# The Scout

CARINA ROSE

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Editor: James Gallagher, Castle Walls Editing

Proofreader: Rosa Sharon, Fairy Proofmother Proofreading

Cover Design: Sommer Stein, Perfect Pear Creative

Cover Photographer: Wander Aguiar Photography, LLC

Formatted with Vellum

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# Chapter 1

## Hannah

The buzzer sounded and chair legs immediately scraped against the linoleum floor.

“Bye, Miss Hannah,” my high school students said as they quickly filed out of my art room, ready to start their spring break.

“Bye, see you in a week. Be safe,” I shouted above their boisterous voices, knowing full well they weren’t listening.

Despite our class project of making signs for my upcoming reunion, I still couldn’t believe fifteen years had passed since I received my diploma. Not much at Blossom Berry Falls High School had changed. The cinder block walls were painted the same canary yellow, the combined cafeteria and auditorium still had that lingering school-lunch scent mingled with antiseptic, and the main lobby continued to feature the pictures of illustrious alumni who had gone on to do great things.

I wasn’t knocking the wall of fame. It did boast quite a few remarkable people who had attended our small school. The entire town of Blossom Berry Falls, Virginia, was very proud of them—and rightfully so. But from my graduating class, there was none other than Cash Jameson. Each day when I walked through the doors to start my day, I had to look at his gorgeous face—chiseled jaw, light-brown hair that had that effortlessly sexy look,



and a confident gleam in his pretty sea-blue eyes that could (and did) garner him a lot of attention. Then there was that damn smile. It used to turn me on. Now it just irritated me.

One hundred years could pass, and I still wouldn't forget the day he stepped into the main office. I happened to be there to turn in my crossing guard sash (yes, I was *that* student) when the prettiest cerulean eyes met mine. He knew the magic they possessed. Then he smiled, and I didn't stand a chance. When the principal's secretary, Mrs. Higgins, pulled up Cash's schedule—and realized we had the same homeroom—she paired us together.

And that was how it started. From that day forward, it was me, the art student, and the hot new boy. All the girls vied for his attention, but for some reason, he gave it all to me.

Not that I complained. Why would I? Back then, and even now, I was average—which I was more than fine with. I wasn't tall, thin, or glamorous. My hair was a soft brown that would get blonder highlights during the summer. I wasn't a complete nerd and had a lot of friends, loved painting and didn't bother with high school drama unless it was on the auditorium's stage.

Life was quiet. Just how I liked it.

It hadn't taken long for Cash to change all of that.

He quickly became my best friend, my first love, my first everything. And the first guy to break my heart. We were the couple no one saw coming and that everyone envied. To us, we were friends who one day cozied up a bit closer than normal while watching a movie in my basement. His thumbs had traced small circles on my shoulder, I'd snuggled into his side, enjoying the way his strong arm wrapped around me, and then I'd looked up

the same time he looked down, and for some reason, our lips had met.

It wasn't just an average kiss—not to us. It changed everything. In that moment, time suspended, our friendship morphed into something neither of us imagined, and saying *I love you* altered. We used to repeat those words all the time. Mostly because we were inseparable, and it rolled off our tongues easily. Except, it used to be a quick “Love you.” Then he added the “I” and said it in a tone so irreverent I could feel it down to my toes. Even my heart realized the difference. Those three words, combined with his unwavering gaze, changed everything.

“Knock, knock.” Mia stood in the doorway, pulling me from my thoughts. She and I had been friends since the eighth grade, and now we both taught at our alma mater. No one, not even my sister, knew me as well as Mia did.

“Hi.” I hung up my smock and grabbed my purse out of the bottom drawer of my desk.

Walking into my classroom, Mia let out her breath. “I can't believe it's spring break already. Thank God I decided to have the class watch a movie rather than discuss historical literature. No disrespect to the genre, but it was hard enough to keep them entertained with *The Breakfast Club*. But as soon as the bell rang, they were up and out as though their asses were on fire.” She laughed and glanced over at the long counters in front of the windows, where various styles of artwork sat to dry. “Oh wow, these are great. You're such a good teacher.”

“The kids are talented.” I loved my students, and seeing their creativity made coming to work fun.

“*You're* talented too. Don't you forget that.” Mia's phone chimed, and her eyes rolled as she looked at the screen. “The meeting is starting. Janice is getting antsy.

You'd think this was a meeting to discuss world hunger, not our class reunion."

I huffed out a sarcastic laugh. "Okay, let me just text Jimmy and wish him luck." My son was the starting pitcher on Blossom Berry Falls High School's varsity baseball team, the Bobcats. Normally I saw him before games, but they weren't playing at home. In addition, I'd committed to help organize our class reunion, and the final meeting was this afternoon.

"Tell him Aunt Mia says to kick ass."

Shaking my head, I tapped out and voiced, "Aunt Mia said to have a great game."

"That's not even close."

Laughing once more, I put my phone back into my bag. "Okay, I'm ready."

We walked down the hall to the library, where the reunion committee had gathered, and took our seats at the large table. Janice, who had been our class president back in the day, sat at the end of the table as a CEO would during a board meeting. She couldn't have been more excited about this event, while Mia and I—well, mostly me—weren't as excited. All I hoped was that Cash would be too busy to come back.

Aside from watching him on television, thanks to my son being one of his biggest fans, I hadn't seen Cash since he left for the big leagues right out of high school. Jimmy knew we had graduated together but never asked many questions about him, probably assuming Cash was way too cool to hang out with his dorky mom—thank God. How do you explain to your son that the man he idolized was his father, who never called his mom back? You didn't.

After a while, I'd let it go.

How long could I have gone on telling myself that Cash was busy and that once the season was over, he'd call or come home? Or that he'd read my emails or the letter I sent to the ball club. Granted, it had been about ten years since I'd done any of those things, but a girl could take a hint.

Then, two years ago, Cash got injured, so he was no longer a player for the Utah Hawks but a scout for them instead. Jimmy felt awful about his injury and even sent a get-well-soon card to the team's address. Each time my son mentioned his idol's name, I itched to tell him the truth, but getting the words out was a different story.

What if Cash didn't take the news well? Or act like his father had? The last thing I wanted was for my son to feel rejected. We were doing well, the two of us.

"Hannah? Did you hear me?"

After a few blinks, I glanced across the table. "I'm sorry, Jan. What did you say?"

She gave me a small insincere smile followed by a long exhale. "I asked if you confirmed the DJ for the party."

"Yes. All confirmed."

"Great, thank you." Janice looked at Michael, the athletic director. He hadn't graduated with us, but thanks to Janice planning a full weekend of activities, including the varsity alumni baseball team versus the current varsity team, she'd added him to the list. It wouldn't surprise me if Janice picked Cash up at the airport and offered him her spare room. She'd always had a crush on him—most girls did. "Is the game all set?"

That was another issue occupying my mind. I still hadn't heard if he was coming to town, but I had a feeling now would be the time.

And I was right.

Michael nodded. “It is. The majority of your class’s team will be here, and I’ve filled some of the positions with local alumni from other years. I will say, our current team is very amped up to beat the ‘old men.’” He chuckled. “That was their words. They all found out right before I came here that they’d be on the same field with Cash Jameson. The boys are very excited.”

Mia glanced at me, and I gave her a tight smile. There had been no doubt in my mind that if I looked at my phone, I’d see that Jimmy had left me a text telling me about the announcement. My heart thundered, and it wouldn’t surprise me if others could hear its rapid beat.

“Have you seen him lately?” Susan, another classmate and a member of Janice’s clique, fanned her face as she looked at me. When I arched a brow, she added, “Cash. Have you seen him? You two dated, right? Wow, did he mature nicely. That man has to be one of the sexiest men who ever roamed these halls. To think he’ll be back. I wonder if he’s single.”

I narrowed my eyes. Along with the canary-yellow walls in the hallway, Susan hadn’t changed either. She’d always been one of the mean girls, and fifteen years later, she could still hold the title of class bitch—*if* that were a category in the yearbook.

She knew damn well we’d dated. Everyone knew about Cash and Hannah. We were inseparable. Even when teachers had an alphabetical seating chart, we were next to each other. Our class voted us the couple most likely to get married. Obviously, that never happened. Then I went to college and came back with a baby.

Mia chimed in, saving me from having to answer. “Was there anything else? I have another appointment to

get to. And before you ask, the cake has been ordered, as well as the cookies.”

If I could have stood up and hugged her, I would have. Instead, I gave her a nod of appreciation, knowing our appointment was going to my house and cracking open a bottle of wine. She was the only one other than my family who knew that Cash was Jimmy’s father. Everyone else assumed it was my college friend Rob. Mainly because he’d accompanied me home for Christmas and was there when I went into labor. In small towns, rumors spread fast, and rather than correct them, I’d let it go. It wasn’t my fault people chose to assume things.

No one needed to know the truth. I’d tried to tell Cash and his family. His father didn’t believe me and thought I was after his hefty contract bonus. He also added that Cash never mentioned or asked about me, and that I should forget about him. Cash proved him right when he didn’t return my calls. As far as Jimmy knew, his dad was a great guy who just wasn’t ready to settle down—not all a lie. Cash was a great guy—until he wasn’t.

Janice shook her head. “No, we’re all set. If I have any questions, I’ll reach out. The final schedule of events will be sent to your email.”

As my students had done, Mia and I stood and hurried out of the room, then the building. “She is so annoying. And, really, was it necessary to have a dozen meetings for a class reunion that has sixty people in it?”

I shrugged. “Some things and people never change. So my place?”

“Yes, I’m going to stop and grab an extra bottle of wine. Something tells me we’re going to need it.”

Laughing, I couldn’t disagree. “I beat you to it. We’ll have plenty.”

“Great. I’ll follow you.”

During the entire drive to my house, I couldn’t stop my nerves or my mind from running through scenarios of Cash’s return. Would he seek me out? Go to our favorite spot at the park? Would he sit at our booth at Blossom Berry Falls Diner? Would he stay in town at the inn, or would he stay outside of town?

The one question that tickled my nerves was knowing whether he was married. The last time I’d seen him, he was standing next to a very pretty and very pregnant woman. I envied her. The way he gave her the smile that once belonged to me broke my heart. Despite all that, his baby would be close to Jimmy’s age. Did he have a brother or a sister? Another thought that added to the guilt.

One day everything would be out in the open, and I just hoped my son didn’t end up hating me.

\* \* \*

“You know what you should do? Hook up with someone before Cash gets here.”

“Excuse me? How much wine have you had? And what does he have to do with it?”

Mia waved her hand between us. “It’s not the wine. Just think about it, Hannah. If you have sex, it can ease your sexual frustration. Well . . . temporarily ease.” Ignoring my eye roll, she continued, “Really, when’s the last time you had sex? And not some mediocre quickie. I mean full-on, orgasmic, shout-to-the-heavens sex.”

Fine. It had been a decade and a half. She’d flip if I told her that. Yes, we were best friends, but Mia would never understand how or why. It wasn’t that I didn’t date, and she knew that. I’d gone on four equally awful dates.

Probably because no one measured up to Cash—not that many could. And it wasn't just their looks. It was that euphoric feeling that I wanted again. That tingling in my belly of thousands of tiny flutters that would come to life when I looked at someone or when they looked at me. Could I have slept with one of those guys? Maybe, but I wasn't that needy, and there wasn't anything wrong with a self-induced orgasm. Volleying the ball back to her, I asked, "When's the last time you did?"

Shockingly, she replied, "Two weeks ago."

Thanks to her answer, my gasp sent wine down the wrong pipe.

"Hands in the air, Hannah! Hands in the air!" Mia threw her free one above her head as though I needed an example of what she meant.

Rather than listen to her, I got up, grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, twisted off the cap, and took a small sip between coughs to help soothe my now raw throat. Breathing a bit more normally, I went back into the living room and sat back down. "Who did you have sex with two weeks ago, and why am I just hearing about it?"

She shrugged her right shoulder. "It's no big deal. It was with Jacob." When I blinked, she added, "Mr. Tillman? The substitute history teacher? I know you saw him."

"Um, yes, I did see him. *Everyone* saw him. Mia, he has to be—"

"Twenty-four. I know, I know. I'm divorced, not dead. And, girl, I haven't orgasmed that much in . . . well . . . ever. And his body was incredible . . . and talented. Guess how many orgasms I had."

"Do I need to?"



Mia laughed. “Sorry, but I’ve been dying to tell someone. Well, you, since you’re my someone.”

“Fine, tell me. How many?”

“Three. Well, three and a half, if you count the time in the car, when I didn’t finish because we rolled up next to a cop. I didn’t even know that many were possible. I mean, I’ve read about them in romance books but always thought the author exaggerated. And his body is incredible. He has two percent body fat. Two. I have two percent body fat in my little toe.”

I couldn’t contain the snort that flew from my mouth. Thankfully she joined in. Neither of us were stick figures, but neither of us wanted to be either. We’d always had a little bit of meat on our bones. Cash loved my curves . . . more specifically, my ass. Back then, he’d grab it any chance he got.

Cash.

Talk about a beautiful physique. In high school, he was fit, but in the last picture I saw of him in an online magazine, he was wearing his baseball uniform sans jersey. Not only did he have a slew of muscles, but he also had tattoos that made him look even sexier.

Rather than harp on my ex’s ridiculous body and my lack of non-toy-induced orgasmic fun, I said, “I’m happy for you, Mia. Are you going to see him again?”

“Nah. It was enjoyable for an evening. We just happened to be at Mason Jar having a drink one night, and one thing led to another. We went from doing the country two-step on the dance floor to a steamy tango in my sheets.”

“You’re too much.”

“Yeah, but you love me anyway. This is why you need to move on from Pinky. You know your favorite toy is

good for maybe one orgasm. Maybe two if you're watching porn or have a vivid imagination. That's why you should—"

Just then, the door burst open. Jimmy dropped his duffel bag on the floor and leaned his bat against the wall. "Mom, you're never going to believe this." He lifted his right foot behind him and pushed the door closed. When I cocked a brow, he looked at Mia. "Hi, Aunt Mia."

"Hey, sport. Did you win?"

"Yeah," he rushed out as though he couldn't have cared less if he had won or lost. Which was never the case with my overly competitive son. "You're never going to believe this," he repeated. Before I could say anything, he blurted, "Cash Jameson is coming to town in two weeks, and Coach Snyder told me that I'm the starting pitcher in the alumni game. Me. Jimmy Hall is going to pitch to Cash Jameson. I wonder if he'll sign my jersey. Maybe I should get a new one so I can frame it and still have mine to wear. Can I get an advance on my allowance?"

His words were rushed, his excitement palpable. *We need to talk* sat on the tip of my tongue, but instead, I said, "Sure. Go take a shower, and then we'll order it."

He kissed my cheek. "Thanks, Mom, you're the best. Wait until I tell Grandma and Grampa. I wish they were here."

My parents had gone to Kansas to spend time with my father's sister, my aunt Maggie, who just had a hip replacement. Having them so far away when Cash came to town wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Lord knew my father would have words for him.

"See you later, Aunt Mia."

Jimmy took off up the stairs, and when the sound of his feet hitting the stairs faded, I looked at Mia and

shared the same thought I had earlier. “He’s going to hate me. But I need to talk to Cash first. If he really wants nothing to do with him, then I’m not going to break my son’s heart twice. I’d rather he did hate me than have that happen.”

Mia reached for my hand and held it in her comforting one. “You’re a great mother, Hannah. For the past fourteen years, you’ve given that boy love that goes beyond measure, and you know that’s true. He loves you just as much. And I agree that you need to see how Cash reacts and find out why he hasn’t contacted you. Don’t go giving him a free pass.”

My nose scrunched up. “Do you think I’d do that?”

She shook her head. “No, but I’m just keeping it real.”

“Well, I appreciate that.”

All I needed to do was keep my cool the best I could until then. Not long after, I walked Mia to the door.

She turned to look at me. “You going to be okay?”

“Yes, I just wish I wasn’t withholding the truth from my son.”

“I know, but you’re doing the right thing.”

I agreed, but when Jimmy came down the stairs thirty minutes later, freshly showered, wearing his favorite jersey with his father’s name on the back, an instant lump formed at the base of my throat.

Time was no longer on my side. The reunion would be here before I knew it. I looked into my son’s light-blue eyes and pulled him into my arms. I didn’t care that he was a teenager. I needed to hug him.

He laughed. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Yes, baby. I’m fine. Now let’s order that jersey. Then I want to hear all about your game today.”

“Okay. I still can’t believe you went to high school with Cash Jameson. You know what I was thinking today?”

My heart stuttered with nerves, but I asked anyway, “What’s that?”

“It’s a good thing he’s not in my class.”

“Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t be the starting pitcher. No one has an arm like Cash.”

“Honey, yours is better.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my mom.”

Rather than continue to compare his arm to Cash’s, I changed the subject. “Want mac and cheese for dinner?”

“With bacon?”

“Is there any other way?”

“You’re the best, Mom.”

I nodded and turned away before he could see the tears in my eyes. Just like the day he was born, I silently vowed to protect him no matter what. It had been just the two of us, and if Cash didn’t want anything to do with him, we’d be just fine. I’d make sure of it.

## Chapter 2

## Cash

I sat behind the backstop netting at River Junior College alongside Jake Webster, another pro baseball scout. While I sought out players for the Utah Hawks, he did the same for the Colorado Bears. Both of us had our radar guns pointed at the pitcher, Elias Mitchell, waiting for him to release the ball.

After Elias went into his motion and delivered the pitch, I pushed the trigger. As soon as the ball popped into the catcher's mitt, I glanced at the small screen. Seventy-one miles per hour for a curveball wasn't bad, but it also wasn't a strike. As a former professional pitcher, I knew not all would be, but so far, Elias had walked four batters, and they were only in the second inning.

"He's not bad," Jake said, glancing at me. "What do you think?"

Elias wasn't bad, but he wasn't great either. Jake didn't play professional ball. His granddaddy owned the Bears, and he'd given him this job right out of college. That wasn't the first time Jake had wanted my opinion. It was bad enough that I couldn't play anymore, but helping this guy because he didn't know what was good or not pissed me off.

Rather than give anything away, I replied, "Depends on what you're looking for." In other words, if you're

looking for a guy who doesn't hide the ball well, has a telling delivery, a current 6.25 earned run average (ERA), and a slow release, then go for it. The Hawks had no use for him. Elias would be bummed because he had always played ball in Utah. River Junior College was only ten minutes from the Hawks' park. I understood that desire, but life wasn't always fair.

I stood, and Jake's head snapped up to look at me. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, I need to take off. Have an appointment to get to," I lied. "Have a good one."

"You too."

After snatching my phone out of my pocket, I glanced at the messages. There were a handful from college coaches asking for updates about their players, and another from my assistant, Leo, which simply said: **Call me.**

Leo had been my assistant since I got drafted. My agent, Thomas, had set me up with him, and even though I no longer played, I still needed someone to organize my schedule. There would be times when coaches would contact me directly, hoping I'd check out a player. Leo would sift through the bullshit.

I hopped in the car and placed the call. Naturally, Leo answered on the first ring.

"Hey, boss."

"Hi, what's up?"

"A couple of things. First, the pitcher you were going to scout in Virginia pulled a groin muscle, so no need to do that while you're there."

"That sucks." It did. I felt for the kid. Especially since he was in his third year at college and it was nearing the end of the season. "Okay, what else?"

“The school administrator in Blossom Berry Falls called. They’re going to be renaming the high school stadium.” When I remained silent, he added, “Cash Jameson Field.”

Shocked, I couldn’t help but ask, “What did you just say?”

“Cash Jameson Field. Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” I didn’t say anything, so he continued, “The ribbon-cutting ceremony will be right before the alumni game.”

“Why are they doing that?” I voiced out loud rather than to myself, as I’d intended.

“Because you’re Cash Jameson. I’m guessing not many pro players come from that small town. It’s already a done deal. There will be a media presence after the game. Give nice short-and-sweet answers.”

“Fine. What else?”

“The inn that you wanted me to book doesn’t have a vacancy.” *Of course it doesn’t.* “I rented you a house.”

“I don’t need a house.”

“Well, unless you have a friend you can stay with, that is your only option. I suppose they’d let you sleep on a bench in the bleachers—”

“Fine. A house it is.”

He chuckled. “Thought so. You’ll have it for three months, starting tomorrow. And before you bark at me, that was the shortest I could get it for. It was originally six. Apparently they’re having a hard time selling and won’t do daily rentals. Obviously you don’t need to stay there that long. As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t. Key will be under the petunia pot on the front porch.”



The season was in full swing, and thanks to my shoulder, my goddamn schedule was clear. “Petunia pot?”

“Don’t ask me. I grew up in Seattle.”

“Fine. Is there anything else?”

“Nope. I’ll send you the address.”

“Thanks, Leo. You know where to find me.”

“Always have.”

“Bye.” I disconnected the call, and my phone immediately chimed with a text message from Leo.

**LEO: 425 Maplewood Lane. I’m forwarding you the itinerary for when you’re there. Remember, I’m taking the family out of town for a bit. Try to relax.**

Relax. Sure. **Enjoy your vacation.**

**LEO: You too.**

Europe or a tropical island would be a vacation. Blossom Berry Falls had a population of nine hundred. When I left, it was just over a thousand. It was a cute town but a bit too small for me. When my family moved there at the start of my sophomore year of high school, I begged my parents to let me stay with my aunt in California, where I was born. Of course, they said no. But then I met Hannah Hall, and suddenly the small town was the best place on earth.

My parents had moved back to the West Coast thanks to my dad’s job transferring him again. Once the manufacturing factory in Blossom Berry Falls was up and running, there had been no need for them to stay, nor had they been back.

Then again, neither had I.

Fifteen years since I’d stepped foot in the quaint town. Fifteen years since I’d seen Hannah Hall—if that

was still her last name. The last I'd heard, she'd moved on with some college guy. Hannah had everything. She was smart, an artist, loving, and one of the nicest people. From the first day I met her, I knew she was special. And after our first kiss, I knew she'd always be mine.

Until she wasn't.

Everyone from my parents to my agent thought it best to cut ties as I embarked on my career. Being only eighteen, it made sense. I wouldn't be around much, she'd be going to art school, and if I wanted to make the bigs, then I needed to focus. The cocky teen thought I could do it all, but I ended up listening to everyone. Even Hannah ended up agreeing. When we went our separate ways, it had been the hardest thing I'd ever done. Although seeing her after all these years with some other guy might trump that.

I got into my Range Rover, put my phone into my cup holder, and headed home to write reports on the young players. Out of four of them, one, a shortstop, would be the only one I'd look at again. The rest wouldn't cut it in our Single-A division.

Being a professional baseball scout had its ups and downs. The best part was it kept me active in the sport that I'd dedicated my life to. I remember when I was scouted for the Hawks right out of high school. That wasn't unheard of, but it didn't happen often. Granted, I first played for their minor league team, but that lasted only forty-three days. My ERA was 1.2 in the minors. When I was called up to the majors to fill in a gap while the starter had Tommy John surgery, my ERA increased by a mere two-tenths. After that, I found myself in the starting rotation.

I walked into my house, tossed my keys onto the side table, and headed into the family room.

After grabbing my laptop, I did what I'd stopped myself from doing for the past decade and a half. I typed her name into a search engine and hit enter. What did she look like? Did she still have curves that could stop a man in his tracks? Was her hair long or short? Was she still a brunette? Aside from looks, was she married? These were questions that kept me up at night. Several results populated, except none were the Hannah Hall I knew. Rather than look through them all, I took it as a sign and closed my laptop. As I was getting ready to grab a beer and veg out on my sofa, there was a knock on my door, and then it opened.

"You really should lock that," my buddy Cal said, strolling in as though he owned the place.

"I need to change the code on the gate. That's what I need to do."

He chuckled, wandered into the kitchen, and helped himself to a beer. Illuminated by the appliance's light, he asked, "Want one?"

"Yeah."

Cal handed me my beer before plopping himself down on the sofa.

"Make yourself at home," I chided.

Kicking his feet up on my coffee table, he twisted the cap off the bottle, and I did the same with mine. "Don't mind if I do."

Ignoring him because lately, Cal was at my place more than his own, I couldn't help but ask, "Trouble in paradise?"

"Paradise. That's rich." He took a long pull of his beer. "We're over. Macey and I just aren't clicking anymore."

"What happened this time?"

“Antonio happened.”

“The accountant that was at your house a few weeks ago for her birthday?”

Cal nodded. “One and the same. Workplace romance or some shit. I don’t know. She claims they’re in love. Too bad she didn’t tell me that before I moved in with her. Tried to get my place back, but it’s gone. Have a meeting with a Realtor tomorrow. Fucking sucks.”

I felt bad for the guy. He and Macey had been together for a little over two years. “You can stay here. It’s not like I don’t have the space. Plus, I’m going out of town next week. Just don’t bring women here. Not a fan of them knowing where I live.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Cal shot up off the sofa and walked across the room and out the front door, only to come in with a large suitcase and a small duffel bag that moved on its own right before a whimper sounded.

“What the hell is that?”

He looked inside as though he had forgotten. “Thor.”

“Thor?” He released the handle of his suitcase and placed the duffel on the coffee table. As soon as the zippered top opened, a little white furry head popped out. “You have a dog?”

“Technically a puppy, but he’s potty-trained. Macey wanted him.” Cal reached inside with one hand and scooped out the small dog I was sure could fit into my morning cereal bowl. “Thor, this is Uncle Cash. Cash, this is Thor.”

All I could do was blink. “If Macey wanted a dog, why is it here?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Antonio had two cats, and they were being mean to this little guy.” He lifted it up in front of his face and started speaking in a voice I prayed I’d never hear again.

“Who’s a good boy? You are. That’s right. We don’t like those cats, do we? No, we don’t. No, we don’t.” The dog’s tiny pink tongue lapped at Cal’s cheek before he turned to me. “Want to hold him?”

“No, I’m good.” I sat back down on my recliner. Cal took the couch and set the dog on the cushion next to him. He gave him a toy that he seemed to produce from thin air.

“What’s wrong with you? Is it Thor? I’m really sorry, but I couldn’t just leave him somewhere. I promise we won’t be here long.”

“It’s not Thor. It’s Hannah.”

“There’s a chick here? I thought you just said—”

“No. Hannah. My high school girlfriend.”

“Ahh, the one who got away.”

“That’s the one. Although I don’t know if I’d classify her as that.”

He scoffed. “Brother, if you’re still thinking about her after all this time, I think that’s exactly how you’d classify her.”

As much as I hated to admit it, Cal was right. “Heard she moved on.”

“Heard and did are two very different things. Go to Blueberry Hill and check for yourself.”

“Blossom Berry Falls.”

“Whatever. Thor and I will hold down the fort while you’re gone. Won’t we, Thor?”

The pint-size pup looked at him before letting out an exasperated sigh. *I’m right there with you, Thor. Right there with you.*

# Chapter 3

## Hannah

Soft country music from the nineties played from the grocery store's speakers. Per usual, one wheel on my cart spun independently from the other three as I did my best to steer it toward the produce department without crashing into anything. Mounds of fresh vegetables and fruits in baskets lined the wall and center aisle.

Lifting a cantaloupe, I did as my mom always told me and pressed the button on the bottom where the stem had once been attached. If it gave way a tad, then it was a good one. Since the first one didn't, I moved on to the next. Grabbing a larger one, I was about to do the same when I heard, "So you saw Cash at Brew and Chew this morning? Not going to lie. He's one of the reasons I decided to come back here. BBF is a far cry from Miami."

They both giggled.

Using the cantaloupe to shield my face, I stood there eavesdropping.

"Sure did." Then the woman sighed. "If I wasn't madly in love with my husband, I would have bought that man a cup of coffee . . ." She paused. "He's single, you know."

They both laughed again, and my eyes narrowed on their own volition. For the past twelve days, my hackles have been elevated thanks to the upcoming festivities. At home, Jimmy's excitement overshadowed my horrible

secret. At school, everyone clamored about what a great event it was going to be. I knew they weren't wrong. Our committee had worked hard for months. Not to mention Janice's iron fist.

"Girl, I saw a picture of him with no shirt on. *Damn*. I'd only seen bodies like that online. Even his tattoos are sexy. I can't wait to go to the game on Friday. And want to know a secret?"

Her voice lowered, and I couldn't help but lean back a little. I mean, who didn't want to know a secret? At that point, I'd been invested in the entire conversation. Why stop, right? My fingers flexed on the netted skin of the melon as I angled my body in their direction.

Just then, the store's intercom announced that the deli had a call on line two. In my head, I was trying to hush it, but that didn't work. Once that silenced, I caught what I assumed was the tail end of the secret: ". . . renaming the school stadium to Cash Jameson Field."

Unfortunately, that scrap of information caused me to suck in a harsh breath, and the bit of dust on the melon shot down my throat. A cough built up pressure like a balloon about to burst. I tried to hold it in, but it was no use. I let out the loudest, most bizarre-sounding combination of a cough and a snort that I'm pretty sure no human had ever made before.

"Oh my word, are you okay?" one of the women asked. When I looked up, I recognized her from my class, but I couldn't put a name to her face.

Finally able to swallow and catch my breath, I nodded and put the melon in my cart. "Yes, thank you. Tried to sniff the melon to see if it was ripe and got more than my money's worth." I laughed, trying to play off what had really happened and hoping she didn't see through my lie.



“Hannah? Hannah Hall?” When I smiled and nodded once more, she beamed. “I’m Sarah. Sarah Monahan?”

*Right!* I mentally snapped my fingers.

“Well, I used to be. Now I’m Sarah Pendleton. And this”—she pointed to the woman next to her—“is Patricia Jenkins, formerly Patricia Shelby. I can’t believe you’re here. We were just talking about Cash.”

Patricia chimed in, “Have you seen him? We were hoping he was staying at the inn, but Hank told us that he rented a house in town. Must be nice, right?”

Hank and his wife owned the inn. No doubt they were full, thanks to the reunion. Plus, it wasn’t as though Blossom Berry Falls had a plethora of hotels. There was the inn, and that was it. The next closest hotel was about forty miles away.

“I heard he brought his family with him. That’s probably why he rented a house.”

Patricia’s information brought an ache to my chest. Not that I had a right to be upset. It had been fifteen years since we’d seen or spoken to each other.

“Are you staying at the inn too?” Patricia asked.

“No, I live here.”

“You still live in BBF?” Sarah said with a bit of disdain in her tone.

Heat crept up the back of my neck. “I do, yes.” Rather than elaborate, I did my best to end the conversation. “Well, have fun. I’m sure I’ll see you this weekend.”

“Or sooner.” *God, I hoped not.* “This town is so small. I never realized it when we lived here,” Patricia said with a smile. Undoubtedly reading my expression, she added, “But so cute.”

“Yes, cute. See you this weekend.” I gripped the handle of my cart a bit tighter than necessary and steered my way through the store, happy having not run into anyone else from my past, especially Cash.

After I checked out, I went home to start dinner. I hadn’t seen Jimmy since this morning, and no doubt the boy was hungry. That kid could, and often did, eat me out of house and home. I knew about growing teenagers and how they had an empty pit for a stomach, but hearing about it and living it were two totally different things. The home we lived in was paid for thanks to my paternal grandmother leaving it to me in her will ten years ago. She always had a soft spot for me and Jimmy, and not having a mortgage on a teacher’s salary was beyond a blessing.

“Jimmy, I’m home,” I called out, shutting the door behind me and making my way to the kitchen. After setting down the bags on the table, I glanced out the back window. There was my son, throwing the ball into his pitchback net, practicing as usual.

Not wanting anything to spoil, I put the perishables away before heading out the back door. The scent of freshly cut grass, birds chirping, and the spring sun brought a smile to my face. Not only did I always love this time of year, but it was one step closer to summer—my time to relax and spend more time with Jimmy.

He lined up with the net, went into his pitching motion, and released the ball. It hit the outside corner of the red square before jetting back into his mitt.

“Hey, sport.”

“Hi, Mom.” He walked over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. Something he did whether we were in public or not. I loved that about him and our relationship. “Do you need help with the groceries?”

“No, I got it, thank you. How was school today?”

He shrugged. “It was school. I got an *A* on my AP Algebra quiz but a *B* on my English paper. Mr. Raven said I can write an essay to bring up my grade. I hate that class.”

When I was younger, I’d be thrilled with a *B*, but Jimmy knew he’d need a scholarship to attend college without a large student loan. I’d do what I could, but no way could I cover the entire thing. It hadn’t been until this year that his coach said that he could possibly play baseball and get college money that way, which was always a possibility.

What hadn’t been a possibility was asking Cash. Yes, he was his father, but it had been clear he didn’t care enough to be a part of his life. Then there was Cash’s father, who had accused me of lying because of Cash’s lucrative contract. Those words had fueled my desire to do it all on my own. My parents had helped in the beginning, but they knew how important it was for me to be independent.

My son had always been smart. When he was in the second grade, he’d read at a fifth-grade level, excelled at math, and was constantly bored. After a couple of competency tests, he’d skipped the third grade and become the youngest in all his classes. Thankfully he wasn’t a small child, or he’d probably have been picked on.

“I know English class isn’t your favorite, but maybe you can get a tutor over the summer. I had one for math when I was your age.” I didn’t mention who’d tutored me since it was Cash, but that wasn’t important. “And remember, Aunt Mia teaches English. She’d help you.”

“Yeah, maybe I just don’t know why I need to learn about Shakespeare. I mean, who cares? I want to be an

architect. I'm pretty sure an analysis of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* won't be in my college curriculum."

"Hate to break it to you, sport, but you need to get good grades before college, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"Good. I'm going to go make dinner. Would you like to help?"

"If it's okay, I'd like to practice more. The game is only two days away, and I want to perfect my curveball."

"Honey, don't worry about the game. If Coach didn't think you were good enough, you wouldn't be starting."

"I know. I'm just nervous."

"I smiled. You'll be great. I'll call you when dinner's ready."

The screen door closed behind me, and when I turned around, Jimmy was back to throwing. It truly was amazing how good he was. Being only a freshman, not to mention fourteen years old, and one of the starting pitchers on the varsity team was a testament to that. There had been zero doubt in my head that once he took the mound, the alumni would see the same.

Specifically one of them.

# Chapter 4

## Cash

Gravel crunched under my rental car's tires as I traveled the wide-open two-lane country road. I'd driven on this route countless times before, yet it looked different. The split-rail fencing looked worn, the white barn and farmhouse where Hannah had loved to visit the baby goats appeared to be abandoned, and the large oak tree where we had once carved our initials was no longer there. Still, the memory of making out with her where that tree once stood was as vivid as the day it happened.

On the other side, cattle grazed in the long, dried-out grass. Seeing movement in my peripheral, I slowed down to let a family of geese cross the road. I rolled down my window and watched the mom and dad geese safely maneuver their family until they disappeared into the long clumps of wildflowers.

Continuing on, I passed a pickup truck and a paneled station wagon that had to be considered a classic. When I rounded the corner at one of the four stoplights in town, my alma mater came into view: the same redbrick building, the purple bobcat painted on the sign a bit faded, and the maple trees that my class had planted in the small courtyard now shading the entire area.

Not able to help myself, I pulled into the empty parking lot next to the field. Nostalgia coiled itself around

me. Aside from Hannah's house, most of my time had been spent at that very spot.

I got out and hopped the fence, landing with a plume of dust. Everything from the dugout to the outfield seemed smaller, but that had to be inevitable after spending so much time at professional and collegiate stadiums. The hard, backless bleachers reminded me of my parents. They'd always been my biggest supporters. Especially my father. Ever since I can remember, he'd coached me. Starting with teaching me how to catch a ball in our backyard and extending to how to get a base hit. Once everyone realized I belonged on the pitcher's mound, he'd hired the best pitching coach in our area.

When we moved, I remember him telling me that the coach was top-notch. Thinking back, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if he had checked out the team before looking for a place for us to live. At times my mother thought he was more driven than I'd been—a notion both of us dismissed.

Glancing up at the scoreboard, I couldn't help but notice the white sheet draped over the top of it. No doubt covering the new name . . . my name. It was an incredible honor. I plucked my phone out of my pocket and called my dad.

"Hey, son."

"Hi, am I catching you at a bad time?"

"No, perfect timing. We just wrapped up a meeting with a new client. Too bad you're not here because your mom and I are celebrating tonight. What great city are you in this week?"

"Blossom Berry Falls," I responded with a chuckle. "Can't call it a city now, can we?"

"Why are you there?" he practically barked out before softening his tone. "Sorry. It's just been so long since

I've thought about that place."

I knew my father couldn't wait to move, but by his tone, it was clear I'd never known how much. "That's why I'm calling. They're renaming the school's field after me. Can you believe it? Cash Jameson Field."

"That's nice. How long are you staying there?"

I'd expected a bit more excitement, but I knew he was in business mode, so I didn't think much of it. "Probably leaving on Sunday."

"Good, good." He cleared his throat. "I mean. I'm sure there are more productive ways to use your time."

"Everything okay, Dad?"

"Yes, sorry. It's been a very busy day. I actually have another meeting to get to. You should call your mother. I'm sure she'd be happy to hear your voice and news."

"Sure. I'll call her later."

"Tomorrow might be better. She's getting her nails done or whatever."

"All right."

"Great. Bye, Cash."

Before I could say *goodbye*, the screen went dark. Chalking up the bizarre exchange to my father being preoccupied, I tucked my phone into my pocket.

"Well, if it isn't Cash Jameson," a gravelly voice said.

When I turned, an older gentleman holding a landscaping rake smiled at me. "Milo?"

"In the flesh. Heard you were heading back here." He nodded toward the scoreboard. "'Bout time they named this place after you."

Milo had been the team's equipment manager back when I played. He played ball when he was younger but



never wanted to coach. Too bad because the guy knew the game inside and out. I couldn't help but give him a quick hug. "Good to see you. How're things? Still hanging out here, I see."

"You know it. Wouldn't want to be anywhere else. The smell of the grass and dirt are as good as the missus's peach cobbler." When I cocked a brow, he added, "Don't go tellin' her that, or I'll smack ya. I don't care who you are."

We both laughed. "How's the team?"

"Trying to get some intel for the alumni game?"

"Maybe. I'm a scout now, so—"

"Sorry about your shoulder. Great play, but not worth the out." He was right. At the time, I just wanted to get the runner home. The bases were loaded, and I'd thrown the pitch, only for it to get by the catcher. I ran forward to cover home, caught the ball, flipped it to my bare hand, and then hyperextended my arm to reach the base before the runner's cleat crossed it. I made the out but at the expense of tearing the hell out of my shoulder. "You feelin' okay? How's the shoulder?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Not good enough for the majors unless I wanted to risk permanent damage. So you going to tell me about the team? Anyone as good as when I played?"

Milo laughed and shook his head. "Guess you'll need to wait and see." He added in a wink that made me chuckle.

"Okay, I'll catch you later."

He nodded. "Good to have you back in town. You should go to the Mason Jar for a drink. I'm sure the folks in town would love to see you."

"Maybe I will."

We shook hands, and rather than take his suggestion of seeing the folks in town, I headed to the home Leo rented to get settled in. Familiar storefronts looked a bit weatherworn but still held their charm. Flags hung vertically from the streetlights boasting about the upcoming ham festival, which brought a smile to my face. Small towns were special. I didn't realize that when we moved here. As my career shifted from player to scout, I spent a lot of time in places similar to Blossom Berry Falls. And the more I did, the more they appealed to me.

When I passed Hannah's old street, I couldn't help but wonder if her parents still lived there or if maybe she and her new husband did. The thought of seeing her with someone made acid churn in my stomach. No one talked about her, not even Milo, who'd caught us making out under the bleachers, in the dugout, at the concession stand shack, and, much to Hannah's dismay, on the pitcher's mound.

That day, I didn't care that Milo was older. I wanted to kick his ass. That mound was my comfort zone, as was Hannah. Put the two together and . . . euphoria. We were on our way there too. Especially when my girl told me she wanted to round the bases both literally and figuratively. My teenage libido had felt as though I'd pitched a no-hitter during the championship game.

Hannah had just unbuttoned my jeans when Milo blasted an air horn. We'd practically jumped out of our skins at the obnoxious sound. Hannah, who had been in just her bra, used me as a shield to cover her. Not that I hadn't already had that idea myself. Thanks to the nighttime sky and the moon being our only source of light, no way did the old man see anything. Still, it pissed me off. Thanks to the old coot that night, we never did do what we'd set out to.

I groaned, thinking about that day. How the weight of her perky breasts had filled my hands just right. How, when I skimmed my thumb over her nipple beneath the cotton of her bra, she'd shivered. How she'd told me I was her one and only. That I was the only one she wanted touching her. Then my gorgeous girl looked at me with her pretty chocolate eyes, so reverently . . . as though I were her entire world, and that had made my heart flip.

After Hannah, no one made me feel that way. Nor did I give anyone the same attention I'd given her. Life changed, everything changed, and it made me wonder if we were even friends anymore. What made a friend? Phone calls, text messages, social media exchanges, a personal visit? If that were the case, then we weren't friends . . . as awful as that sounded.

Not that I was blameless.

Before I knew it, the robotic voice coming from my Bluetooth told me I'd arrived at my destination. I turned and pulled onto the short driveway. A small yellow two-story house with a wraparound porch sat at the end of it. The shrubs around it were a tad overgrown, and the flower boxes on the porch had seen better days, but none of that mattered to me. As long as I had a place to stay for the few days I'd be in town, it was fine.

I got out of my car, grabbed my suitcase and duffel, and strode up to the porch, the planks creaking beneath my sneakered feet. Not knowing what a petunia looked like, I finally found the key under the fourth pot I lifted.

The interior boasted a farmhouse style. Soft white-and-blue-cushioned furniture, hardwood floors that were gently scratched, and a small kitchen off to the side. There wasn't much room, but I didn't need it. I'd be there only for the weekend, regardless that I had it for months.

I took a self-guided tour, finding the primary bedroom with a bed that looked a bit too short for my six-foot-four frame, another room with a twin bed, and a bathroom in the middle of the hallway. Thankfully I wasn't sharing the house with anyone, so that didn't matter.

Glancing through the back window, I noticed a boy playing in his backyard, which a fence divided from mine. Going out the sliding glass door, I stood on the small deck and watched him through the sparse shrubs as he threw a baseball at the pitchback, catching it on the return. He had great form, what appeared to be an accurate arm, a very quick release, and my name on his back.

The smile that spread across my face couldn't be helped. It never got old seeing JAMESON above the number . . . my number . . . forty-four on the back of his jersey. Tomorrow at the game, I'd be wearing my old Hawks jersey. I brought my old high school one with the same number with me, but that was because the school said they wanted it for their Hall of Fame case in their main lobby.

All of that didn't matter to me. Yes, it was an honor and all that good stuff, but I'd rather be playing. Letting out a sigh, I went back to watching the kid throw more pitches. Instinctively, I wanted to go to the fence that separated us and watch more closely. Except, not wanting to look as though I were a creep, I didn't. He reminded me of myself and the way I'd spend countless hours throwing at the same type of practice equipment. He couldn't be more than fifteen years old. Tall, a little lanky, but not gangly.

Not only did he remind me of myself, but there had been something about the yard, more specifically, the screened-in porch off the back of it. I couldn't place it, but it had been fifteen years since I'd been back to

Blossom Berry Falls. And after traveling to various places, things seemed to blend after a while.

He got into his stance and released the ball toward the inside corner. When he missed his mark, he lowered his head and shook it.

“Shorten your stride, kid,” I whispered into the air.

After watching him for a few more throws, I headed back inside, sat down on the sofa, closed my eyes, and continued to wonder about what tomorrow would be like. I’d be back on the mound. I closed my eyes and could almost hear the crowd cheering for me in the last game I’d played there. One voice had been the loudest . . . my Hannah’s. She’d worn my name on her back and had never missed a game.

Anytime I had a bad inning or gave up a home run that she knew pissed me off, she’d yell, “You’ve got this, kid!” The *kid* part always made me smile. It relaxed me. She relaxed me. Rather than reminisce for the rest of the night, I headed to bed, knowing that tomorrow might be the day I’d get to see Hannah.

*Just let her be single.*

# Chapter 5

## Hannah

Sweaty palms had never been a trait of mine . . . until today. I rubbed my hands on my jeans as I headed down to the field with Mia beside me. Nervous energy had coursed through me all day thanks to the morning announcements when Principal Collins had surprised the school by proclaiming that the field would be renamed Cash Jameson Field and the ceremony would be before the alumni game later that day. The whoops and hollers from different classrooms echoed through the hallways. I knew my son's voice was mingled with the others.

The end-of-the-day announcement was met with more cheers after the school found out the alumni game had been sold out.

*Of course it was.*

Along with a car-filled lot, there were also local news station vans—Jimmy and his teammates had to be flipping out. People funneled through the gate, no doubt wanting a seat close to the field. Thankfully, the parents had a section reserved. Although today I wished I could be in the last row rather than the fourth.

“This is amazing,” Mia said, looping her arm through mine. “Are you doing okay? How was Jimmy this morning?”

I smiled. “Jimmy was up at five a.m. practicing out back. Thankfully, he ate a big breakfast. After all the lunchroom excitement about ticket sales, who knows if he had anything to eat. He’s very excited about everything, especially meeting Cash.”

Mia stopped walking and, with a gentle grip on my forearm, turned to look at me. “I’m sure Jimmy will be fantastic, but you didn’t answer my question. How are you doing?”

A pit of anxiety blossomed in my belly. “I’m nervous, Mia. Jimmy is pitching today . . . to his father,” I whispered. “Cash isn’t dumb. In fact, Jimmy is more like him than me. Cash told me he could have skipped the sixth grade but didn’t because of baseball. Something about his father not wanting him to compete against older kids. I did well in school, but not to the point where I could skip a grade. And then there’s baseball. Do you know how lucky I am that certain people in this town haven’t put two and two together? Or maybe they have and have been gossiping behind my back. I swear everyone is looking at me differently.”

“That’s your imagination running wild. No one is looking at you differently. And you and I both know they don’t think Cash is his dad because of Rob.”

She was right. I knew that. I also knew Rob had saved my ass on more than one occasion. Too bad he was teaching abroad, or he’d be here. Not to continue the rumor mill’s speculation, which I never confirmed one way or another. “There’s sweat in my cleavage. I haven’t felt this anxious in a while.”

“Who knows. Maybe all will stay the same . . . no one the wiser.” When I gave her a pointed look, she sighed. “You’re right. No way is that happening.”



“Hannah! Mia!” Janice shouted, waving. “Isn’t this great? We’ve raised so much money for the school.”

We both nodded when Susan scurried up to us, wearing skinny jeans, a tight-fitting long-sleeve shirt with the Bobcats logo stretched across her ample breasts, perfectly styled hair, and makeup as though she’d be going out to the Mason Jar after this to pick up guys. Much in contrast to my casual Friday look, which consisted of boyfriend-style jeans and a long-sleeve, loose-fitting Bobcats shirt with Jimmy’s number, thirty-three, on the back. Then again, she was newly divorced and no doubt on the prowl, and I was happy being a single mom to the world’s best kid.

“Ladies”—she leaned in as though we were all besties ready to hear the latest gossip—“I just saw Cash outside the visitors’ locker room. “The lord blessed that man. And I didn’t see a ring.” She straightened her spine and smiled. “You all know what that means.”

“That he takes off his jewelry when he pitches?” Mia asked.

Janice and Susan laughed. “You don’t mind, do you, Hannah? I mean, you guys are old news, right?”

I nodded. “Do what you want, Susan.”

“She always does,” Mia muttered.

“Great. I didn’t think you’d care. If that man is as good in bed as he looks”—she fanned her face—“I might need to get some new lingerie. See you both later.”

Mia gave her a grin as fake as Susan’s boobs. “She’s such a bitch.”

“Let’s not worry about her. Despite all this Cash stuff, I need to wish Jimmy luck.”

“You’re right. We’ve got this.”

Nodding, I swallowed a formidable lump in my throat and flexed my fingers. After giving the student at the table my ticket, we headed toward the fence, and as soon as Jimmy spotted me, he waved and ran over.

“How are you doing, sport?”

“I’m good. Coach said that I’m still starting, and the game is only six innings, so I should be able to pitch them all. Unless I tank.”

“You’re not going to do anything of the sort. You’ve got this, Jimmy Hall. I know there are a lot of people here —”

“Yeah, including reporters and Cash Jameson.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes, but they’re just people.” He gave me a lopsided look telling me that was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever said. “Fine, they’re more than average people, but you’ve got this. What do I always tell you?”

“Quit while I’m ahead?”

“Funny. Want to try again?”

“Believe in myself as much as you do, and I can accomplish anything.”

“That’s right. And you know I’m your biggest cheerleader and believe in you.” I placed my hand on his shoulder. “You’re smart, talented, and know this game. You’ve got this.”

“Your mom’s right, Jimmy,” Mia chimed in. “And for the record, I believe in you too. Just pretend the reporters are naked.”

His eyes scanned the group of media people, landing on a smartly dressed and very pretty blonde who looked to be in her early twenties. “That’s a great idea, Aunt Mia.” Jimmy smirked, Mia laughed, and I sighed.

“Okay, go and be great. You know where I’ll be.”

He nodded and ran off.

“Really, Mia?”

“Fun Aunt Mia, remember?”

Shaking my head at my best friend, I did appreciate her distracting him, even though it wouldn’t have been a tactic I used. We made our way to our seats, saying hi to friends along the way but not slowing down long enough to chat. The last two spots at the end of the bleacher had my name on them. We sat, and Mia leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Breathe.”

Right. Breathing would be good. Jimmy and his teammates took the field, lining up in front of the dugout, and the crowd rose to their feet. He knew where I sat, so when our eyes met, I lifted my hand in the air and mouthed, “Good luck,” before giving him a thumbs-up.

“Kick butt, Hall!” Mia yelled, making Jimmy laugh. When I looked at her, she shrugged. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Welcome to the first annual Blossom Berry Falls alumni baseball game!” came over the speaker sitting next to home plate, usually used for the national anthem. Everyone sat down. “The game will be a total of six innings unless the old guys wave the white flag.” A collective chuckle rang through the crowd. “We have special guests with us this afternoon. Please help me welcome our administrator, Mr. Nesbitt, and no introduction is needed for our principal, Mrs. Collins.” They both waved and stood near home plate. I finally let out a breath—until Mrs. Collins lifted a microphone.

“Hello, Blossom Berry Falls baseball fans!” The crowd cheered. “It is a great honor to welcome back one of our own, a man who has made his mark in professional

baseball, one who will always be a Bobcat, Cash Jameson!”

All I could do was stare. Cash walked in through the dugout, surprising most of the players, who shoved each other with gaping mouths. My son included.

“Holy shit,” Mia said with pure awe in her voice. Not that I blamed her. He looked better than I could have possibly imagined—which said a lot since he was in most of my recent thoughts. When I saw a picture of him online, yes, he was good-looking, but nothing like the actual man only fifty yards away from me. Cash lifted his cap, acknowledging the crowd. His tattooed arm flexed in the process.

I immediately looked at Jimmy, who, along with his teammates, clapped as though their hands were on fire. His eyes were wide, and there was no mistaking the awe in them.

“Hannah, he’s . . . something to put in the Pinky bank.”

“Seriously?”

She shrugged. “Am I wrong?”

No, she wasn’t wrong. Not in the least.

“It is my pleasure as school superintendent to welcome everyone to the newly named Cash Jameson Field!” He swung his hand toward the scoreboard, and there it was in bright-yellow letters: CASH JAMESON FIELD—HOME OF THE BOBCATS. “Cash, would you like to say a few words?”

*Oh God.*

Dammit! Why did he need to look so good? All my hormones awakened from a long, long sleep. Cash was strikingly handsome. His sandy-brown hair tousled in the gentle spring breeze. Confidence rolled off him in waves as he stood tall and proud. The fabric of his T-shirt

hugged his perfectly toned physique, emphasizing his sculpted arms and broad shoulders. My tongue poked out, and I licked my lips.

He took the mic and lifted it toward his mouth. His deep voice reverberated through the small speaker as he said, "Thank you, Mr. Nesbitt and Mrs. Collins. It's an honor to be here. Blossom Berry Falls has always been special. From the first day when I stepped into the office my sophomore year, I knew I was in the right place at the right time. My life changed that day, all thanks to the wonderful people in this town."

His eyes scanned the crowd, Mia grabbed my hand, and I prayed I didn't break one of her fingers.

Breathing . . . no longer an option. Heck, if it weren't for the sound of my pulse in my ears, I would have thought I'd passed out. Because when his eyes stopped searching, I closed mine. I reminded myself why I was there. Who I was there to see, and it wasn't Cash Jameson.

It was my son.

My soul.

My life.

"I'd like to thank everyone once again for this honor. Now it's time for us old men to play some baseball." He looked at the team. "What do you say, fellas? You ready?"

Jimmy and his teammates roared to life. Unshed emotion formed in the back of my eyes, creating an unwanted pressure. Grounding myself, I once again searched for my son, who suddenly had his game face on.

A few minutes after the senior chorus sang the anthem, Jimmy was on the mound, warming up. This game meant so much to him. He walked the first batter, then settled into his stride, striking out the next and

forcing the third to pop up. Naturally, the cleanup batter was Cash. He stepped into the batter's box, and everyone cheered louder for Jimmy, thank God.

The smirk on Cash's face as he got into position had me believing he was glad the fans were on the kids' side. Cash took the first pitch, a ball. Then a strike on the inside corner. For some reason, after that pitch, he stepped back and gave Jimmy a bright smile, tapping the tip of his bat on the plate before getting into position. Jimmy nodded at the catcher, went into his stance, and fired a pitch that Cash smashed toward the outfield fence. Everyone stood, and thankfully it went foul.

Letting out a collective breath, everyone sat back down. Jimmy wiped his hand down his pant leg and squared up to the plate. He gave the runner a quick look before releasing his best pitch, a curveball. Cash swung, missing it completely. We all flew to our feet, this time cheering for our kids.

Jimmy glanced at Cash, who winked at my son—our son—and my eyes couldn't help but fill with tears.

"That was amazing," Mia said, giving me a hug. "*Jimmy* is amazing."

"Yes, he is."

The entire afternoon became a battle between the teams. The score was tied in the bottom of the sixth with two outs and a man on first and third. My eyes locked on the player who had just stepped into the batter's box. It amazed me how my son could be so calm, cool, and collected in these situations when my heart felt as though it were about to leap onto the nice old man sitting in front of me, Mr. Strickle, who was the grandfather of Max, now on third base.

"You've got this, Jimmy!" one of his teammates shouted from the dugout while the others hooted and

hollered similar sentiments.

The first base coach clapped three times before tapping his left shoulder with his index finger. I scooted toward the end of the wood bleacher, clasping my hands together. “Come on, come on!”

Mia reassured me by saying, “If anyone can do it, Jimmy can. He’s one of the best on the team.”

I’d heard others claim that, too, but that still didn’t calm my nerves. A lump formed in my throat as Cash went into his windup and released the ball, only for the umpire to yell, “Strike!”

Mr. Strickle shouted, “Knock it out of the park!”

All Jimmy needed was a base hit. *Don’t be greedy*, I thought to myself. I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted, “You’ve got this, kid!”

Cash looked up into the stands with wide eyes. *Shit*. I sank into my seat. *Did he see me?*

“Hannah, what are you doing?”

Peeking through Mr. Strickle and the guy next to him, I saw Cash getting ready to pitch. Sitting straighter, I didn’t bother answering Mia, focused instead on my son. Jimmy dug his back foot into the dirt, positioning himself in the batter’s box. The barrel of the bat made a small circle above his head, something Jimmy had been doing since Little League. It meant he was ready to swing for the fences. The runners took their leads, his coach clapped his hands again, and Cash released the ball. Jimmy shifted his weight back. Then, surprising everyone, he leveled his bat and laid down the perfect bunt.

We all jumped to our feet, watching the stitched ball make its way down the third base line. “Stay fair, stay fair,” I whisper-shouted.

Jimmy's teammate Max teased the catcher while Jimmy sprinted toward first. With his bare hand, the third baseman snatched the ball, gave Max one more quick look, then threw to first, only to have it bounce short in the dirt and miss the glove of the first baseman. Max raced toward home plate to score the winning run.

The already-standing crowd cheered as loud as I'd ever heard them for our kids. Mia and I hugged each other, hopping up and down as best as we could in the small space. Mr. Strickle turned and gave me a thumbs-up.

The kids lined up to acknowledge the alumni. Both Jimmy and Cash were last in line. They shook hands, exchanged words, and then Jimmy pointed in my direction. I instantly turned and hugged Mia once more as a shield, whispering in her ear, "We need to leave. I'm not ready to see him yet."

Her chin rubbed against my shoulder as she nodded. With my head down, I followed Mia out of our row, down the couple of steps, and through the small crowd that no doubt waited for Cash to come out.

Once we were safely in my car, I sent Jimmy a text.

**Great game. You're amazing. Hey, I had to run an errand. See you at home. We'll go out and celebrate.**

He didn't text me until I was pulling into Mia's driveway a few minutes from my house.

**JIMMY: I wish you were here. You're never going to believe what happened. I'll see you soon. Cash is amazing. Best guy ever.**

All the blood drained from my face. "Hannah? Are you okay?"

I showed her my phone, and she sighed. "Would you like me to come over?"



As much as I wanted her to, I shook my head. “No. Thank you, though. I’ll call you later and let you know what happened.”

She nodded and opened her door. Before getting out, she looked at me. “Jimmy loves you, and he’s a smart kid. He’ll understand.”

“I hope so.”

Her door closed, and I drove home, praying I could handle whatever was coming my way. Although I had a feeling celebrating with Cash wasn’t going to be it.

# Chapter 6

## Cash

Losing had never felt better. Yes, as an athlete, no one enjoyed losing, but seeing the kids play their hearts out and their smiles after they won made it worth it. The pitcher, Jimmy, had talent. His delivery was on point, and that bunt was genius. Not only that, but it didn't take long for me to realize he was the kid I'd seen practicing in the yard behind mine.

When I made it through the line, he was the last one to shake my hand. "Great game, kid."

"Thank you, Mr. Jameson. That means a lot to me. You're my all-time favorite player. Sorry about your shoulder. That sucked."

"Call me Cash, and you're right. It did suck." I chuckled, letting go of his hand. "You have an awesome arm. How old are you?"

And just like that, my scouting cap was on. This kid didn't look old enough to be a junior and definitely not a senior. Something deep inside me said to get a preliminary contract in front of him and his parents.

"Fourteen. I'm a freshman." When I furrowed my brows, doing a bit of math, he must have read my mind. "I skipped a grade. I should be in eighth."

"And you play varsity ball?" He nodded. "Ever think about playing for the big leagues?"

Jimmy blinked a few times and laughed. “Is that a trick question?”

“No tricks.”

He studied me. “Yeah. Who doesn’t think about that?”

Before I could ask if his parents were there, a teammate of his ran up to us. “Hi, Mr. Jameson.”

These kids were making me feel older than my thirty-two years.

“Jimmy, my granddad is ready to go,” the kid continued.

“Okay.”

He handed Jimmy a Hawks jersey before holding out a ball and marker for me. “Mr. Jameson, can I have your autograph?”

“Sure can. What’s your name?”

“Max.”

“Nice base running.”

His mouth gaped. “Wow, thank you. Couldn’t let the perfect bunt get wasted. Man, I thought Coach was gonna lose it.”

I scrawled my name on the ball and handed it back to him. “Yeah, why’s that?” I couldn’t help but want to know. “Was the play not designed that way?”

“Nah,” Max said. “The coach gave Jimmy the sign to swing. He’s the leader in home runs. That was all him. Best on our team.”

Jimmy shoved his shoulder. “Didn’t matter how good my bunt was. You’re the one who scored.”

The humbleness and maturity this kid showed blew me away. A lot of teenagers—hell, a lot of adults—would have been happy to take the credit. Max was right. That

bunt was genius. Knowing that he did that on his own was amazing—better because it paid off. Which I was positive the coach told him. If it had gone a different way, we might have been having another conversation. That said, the kid had talent, and if anyone could recognize that, it was me.

Max finally looked at the ball in his hand. “This is so cool. Thank you, Mr. Jameson. Jimmy, I’ll meet you at the car.” Max hustled off the field, hopping the fence that led to the parking lot.

“He’s my ride. My mom had to leave,” Jimmy said.

I almost told him that I’d drive him home, but instead, I nodded.

“Can you sign this for me?”

“Be happy to.” I scribbled my name on his jersey.

“This is great. Thank you.”

“I’d like to speak to your parents.”

His eyes widened.

“Do you think I could stop by your house?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? Of course. This is amazing. Wow. Thank you, Mr. Jameson. I mean Cash. I live at five twenty Oak Hill Road. It’s around the corner from the old white barn. Do you know where that is?”

Images of Hannah and me stealing time behind the silo popped into my head. “Yes, I know where it is. You better hurry before your ride leaves. I’ll see you soon.”

“Wow. I can’t believe this.”

“Catch you later.” He took the same route his friend did, and as soon as he cleared the fence, I shouted, “Hey, Jimmy, what’s your last name?”

“Hall!” he shouted back before running toward the lot.

*Hall?* The only thing I could think was that maybe it was a cousin of Hannah's. Or maybe a different family with the same name. It wasn't an uncommon one. All I knew was I couldn't wait to find out.

After I did a few short interviews with the press that attended the game, I went to my rental, took a quick shower, and grabbed my tablet, which had a generic contract saved to it. Rather than drive, I walked around the block to Jimmy's house.

Cute place. Similar to mine on the outside, except the flower boxes actually had flowers in them, the shrubs were nicely trimmed, and the swing on the porch reminded me of the one that Hannah's grandmother had. Wait . . . this was her grandmother's house.

Clearing my head, I ran my hand through my damp hair before stepping onto the front porch. The floor creaked under my feet, and a memory of kissing Hannah good night on this very spot popped into my mind. Glancing at the swing, I remembered how she'd stretch her legs over my thighs. Her toenails were always painted fun colors. I'd been here many times before. *Maybe Jimmy was related to Hannah.* I rapped my knuckles on the door and waited.

I knew because of Jimmy's age, I'd need to tread gently. The kid was younger than anyone I'd ever considered talking to, but there was something about him. I saw it last night, and he proved it today. The kid was a natural.

"Coming!" a female voice said before the door swung open, and my lungs were no longer able to accept air.

Wide, beautiful chocolate-brown eyes, chestnut hair pulled back into a ponytail, reminding me of when I used to play with it any chance I could, and lips that no man would ever forget all rendered me stupid.

On autopilot, my eyes roamed up and down her body. When I'd spotted her in the stands, she'd turned so quickly that I couldn't see more than her shoulders and her profile, but even in loose-fitting jeans and a T-shirt, Hannah Hall had curves that proved she was no longer a teenager but a gorgeous woman.

We stood there staring at each other. "Hello, Hannah. You look as beautiful as ever."

"Cash? What are you doing here?"

The sound of footsteps bounding downstairs had Hannah turning around. Jimmy's longish hair was wet. Droplets of water dotted his red T-shirt. "Mom, sorry, I jumped in the shower when you weren't home. I tried to hurry so I could tell you, but—"

"Mom?" I asked, dumbfounded. Hannah's chest rose and fell as her hand disappeared around Jimmy's back. "He's your son?"

The young kid chuckled at the way his mother and I stared at each other.

"Come in, Cash." Jimmy stepped around his mom, giving her a curious look, before pulling the door open wider.

I stepped over the threshold and looked at the two of them, the pieces starting to fall into place.

*Fourteen years old.* I didn't need to do quick math in my head. Hannah and I hadn't been together for almost fifteen years. *Great baseball player.* My mouth dried as I stared at the young kid with dirty-blond hair and crystal-blue eyes similar to mine. *He couldn't be, or else I'd know. Hannah would tell me.* But her pretty brown eyes were now etched with worry. It was true. He was mine. *No way.*

There was no other explanation. He wasn't just any Hall. He was Hannah Hall's son . . . our son, and she kept him from me. In an instant, the joy I felt at finding a new prospect morphed into something completely different: shock, love for a kid I didn't know, confusion, and hurt. Sweet Hannah had a secret that she'd also kept from her son, who clearly adored her.

Oblivious to the emotion swirling in my head, Jimmy closed the door. Hannah still hadn't moved, so I did. Maybe I did get it wrong. Maybe it was a fluke. Rather than jump to the obvious conclusion, I leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Hi, Hannah. Good to see you again. You're even more beautiful than you were in high school."

Damn, she smelled sweet. Some sort of flower or fruit, maybe? I didn't know, but as soon as my lips met her skin, my heart joined the party. It recognized its other half. The one that had been missing.

"Cash. It's, um . . . this is a surprise."

*I'm sure it is.*

"Mom, you're never going to believe this. Cash thinks I might be able to go pro. The big leagues. Isn't that amazing? He's a scout and he'd know."

"What?" She giggled nervously. "You're only fourteen."

"I know. So cool, right?"

"Hey, sport?"

Jimmy and Hannah's eyes widened at my instant nickname for him.

"That's what my mom calls me."

Not sure how to respond, I simply asked, "Can you give your mom and me a chance to talk?"



He looked at his mom, who nodded. “Why don’t you go call your grandparents and tell them about the game?”

Grandparents. *Her* parents. That was when I remembered whose house I was standing in. The floral sofa and chairs were replaced with soft yellow and gray ones. The fireplace still had the same red-brick facade and wood mantel. Pictures of the family rested atop it. Moving on their own accord, my feet carried me toward it.

I picked up the picture of Hannah holding Jimmy. He had to be three or four, maybe? A stuffed toy baseball sat in his hand, his little fingers barely wrapping around it. Running my fingers along the image behind the glass, I uttered, “I don’t understand, Hannah.”

When she didn’t answer me, I set the photo back in its place and turned around. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, cocked her hip, and studied me. “Can we not do this now?” Her eyes darted to the stairs before landing back on me. “Cash—”

“Tell me that boy upstairs isn’t my son.” Then it dawned on me. There were no pictures of another man, no pictures of her in a wedding gown, no evidence anyone other than the two of them lived in this house, and no wedding ring on her finger.

She sat down on the sofa and dropped her head in her hands. Ignoring the thunder in my chest, I gave her a few minutes. I knew her well enough to know she was processing. It had been something she’d always done. Hannah rubbed her hands on her jean-clad thighs, rolled her shoulders back, straightened, and looked at me.

Her eyes met mine, and her gaze never wavered when she said, “I can’t do that. Can you tell me why you picked today to acknowledge him? Was it because you’re seeing

dollar signs? Jimmy said you thought he was good enough for the pros.”

“He is. We should probably be talking about that, except—”

“My son isn’t for sale.”

Shaking my head, trying to process her words, I couldn’t help the ire that began to churn in my stomach. “Sale? Maybe we should start from the beginning. First, you can tell me why you kept him from me.”

Affronted, she reared back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that you thought he was for sale. This is just a lot right now. He’s only a freshman.”

“And he’s only going to improve with age. He’s a natural.”

“Plus . . . I’m . . . it’s just . . . he doesn’t know about you.”

I wanted to shout, *that’s obvious*, but didn’t. “So you’re not disputing it?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never disputed it.”

Confusion overtook my other swirling emotions. “To who? Not me.” Letting out a breath, I raked my fingers through my hair. “Time and place, Hannah,” I demanded. Her bottom lip quivered. I needed to soften my tone. This wasn’t us. Hannah and I were never mean to each other. We were best friends at one point. “I’m renting the house behind this one. Come over tonight. Say eight o’clock?”

Just then, Jimmy walked back into the room and straight toward Hannah. “Grandpa didn’t answer his cell phone. Bummer, because he’d flip, knowing Cash was here.”

“I’m sure he would,” I uttered.

I couldn't stop staring at the young man in front of me. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed the similarities at the game. His quick delivery, his acute awareness and his genuine ability at the sport we both loved. Instinctively I wanted to wrap my arms around him, but I couldn't yet. Then it dawned on me that I had no idea where he thought his father was. My heart cracked, thinking that he thought I'd abandoned him.

"Mom, did Cash talk to you about scouting me?"

"Your mom is going to come to my place tonight, the house right behind this one, to talk more about your future."

Hannah gasped right before she glared at me. I hated sounding like an asshole, but I needed answers. I deserved answers.

"Really? That's great." Jimmy turned once again toward his mom. "The guys are going to the bonfire tonight. Can I go?"

"Where and who will be there?"

"It's at Jacob's, and his parents will be there. You can call them if you'd like. Please, Mom, all the guys are going. Max said his mom would take us."

This had to be hard for Hannah. Only being fourteen and on a team with older kids couldn't be easy to balance when it came to parties and going out.

"You can go, but be home by ten."

"Ugh, how about eleven?"

"Ten thirty and no later."

"Come on, Mom. Things don't get started until then. Plus, Max can stay longer."

"James Arthur Hall, is it polite to talk back to me?"

Jimmy's face flamed red. "Sorry. Ten thirty is fine."

*James.* My name. My real name. James Cassius Jameson. I was named after both of my grandfathers. Since my uncle and cousin were also named James, I went by Cash. Even in school, all my paperwork had “Cash” on it. When I turned seventeen, my parents made it my legal name. Hannah knew my real name. She knew everything about me.

Yet I knew nothing about our son. Was he a good kid? Rambunctious? When he was little, did he like reading? Does he now? I knew he skipped a grade, which meant he was a smart kid, but what was his favorite subject? Math? English? Did he draw like his mom used to? The only thing I knew was he excelled at baseball, like me.

“If Max wants to stay longer, I’ll come and get you, okay?”

He kissed his mom’s cheek. “Yeah. Fine, I guess. I’m going to go call Max.”

Unable to stop myself, I smiled. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Jimmy. We’ll talk more then.”

“Cool.”

“Maybe we can play catch, and I can show you a few tricks.”

“No way! I mean, that would be amazing. Thanks.”

Shocking me, he stretched his hand out. Taking it in mine, I gave him a shake.

“You’re a polite young man.”

Hannah hadn’t said much since her curfew debate with her son . . . *our* son. She handled it perfectly. There had been zero doubt she was a great mom. I moved across the floor to the front door.

“This was your grandmother’s house.”

“You remember that?”

I nodded. "I remember a lot of things. I'll see you tonight, Hannah."

She gave me a tight smile, and when the door clicked closed behind me, I leaned against it and stared at that swing. An image of me, Hannah, and a very young Jimmy sitting on it while we read him a book popped into my mind. Then I looked at the front yard and imagined playing catch with him.

So many years gone . . . time that I could never get back. Now all I wanted was to know why.

# Chapter 7

## Hannah

I knew Cash wanted answers, but he wasn't the only one. The audacity to act as though he didn't know. Meanwhile, my poor son was caught in the middle. Well, no way would Jimmy be in our cross fire. After Cash left, Jimmy knew something was off. He was a perceptive kid. No one knew me the way he did and vice versa. My excuse? That I'd been caught off guard.

Thankfully Jimmy had never got ahold of my parents. I didn't know what I'd been thinking when I told him to call his grandparents. If they heard Cash was in my house, recovering aunt or not, they'd be on the first plane home.

There was one person who knew the entire story and who could help me, so I called her.

"Hey, Hannah."

"Hi, Mia. I need your advice. It's about Cash. We're meeting at his house to talk about Jimmy. What the hell am I going to do? I'm sweating . . . again. Seriously, what am I going to do?"

"First, try to calm down. Second, you tell him the truth. That he's an asshole for ignoring you. And that his father is a major douchebag."

"You're so ineloquent for an English teacher."

Her laugh calmed me. “Right now, I’m your best friend who would love to give him a piece of my mind myself. In fact, if you want me to come with you, I will.”

“I love you for wanting to, but I need to do this on my own.”

“Okay, but just send out the Mia signal if you need me, and I’ll be there in a hot second. Remember, *you* did nothing wrong.”

“Okay, you’re right. Thank you. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Rather than walk through the neighboring yards, I hopped in my car and took a very short ride to the house Cash had rented. If Blossom Berry Falls wasn’t tiny, I’d think he planned his location. Not that he knew I’d moved into my grandmother’s house.

After pulling into the driveway, I stared at the weathered home. It had seen better days. The previous owner, Mr. MacMillan, had passed away last year. Neither of his kids wanted it, so they were preparing it for sale. Except by the looks of it, they were not getting very far. Aside from having the lawn mowed every week, nothing else had been done.

“You can do this, Hannah,” I uttered. Taking a cleansing breath, I got out of my car and headed to the front door, which opened before I could knock. Cash gave me a weak smile. Why? Why couldn’t he have aged like a couple of the other guys I saw at the game? Something told me that if he had a bit of a beer gut and receding hairline, I’d feel a bit stronger in my resolve not to fall prey to his charm.

But as my luck would have it, he was the complete opposite. Even in worn jeans and a T-shirt, he could have graced the cover of *Gorgeous Man Magazine*. It was as though when Cash was born, God said, “I’ll give this child



looks, brains, and talent.” Too bad the Big Guy forgot to give him a conscience.

“Hi.”

“Hi, Cash.”

He stepped aside, and I did my best not to brush up against him as I passed through the doorway. As soon as the door closed, I wished we were at my house. Home-field advantage and all that. The only reason I agreed to come here was so I could leave when I wanted. Having Cash in my home a couple of hours ago had stressed me out.

Everything about this situation felt off. The way he studied Jimmy blanketed me with immense guilt, and I did not deserve to feel that way. *None of this was my fault*, I said to myself.

“You look great, Hannah. The past fifteen years have been good to you.”

“Thank you.” Was I supposed to say the same to him? Our eyes met, and rather than prolong the inevitable, I started our conversation: “This situation—”

“Is fucked up.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“At least we can agree on that.”

“I was going to say *delicate*.”

“That too.”

He smiled, and I immediately wanted to tell him not to. I told myself to not look affected by him. To stand my ground. This wasn’t about me or even us. It was about Jimmy. For the first time in Jimmy’s life, I didn’t know how my son would feel about his mother keeping such an important secret. That thought sobered any spell Cash could cast on me. Anxiousness gnawed at every part of

my being. Not because Cash didn't know Jimmy, but for not figuring out a way to tell my son. I could easily rationalize the whys and hows of the situation, except I knew that no matter what I did or said, he'd feel hurt and betrayed. As his mother, the only thing I wanted was for him to be happy.

"Can I get you something to drink? I didn't know if you preferred wine, beer, or something else. I grabbed a bit of everything. Iced tea?"

"No, thank you. I won't be staying long."

I also did my best not to sound like the world's biggest bitch, but my emotions were all over the place. Mama Bear sat poised and ready in one corner of the proverbial ring, and the woman who'd raised a sweet young man and who'd spent the past fourteen years teaching him to be someone others looked up to and not to judge stood in the other corner. Both emotions were justified, except at that moment, I couldn't suppress the protective side, rationalizing why I needed to stand my ground.

Cash nodded and raked his hand through his hair. "I know you're upset and disappointed, but Hannah, you know me. We were best friends once . . . more even."

"I *knew* you, Cash, and that was a lifetime ago. Or at least it feels that way."

"Doesn't make it less true."

"No, I suppose it doesn't."

"Which is why I don't understand why you would keep our son from me."

And . . . there it was. The detonator I knew would set me off. Blame. No way would I take that on the chin. Thanks to that pin being pulled, there was little to do to rein in my resolve.

“Me? *I* kept our son from you? No, *you* did that. I honestly don’t understand why you’re acting as though you didn’t know. Is it because you’re back here and you’re afraid that people will realize that you never acknowledged your son? God forbid it ends up as a headline.” I tossed my hands in the air, mimicking bright lights. “Star baseball player finally acknowledges son after fourteen years. Not that it wouldn’t be justified. *You* did this. Not the other way around.”

His long legs ate up the distance between us. I took a step back and tilted my head to look up at him.

I couldn’t help noticing the way his Adam’s apple dipped in his throat. How his chest rose and fell in controlled breaths. “You said something similar at your house. It didn’t make sense then and doesn’t now. I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything.” He rested his hand on the back of his neck, drawing my eyes to the ink on his flexed biceps. Averting my gaze, I brought my attention back to his face. “Can we please sit down and talk about this?”

Even though I didn’t want to, I decided it would be the best way to put distance between us. I moved across the living room and sat in the armchair next to the sofa, where he took a seat.

“Now tell me why you’re blaming me for not knowing about Jimmy and why you’d think I would have abandoned you both.” Before I could utter a word, he added, “Start from the beginning.”

Even though he knew that part of the story, I reminded him of what happened all those years ago. “That July, fifteen years ago, you needed to leave for Utah, and we decided to take a break or whatever.” God, I hated that term. It never worked out. Usually, someone in the equation never wanted a break at all. In our case, that person would be me. Except I knew it was the right

thing for both of us, so I did it—it broke my heart, but I did it. “And we had sex for the last time.”

“We made love. We never had sex, Hannah.”

All I could do was blink. Warmth rushed through my body, forcing me to cross my legs to stave off the pull I felt toward him. Rather than acknowledge his statement, I continued, “In September, I started feeling off. I was always tired, and certain foods and smells made me queasy. I went to the campus clinic, and I found out I was pregnant. I was completely shocked, Cash. And scared. I’d just started school and didn’t have many friends yet. As soon as I walked out of that doctor’s office, I called you and called you. Each time I left voice mails asking you to call me. I waited and waited, but you never responded.”

Thinking back to that young version of myself who trembled when her phone rang, only to have her heart break each time it wasn’t Cash, brought more tears to my eyes. It didn’t take much to still feel the deep-rooted disappointment I felt that day.

“I never got your messages, Hannah.”

“You know, even then, I gave you the benefit of the doubt. Technology wasn’t perfect, right?” He nodded at what I posed as a rhetorical question. “And that was why I called your parents. I knew that you’d talk to them, so I told your dad to tell you to call me.”

Cash’s brows furrowed.

“Did you tell him why?”

A tad put off that I needed a reason, I shook my head. “No, not then. But I did a month later when you still hadn’t responded to anything. I’d been so desperate to tell you that I wrote a letter and sent an email telling you I was pregnant.”

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered. “I didn’t know. I can’t believe my father would do that, and I swear I never got any indication that you were trying to get hold of me.”

“Look, I did everything humanly possible. Even going as far as going to your parents’ house. Again, I told your dad everything. And he said that you were happy and to leave you alone. That trying to slap a paternity claim on you was the oldest trick in the book.”

Cash’s eyes darkened as I spoke about his father . . . his hero. Except everything I recalled had been the truth. “Regardless of him, and for the sake of our child, I needed to try once more. Rather than leave it to chance or in someone else’s hands, I got on a plane and flew to Utah. Not knowing where you lived, I went to a game. That was when I saw you with *her*. Speaking of which, does Jimmy have a half brother or sister? They’d be around the same age.”

Cash’s eyes flew wide. “Saw me with who? I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t have any other kids.”

“I don’t know who she was. You were standing next to a very pretty pregnant blonde. The ends of her hair were pink. I remember thinking that maybe she was having a girl, and that was why they were that way. You looked at her with love in your eyes. I should know. I used to see it every day.”

Silence stretched between us. I didn’t know how long neither of us spoke, but it started to become uncomfortable.

Pushing myself up, I looked down at him. “If you want a paternity test, I’ll get you one, but it isn’t needed. You’re the only man I’ve been with.”

At that admission, Cash stood. His head cocked to the side, probably wondering how someone could go

without sex for so long. No way he did or could. But he wasn't raising a kid on his own while having a full-time job. He wasn't dead tired for the first few years of his son's life. Time flew by because all I did was blink, and suddenly Jimmy was in high school.

"First of all, I don't need a test. Secondly, that woman you saw me with had to be Tina. She's my buddy Cal's sister. You met him once a long time ago."

He was right. I remembered him coming to visit Cash one summer for a few days.

"She and her husband have a fourteen-year-old daughter, and she's the only person I know who used to have pink hair. Tina is like family to me. As you know, Cal and I have been friends since the second grade. He lives in Utah now. She was visiting him, and he took her to a game. So did I look at her with love in my eyes? Probably. And regardless, you should have come up to me and told me I had a son. I don't care who I was standing next to."

"I'm sorry, but between what your dad told me and seeing you with her . . . Tina . . . I couldn't. It was a very emotional time in my life. Thank God I had Mia, Rob, and my parents. They gave me strength. The day he was born, I tried one last time, and your phone didn't even ring. It went straight to voice mail. All I could think of was you blocked me. That was the final straw."

Proving my point, I grabbed my phone, tapped out a text, and waited. When nothing happened, I quirked my right brow and flipped my phone around. "Is that still your number at the top?"

"Yes, but I never blocked you." He worked his phone for a bit and let out a breath. "I don't understand how it happened. It had to be a mistake that I can't go back and rectify and probably will never get to the bottom of."

That was fifteen years and many phones ago. Hell, I think I had a flip phone back then. You're now in my active contacts again. Right now, I want to know all about our son. He's amazing, Hannah. When he was pitching today, I saw a lot of me in him. Now I know why. He needs to know I'm his father."

"He will. I need to figure out how to tell him. I'm not going to rush this."

Cash began pacing, the wooden planks creaking as he moved across the floor and back again. "Where does he think I am? Who does he think I am? The kid's smart. He had to have asked."

"I told him that his father is a good man. That we were in love, but our timing wasn't right. Life got in the way, and it was just him and me. Jimmy is my life, Cash. You know nothing about us. Nothing about me. Do you know how hard it is when a boy idolizes a man he doesn't know is his father? After all my attempts, I don't understand how you could not have known. I hate you for that. For leaving us. Ignoring him. I don't care about you forgetting about me. As you said, we were best friends and then nothing. Not a word. Did it never dawn on you to call me? To say hi or see how I was doing? You stopped caring."

Unwanted emotion welled in my eyes. The last thing I wanted was to cry, but it wasn't for me—it was for my son. Anger started to bubble up inside me.

"I didn't ignore him. Because I didn't know he existed. And I never stopped caring. I did ask about you. I was told you had moved on with some guy you went to college with. Maybe I should have called, but I didn't. Chalk it up to stupid pride. After my parents moved, I never came back until now. The only person I hung out with was you. Not even my teammates. Just you. And, by the way, who's Rob?"

Scoffing at that, I shook my head. “Rob and I went to college together. He happened to be in the clinic when I found out I was pregnant. To say I was a bit stunned and scared would be an understatement. He and I became close friends. Rob came home with me because his family was in Colorado, and thanks to a freak storm, he couldn’t go there for the holiday. As far as everything else, I’m sorry, but I call bullshit.”

“You’re wrong. It’s not bullshit. I don’t know what happened, Hannah. In the beginning, I was busy. It was the middle of the season, and training was intense. I’d get up early, work out, train, sleep. By the time I could breathe, as I said, I heard you’d moved on with someone else . . . I guess Rob. Why would I call? And again, I didn’t get any indication you were trying to get ahold of me. Hell, I didn’t have my phone most of the time. I ate, drank, and slept baseball.”

His refusal to acknowledge that I tried was exasperating. “I can’t do this. I need to go. I’ll tell Jimmy soon. Don’t you breathe a word of this, do you hear me?” I threatened. “And as far as you scouting my son, the answer is no.”

“He’s *our* son, and we can talk about that later. When you tell him about me, I think I should be there.”

“No.”

“Please, Hannah. I know you’re upset. I’m not very happy either. But I want to be able to explain. To tell him I didn’t abandon him or you. This is me, Hannah.” He placed his hand on the center of his chest. “Please believe me. Do you honestly think I’d ignore you? Do you know how many times I thought of you? How many times I wondered, if I came back, if you’d leave the new man in your life? But what type of friend or man would that make me? All I wanted was for you to be happy.”



Deep down, I wanted to believe him, but the more I stood there, the more I needed space. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what to believe. Fair or not, I can only go on what I did and what you didn’t do.”

Cash’s jaw ticced. He raked his hand through his hair and loudly exhaled. “I’m not calling you a liar, but my dad wouldn’t keep me from my child. And there would be no way my mom wouldn’t be elated no matter what the circumstance was.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I stared at him. Quite certain my heart rate would break the dial on a blood pressure cuff, I crossed my arms over my chest. “If you’re so sure about that, call him. Go ahead. Ask your father if I came to your house to tell you that I was pregnant with your child. Ask him if I offered to have a paternity test since he accused me of lying for money. Ask him if I begged him to have you call me. Ask him if he told me to leave you alone. I know you love your father, but he has a funny way of reciprocating that emotion. As far as your mom, I never spoke to her. I only imagined that she felt the same. I had very little to go on. Once they moved, I never bothered to contact them again.”

Cash stared at me. When I didn’t blink, I couldn’t help but wonder what was running through his mind. After what felt like forever, he snagged his phone out of his pocket and tapped the screen a couple of times before I could hear ringing.

“Hey, son.”

“Hi, Dad. I have a question for you.”

# Chapter 8

## Cash

“Sure, what’s up?”

Before I asked, I fixed my gaze on Hannah’s steely stare, no doubt surprised that I left the call on speakerphone. “Do you remember Hannah Hall?”

A couple of beats passed before he begrudgingly answered, “Yes, the girl you were infatuated with. What about her?”

It was a hell of a lot more than infatuation, but that debate wasn’t the reason for the call, so I cut to the chase. “Did she call you and then come to the house to tell you she was pregnant with my child?”

“Pfft. That’s the oldest trick in the book, son. Dollar signs, that was all that girl saw.”

Hannah’s eyes glossed over, but I wasn’t sure if it was hurt, sadness, anger, or a combination of all three. What I did know was that she didn’t lie about telling my father. Her previous anger took root in my veins. When a tear rolled down her cheek, every protective muscle in my body tensed.

“You never thought to tell me she came to see you? What about Mom? Did she know?”

“I don’t have time to play twenty questions. What’s this about, Cash?”

“What’s this about?” I barked out. “It’s about the fact that I have a fourteen-year-old son. That you and Mom have a grandchild, and you deprived me of knowing that. You deprived that sweet kid of having a father he could look up to. You broke up my family.”

“Really, Cash? You’re getting ahead of yourself. Instead, why don’t you get a paternity test?”

In a flash, my world flipped upside down. Thanks to my previous profession, stress was a common factor in my life, as were making changes on the fly. There were days when I didn’t think I’d be pitching, only to be put in a couple of hours before game time. Shit happened. I got that. But news of my son and what my dad did threw me completely off balance.

“Don’t need to.” My anger evened out to indifference. “I didn’t want to believe you’d do this to me, Hannah, and my son, but I was wrong. I looked up to you. My son, unknown to him, looks up to me, and I can assure you that I’d never let him down. You’re selfish, self-righteous, and from now on, you’re out of my life.”

Hannah’s eyes widened.

“Was Mom in on this too?”

“In on this? No, I didn’t want to upset her. Cash, I did what was best for everyone. That *girl* was with someone else. Get the test. Don’t trust—”

I ended the call and looked at the blank screen. The term *seeing red* never made much sense to me until that moment. Hannah flinched when I yelled, “Fuck!”

What I recognized as compassion filled Hannah’s eyes, but I knew that was because she understood how I looked up to my dad. “I’m sorry,” I finally said, calming down a bit. “He had no right to do that to any of us.” My legs shook with adrenaline. Sitting on the rolled arm of

the chair, I linked my fingers together and put my hands on my thigh. "I'm also sorry for assuming better of him."

She nodded. "I'm sorry he let you and Jimmy down. Still doesn't explain all the other ways I tried to contact you."

All I could do was shrug. At that point, I didn't know how to explain anything. It felt as though we were talking about anyone but myself. How could I have been so unaware of everything? Desperation clawed at my soul. "Don't know what to tell you. I wish I had answers. You have no idea how true that statement is. It was a long time ago."

Not being able to take it any longer, I walked toward her and cupped the side of her face with my right hand. She began to lean into it but stopped herself. Our eyes met, and without being able to help myself, I leaned down to rest my forehead against hers. "I'm sorry, Hannah. Can you at least believe me when I say that if I had known, I would have been here to be by your side? By our son's side?"

She pulled far enough back to look at me. "You would have changed what you were doing for a pregnant ex-girlfriend?"

When I opened my mouth to answer, she stopped me. "Don't answer that basing it on what you know about your career-ending injury. You need to base it on fifteen years ago. I don't mean to sound harsh. I felt awful when you got injured. In fact, Jimmy sent you a get-well card. Not that you'd remember that, as I assume you received a lot of them."

"He sent me a card?"

Hannah nodded.

"Probably signed it with his last name too, right? And return address."

Another nod.

“I’m not sure how I missed it. It was a confusing time in my life. I’m sorry, Hannah,” I found myself saying again, although I knew an infinite number of *sorrlys* wouldn’t soothe fifteen years of heartache and confusion.

“Me too,” she finally admitted. “Sorry that you missed out on raising Jimmy because the person you relied on lied to you.”

She was softening. I could tell. Not wanting to push her, I ran my hand down her arm. “Can you stay a little while longer? I just want to hear about him . . . about the two of you together. Will you please give me that?”

For the next hour, Hannah told me all about my son. How he’d tried a variety of sports before deciding on baseball. According to her, he was a natural—not that I’d been surprised by that. The kid had talent. She told me how they’d read a lot together, and even though they weren’t rich by any means—which killed me since I was—they never wanted for anything.

“Jimmy is very smart. He’s always been a good eater and loves everything but is allergic to peanuts.” I couldn’t help but give a weak smile when she said, “Like you.”

The more she told me about him, the more guilty I felt for missing all of it. “Sorry about that.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing.”

Her lips finally quirked up into a smile. Those fucking kissable lips. It would be so easy to close the gap between us and taste her again. Had I been with other women? Yes, of course. Did I feel for any of them the way I had Hannah? Not even close. I didn’t lie when I told her that any time we were together, it wasn’t sex. Not even the first time—her first time was mine. We shared so many things together, and now it was all screwed up.

Thinking about all the missed opportunities and events that I could have been a part of fueled my ire and confusion. Not toward her, because so far, everything she told me had been true.

“I need to go,” she said, standing. “Jimmy is going to be home soon.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hannah studied me.

“At the reunion.”

“Right, I almost forgot, and I’m on the committee.”

Of course she was. “Why don’t I pick you up? We can go together. Unless you have a date.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

Crossing my arms defensively in front of my chest, she rolled her eyes. “With Mia. She’s my date.”

The snarky look that flashed across her face had me glaring. “How is Mia? Still causing trouble?” When we were in school, if anyone could pull Hannah out of her comfort zone, it was Mia.

“She’s great. Divorced. He was a jackass, so no loss there. She lives in a cute apartment in town.” Hannah fiddled with the edge of her sleeve. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you then. Tell Jimmy—”

Her raised eyebrows silenced me.

“Never mind.”

We crossed the floor, my hand automatically going to rest on her lower back. That same charge of energy that only she could impose on me ran up my arm. She opened the door and turned toward me. “I’m not going to keep

you two apart, Cash. I just need to figure some things out first.”

Nodding, I thanked her for that right before I leaned down and kissed her cheek. “Good night, Hannah.”

“Good night, Cash.”

She was still the most beautiful woman in the world. Even when she was pissed off, she was gorgeous—maybe even more so. But it was her heart that I fell in love with all those years ago. Her good, generous, kind heart . . . the one that I broke.

I’d never felt like such an idiot as I did when she’d explained everything to me. I still didn’t understand why I never received any communication from her, but if I didn’t have my head so far into the clouds, putting my all into making and then staying on the team, I would have thought to call her. It hadn’t been that I completely forgot about her—I didn’t. I couldn’t. Yet that was exactly how she felt, and I couldn’t blame her.

Then there was Jimmy. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how he felt about his father, about me. Yes, Hannah said he idolized me, but that was Cash Jameson, the baseball star. Not Cash Jameson, the dad who had never acknowledged him, who didn’t even know how much he weighed at birth.

*Fuck.* I popped open a beer, sat on the couch, and took a long swig. The weighty realization that I had a son hit me over and over again. Despite feeling a bit numbed by shock, autopilot kicked in, and I did my best not to freak out. Once Jimmy learned the truth, I’d never want him to feel as though I didn’t want him. Or that the news of him being mine had been negative. I also didn’t want him to think I disliked his mom. For a couple of reasons—one, it wasn’t true, and two, he had enough on his plate.



Having him think that his mom and I were at odds would only make this worse.

Maybe a piece of parenting was instinctual, and that was the part of my brain that kicked in. The other had to be terror and confusion because at that very second, those were the emotions swirling in my head. Fear that I'd screw up and confusion for all the missed time.

I scrubbed my hands over my hair, grabbed my phone, and called Cal. When he didn't answer the first time, I called again.

"Hey. Sorry, Thor had a little accident."

"You said he was potty-trained."

"No, no. He is. The bird freaked him out."

"Bird?"

"Yeah, no big deal. It's gone now."

"There's a bird in my house?"

"Was. There *was* a bird in your house. Anyway, all crises are averted. Right, Thor?" His voice morphed into that weird tone again. "Yes, it is. No more crisis. Uncle Cash should relax." Cal chuckled. "Sorry, he's just so cute." He cleared his throat. "How's things? Did you win the game? Did you see Hannah? Man, she was a knockout. So was her other friend. What was her name? Gia? Kia?"

"Mia."

"Right." He sighed. "Mia."

"They're all good. I did see Hannah. She's a mom now."

"No shit. Boy or girl?"

"We have a son."

Silence. All I could hear was panting, which I could only assume was Thor. After a long stretch of dead air, he asked, “Did you say *we*?”

“That’s right.” I went on to tell him about the game and this amazing pitcher, Jimmy. Then about her assuming Tina was carrying my child. That comment made him groan. And then my father’s part in it all.

Cal whistled. “Your dad? That’s . . . um . . . fucked up.”

“I said the exact words earlier.”

“So now what?”

“Don’t know. Not sure where we go from here. She’s going to tell him about me, that I’m his dad, just don’t know when. It was a mind trip today. It was as though I had gone through some time warp at that game. Teenage me pitched to adult me, and it wasn’t until he said his last name was Hall that I started to piece things together.”

The more I thought of all I’d missed, the more I wanted to knock on Hannah’s door and spend every minute with them. I wanted to see pictures of her pregnant with my child growing in her belly. Did she have pictures of Jimmy as he aged through Little League? I needed to be close to them.

“Hey, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure, name it.”

“Can you hold down the fort there? Don’t look for a place of your own yet. Just stay at my house, Thor too. I’d feel better knowing it wasn’t empty.”

“How long are you staying there?”

“As long as it takes. The only thing that matters to me is my son, knowing that I’m here for him. Can’t wait for you to meet him. The kid is special. I actually think he

can make the big leagues, and I told him as much. He's fourteen and phenomenal."

"Of course he is. He's your kid. Dude, you have a kid."

"I know."

"I'll stay as long as you need me to." He paused before asking, "What about Hannah? What was it like seeing her again?"

*What was it like?* "Blew my mind. She's still pretty, an amazing mom, and I'm happy that she didn't completely shut me out after everything."

"Sounds like a good person. It also sounds like you still have a thing for her. Do you think you can love her again?"

"That's the thing, Cal. I don't think I ever stopped. It's one of those things when you just feel like no time has passed, yet a lifetime has. She never told me about him. I know she tried, but fourteen years have gone by. I'm not sure what will happen with us."

"Don't envy you, brother. It might be rough for a bit."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks again, Cal."

"Call me if you need anything. Good luck."

"Thanks."

*I'm going to need it.*

# Chapter 9

## Hannah

The school gym had been transformed into a vibrant space filled with decorations, banners, and a stage. Balloons in various colors floated around. At the entrance, the banner my class made greeted everyone—WELCOME TO THE BLOSSOM BERRY FALLS CLASS REUNION!—and poster-sized yearbook pictures adorned the walls.

Naturally, there was one of Cash receiving a trophy for the most valuable player. Laughter and chatter echoed, the class reunion in full swing. Trying to hide my nerves from seeing Cash, I sipped my wine and nodded at something my former classmate Roland had just said. Although, if anyone asked me what that was, I'd have no idea.

“Relax, Hannah,” Mia whispered, leaning over to me. “Maybe he isn't coming.” I gave her a *you've got to be kidding* look, and she quickly amended her statement. “You're right. No way would he miss this. Let's go sit at a table.”

We headed to one of the white-linen-covered tables adorned with red cloth napkins and a flickering candle sitting on a round mirror in the middle. I waved or nodded to a few of my classmates as Mia and I made our way across the wooden floor.

My gaze landed on the door. Call it a sixth sense, or maybe it was a shift in the room, but no sooner had I

turned my head than Cash walked in. The chatter around us increased as people made their way toward him. He shook hands and said hello to a few people. When he turned his head, his eyes landed on me.

My heart skipped a beat. I didn't want it to, but his smile always had that effect on me. Ignoring a few others or just giving them a passing nod, he strutted toward us.

"Damn, he looks good in a suit," Mia said with a sigh.

He did too. While other guys had on sport coats or golf shirts, he was decked out in what I assumed was a designer or custom suit. I couldn't tell yet if it was navy or black, but the red tie was a nice nod to our school colors.

Cash stopped when he got to our table. "Good evening, ladies."

Mia stood. "Hi, Cash. It's been a while."

"Mia, it's good to see you."

She punched him in the arm. "That's for . . . you know." Then they exchanged a quick hug, which reminded me of when we were all friends.

"May I join you two? Or are these seats taken?" Despite his asking both of us, his focus was on me. Tiny sparks pricked my skin. Then my thighs decided to join the party and tensed beneath my dress. *Damn traitorous body.* "Hi, Hannah. You look beautiful." Cash bent over and kissed my cheek. "Stunning, actually. Can I sit next to you?"

Playing it calm and cool, I gave him a quick smile, hoping he couldn't see the effect he had on me. "Thank you. You look nice too. And sure."

"How's Jimmy?"

That didn't take long. Not that I expected him not to ask. "Good, still on cloud nine after yesterday's game. He's at his friend Max's house."

"Hey, man," one of our classmates, Brian, said to Cash. "Good to see you."

Cash's eyes quickly flicked to the guy's name tag. "Hey, Brian, good to see you again. It's been a while."

*Sure has.*

"Hi, ladies. I must say, you both look beautiful tonight, but then again, you were the prettiest in our class."

"Are you talking about us again, Brian?" Susan said, appearing out of nowhere with Janice at her side.

"Gag me," Mia whispered, making me giggle.

Cash stood as a gentleman would. Susan's eyes cruised up and down his body. "Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes. How've you been? I didn't get a chance to talk to you at the game yesterday."

He knew how much I despised Susan in school. Generally, I liked everyone. But when Cash and I started hanging out, she and Janice took an interest in being extra snarky toward me. Not that I cared. I'd only known them since kindergarten, and I knew they'd grow up to be shallow, but it had irked me all the same.

"Nice seeing you again—" He made a point of looking at her name tag as though he had zero recollection of her. I didn't know why, but that move made me sit up a bit straighter in my seat. "Susan," he added.

Under the table, Mia bumped my knee with hers. Good, she'd noticed it too. If I could have clinked my glass against hers, I would have.

"Yes. Well, save me a dance, will you?"

"Sorry, no can do. My dance card is full."

*Dance card? Who says that? And with who?*

That question was answered when he casually rested his arm on the back of my chair. No. My head snapped in his direction, and a smirk graced his beautiful face.

“I love it,” Brian announced as his wife, Brenda, walked up to him. He introduced her to Cash, and then Mia invited them to sit at our table, leaving only one empty chair. “This is great,” Brian went on to say. “These two were the class couple,” he explained to his wife, who wasn’t from our area. “Voted most likely to marry.”

“That’s adorable. You’ve been together this entire time?”

“No, Cash left to play baseball,” Brian explained.

That comment sobered me up. “If you’ll excuse me for a minute.” I stood, as did Cash and Brian.

“Where are you going?”

“Ladies’ room.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“To the ladies’ room?”

He chuckled. “I’ll walk with you.”

I didn’t actually need to go. All I wanted was some fresh air. But I refused to admit that, so instead, I nodded. Like he did last night at his place, he placed his hand on the small of my back. This time I could feel the heat of it through the thin material of my dress. He directed me toward the opposite side of the gym, where the locker rooms were.

“Where are we going?”

“Do you really need the restroom?” When I shook my head, he nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. Follow me.”



That was difficult to do since he was by my side. Sensing my hesitation, he took my hand in his and led me through the boys' locker room and out the back door, dumping us out into the parking lot.

I couldn't stop inhaling the fresh nighttime air. My lungs begged for it. I almost felt as though I'd been holding my breath since he'd walked into the room. And the party had yet to truly get into full swing, yet I wanted to leave. It was too weird being there with all the nostalgia around us. Maybe it was anxiety, but it felt as though everyone had pieced together my secret. That thought caused me to shiver and for tiny goose bumps to pepper my arms.

"Here." In an instant, Cash's suit jacket was draped over my shoulders. His manly cologne replaced the springtime air. It wasn't a scent I could pinpoint, but nonetheless, it had me wanting to sniff the lapel.

"Thank you."

After a long pause, Cash broke the silence. "I've barely slept. I couldn't stop thinking about you, Hannah. All last night, I lay in bed thinking about all that I missed. Thinking about you and Jimmy. I'm sorry, but I was going out of my mind, so I told my buddy Cal."

My eyes widened in fear that people would find out before Jimmy. Thankfully I knew Cal was in Utah, but that didn't stop my skin from prickling with nerves. "Who else did you tell?"

"No one. I wouldn't do that. But I needed to talk to someone. He's my best friend."

"What did he say?" I could only imagine what he thought of me. He had to hate me for keeping this from Cash. It forced me to add, "Did you tell him I tried telling you?"

“Of course I did. He’s pretty pissed off at my dad and equally confused about your letters and attempts to contact me. And when I told him about Tina . . .” He chuckled. “He groaned.”

“Groaned?”

“The thought of me with Tina would send him into orbit. We had a pact. Not that she was my type, but brothers rarely want their sisters with their buddies. They know too much about them.”

“I’m sure you have quite the reputation.”

He ran his hand along the back of his neck. “Not as bad as you probably think.”

Jealousy wasn’t an emotion I enjoyed. Oddly, the only time that emotion had sparked to life, Cash had been at the center of it. “You don’t need to explain anything to me.”

“I want to.”

He shifted his position so he stood in front of me, and I looked up into his mesmerizing eyes. A soft breeze brushed against my skin, gently tousling my hair. Cash reached forward and tucked the errant strands behind my ear. Once again, his touch sent shivers down my spine.

“I’ve never stopped thinking about you, Hannah. Now, knowing everything I missed, I hate myself for letting my ego stand in the way of coming to see you. I’ve missed you so much.”

Tears filled with vulnerability pricked the back of my eyes. “I’ve missed you, too, but I couldn’t let myself miss you for anything other than for Jimmy.”

He leaned forward, resting his forehead on mine. When he did that yesterday, it had taken everything not to wrap my arms around him. Tonight, as dusk took over the evening sky, something in the air shifted, forcing us

to move closer. It felt as if time had mended itself, merging the past and the present into a single moment of pure connection.

Except it hadn't.

"We should get back inside."

In silence, we turned and headed back into the gym.

\* \* \*

"Dance with me."

Cash should have posed it as a question, but with our tablemates' eyes on us, there'd been no need. If I'd said no, then more questions would have sparked. Not to mention Susan would swoop like a vulture on its very tempting prey.

Placing my hand in his, I stood and allowed him to escort me to the center of the room. Classmates smiled at us. Melody, who had sat next to me in American history, winked and pointed to the poster on the wall behind me. There was no reason for me to turn around. I'd already noticed the picture of me and Cash at our senior prom when we were crowned king and queen.

The years of disappointment began to dissipate when Cash's vulnerable gaze locked with mine. If it weren't for all the years of anger, it would have been as though no time had passed. We still moved in sync, and the familiarity with one another easily returned.

Our bodies swayed to the slow, melodic tune the DJ decided to play. I didn't recognize it, but the way Cash hummed the song in my ear, it was clear he did. The warmth of his breath, mixed with the press of his chest against mine, sent a whoosh of heat through my body.

When the song ended and flowed into a quicker one, his fingers flexed on my hand. Without thought, I smiled.

“This is nice. I know I’ve said this before, but I’ve missed you so much, Hannah. I know I screwed up by not coming to see you. And that’s not just because of Jimmy. It’s because of you.”

Melody accidentally bumped into me. She laughed and pointed to her husband. “His fault,” she mouthed, making me laugh.

“We should probably move,” I said to Cash. When I went to get off the dance floor, he tugged me back. “What are you doing?”

“You said we should move. Don’t you recognize this song?”

Standing still, I narrowed my eyes and listened. The two-step swing-style tune was what we’d danced to when my mother thought it important that we know certain steps. We’d spent hours in my childhood living room while my parents taught us the steps.

Gasping, I shook my head. He wanted to dance to this? No way. Sensing I was ready to bolt back to my seat, his grip on my hand tightened, and he waggled his brows. My insides quivered. A carousel of memories engulfed me. But even if I wanted to, I didn’t remember the steps, so once again, I shook my head.

“Yes,” he mouthed, and before I knew it, we were cruising around the floor, laughing, and suddenly it was just us, literally. Our classmates moved to the perimeter of the floor, forming a circle. Everyone’s eyes were on us.

Cash didn’t seem to care. Then again, he was used to attention. The man stood in the center of a baseball field in front of a full stadium and millions watching on television. We were so different, but Jimmy was more like him. It was a fact I could never deny.

Once the song ended, applause and catcall-style whistles rang out. Glancing around, I found Mia with a beaming smile plastered across her face.

“I think we’re a hit,” Cash said, garnering my attention once more.

“You’re the hit,” I countered.

I wasn’t sure if it was because we were caught up in the moment, but for some reason, Cash lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me. It was a kiss filled with longing that had amassed over years of separation. Best friends, lovers, my first and only love. No one looked at me the way he did or made me feel more desired.

Getting lost in him would have been easy if the hoots and hollers hadn’t reminded me of where we were. Embarrassed and a bit annoyed with myself for letting it get that far when I knew we still had a lot to work out, I broke our connection and took a step back.

“Thank you for the dance.”

He nodded and, sensing my slight emotional discomfort, bowed toward me in grand fashion. “The pleasure was mine. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.” Spinning on my heel, I turned toward Mia. “Can we go, please?”

We said a few quick goodbyes before heading outside.

“Holy hell, Hannah, that kiss was—”

“Not the smartest thing to do.”

“I was going to say hot.”

Mia had just unlocked her car when I heard my name being called. Heavy, quick footsteps had me looking behind me. Cash hurried to where I stood. The car shook when Mia closed her door, leaving us alone.

“Please don’t be angry with me about the kiss. I didn’t plan it.”

“I know. I’m not mad.” *I’m turned on.*

He let out a breath. “Thank you.”

“We’re not the same people we were back then. It’s easy to get wrapped up in it all, but that can’t happen again.” Cash’s Adam’s apple bobbed in the soft glow of the moon. He suddenly looked younger, like the boy I once loved. Before I knew it, I said, “I’ll tell Jimmy tomorrow. Come to my house around two. I think you’re right and you should be there.”

Cash wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. That time I let my arms circle his waist in reciprocation.

“I promise everything will be okay.”

Releasing my hold, I leaned back and nodded, praying he was right. “See you then.”

He opened my door, bent down, and looked at Mia. “Great seeing you again. Drive safe.”

“You too.”

He closed my door, Mia started the car, and we pulled out of the lot. “We’re going to tell Jimmy tomorrow.”

She reached across the console and took my hand in hers. “Everything will be fine.”

“I hope so, Mia. I really hope so.”

# Chapter 10

## Hannah

I tossed and turned all night. The significance of the conversation I needed to have with Jimmy weighed heavily on my heart and mind. All I knew was I couldn't let what happened with Cash at the reunion cloud my judgment. The best way to deliver this news to Jimmy was through honesty.

If only it were that easy.

Jimmy's life was going to change . . . all our lives were. He was going to be so disappointed in me. *That* I knew for a fact. So many people say that parents shouldn't be friends with their kids. I never really understood that. Yes, being his mom was most important, but we trusted each other, and we were closer than close. The thought of his disappointment in me was unbearable.

I wasn't naive enough to think that the day would never come. Yet, for some reason, I'd let the years slip by—my mistake. A formidable ache grew in my chest, forcing my hand to idly try to rub the pain away. Closing my eyes, I took a cleansing breath, doing anything I could to squelch my nerves.

*Ding.*

CASH: **Hi. Is he home?**

**Yes. He came home a little while ago. He's in the shower. I'm so nervous.**



**CASH: I'll be right over.**

**Maybe I should do this alone.**

**CASH: I'd like to be there. Please.**

His clear desire made me wonder if he thought I owed it to him . . . to be there when I told our son. It made sense if he felt that way. Maybe it was exhaustion or fear on my part, but I agreed.

Ten minutes later, the shower turned off, and at the same time, there was a knock. Letting out my breath, I walked across the room and opened my front door. Cash smiled like only he could.

“Hi, come in.”

Surprising me, he kissed my cheek. “Hi.”

“Can I get you something?”

Cash shook his head and rubbed his hands together before running one through his hair. My eyes tracked the movement. “Sorry, I wasn't really nervous until I got here.”

“You're lucky. I've been nervous for fourteen years. Would there be a day that someone pieced the puzzle of us together? It baffles me that no one has. There are so many similarities it sometimes makes me wonder how it hasn't been exposed yet. Then again, they probably know you're richer than rich and can sue them.” I was rambling and barely making sense.

“I didn't see it when he pitched to me. I knew there was something about him, but the thought that he was my son never crossed my mind. Until he said his last name. But even then, as you know, I didn't connect the dots.”

“Well, they're connected now.”

“Are you ready to do this?”

“No, but I know I need to. He’s going to hate me. I spent most of my night and morning rehearsing what I wanted to say to him, but ultimately, it all sounded awful and hollow. I can explain how I tried to tell you, but how do I explain why I didn’t tell him?” I shook my head and sat down on the sofa.

“We’ll talk to him together.”

“I should have told him. Jimmy had the right to know.”

“Right to know what?” He began descending the steps, and when he jumped off the last two, landing on the floor, he spotted Cash sitting in the chair kitty-corner from me. “Oh, hi, Mr. Jameson. I mean Cash.” He laughed.

Cash stood and shook his hand. “Hey, sport.”

Jimmy turned to me. His sweet face looked more and more like his father’s. His blue eyes shifted between me and Cash. “Hi. It’s so weird that you’re here.” He chuckled, bringing a smile to my face. “I feel like I grew up watching you on TV.”

Cash’s eyes met mine. “Honey, I need to talk to you about something.” I tried to keep the tremble from my voice, but that didn’t work very well.

Worry flashed across his sweet face. “What’s going on? Did something happen at the reunion last night?” That was when his eyebrows hit his damp hairline, and a smile spread across his face. “Are you guys together?”

“No,” I stated quicker than Cash could have countered with anything else. Yes, we had fun, and his kiss was one I’d never forget. But lips like his—strong, confident, and firm—demanded my heart come to life. Despite all that, we were not back together.

He chuckled and put his hands up. “Okay, okay. Just wondering. Max’s aunt told Max’s mom that she saw you two kissing last night. One of the guys from my team thought it was cool.”

*Great.* Damn small town. Everyone probably knew about that kiss. It hadn’t helped that it had happened in the middle of a reunion full of our classmates. “Right, well, anyway, that isn’t important. But there is something we need to talk about. Come here and sit down with me.”

I shifted over, giving him space. Jimmy flopped down and ran his hand through his damp hair, shoving it back in a haphazard style. Other than the birds chirping outside and the hum of the refrigerator running in the kitchen, the room fell silent.

Cash nodded, and I angled my body toward my son. “A long time ago,” I heard my trembling voice say. That was one of the beginning lines I had rehearsed but didn’t want to use.

After my long pause, Jimmy took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “Is it Grandma or Grandpa?”

The worry in his voice had me shaking my head. Not wanting to cause him any more stress, I started with, “No, sweetheart, they’re fine. It’s about your father.”

“My father?” He glanced at Cash, who sat with his right ankle balanced on his left knee, his index finger rubbing just below his lower lip and his eyes focused on his son.

“Why?” Jimmy asked.

“Before I tell you about him, I need you to understand something. I tried everything I could to let him know about you. Years went by, and then I wasn’t sure how he’d react to knowing we had a son. Although I should have known that once he met you, he’d instantly fall in love. I mean, who wouldn’t?”

“I’m confused. Are you saying he met me? When? Who is he?”

All the moisture in my mouth dried and threatened to come out of my eyes. I didn’t want to cry. I couldn’t cry. I was the strong one. The one who nursed him when he was sick. Helped him with his homework, drove him to practices and games. I was his constant.

He was my purpose.

“Me,” Cash blurted, causing both our heads to snap in his direction.

My jaw went slack. I wanted to throttle him. In all my rehearsed conversations, never once did I imagine him being the one to utter those words. I was supposed to explain it to Jimmy a bit more subtly. Except, unlike Cash, the truth clogged my throat. But that one word had just created a tsunami.

Before I could say anything, Jimmy flew up off the couch and again ran his hand through his hair, much like Cash did when he felt stressed or anxious. The two of them were standing. Meanwhile, I was afraid my legs wouldn’t hold me if I tried, so I remained seated.

“You’re my dad?”

“Yes.”

“How?” Jimmy looked at me and back to Cash. “I mean, I know how, but—” Then he pivoted. His eyes widened, and it didn’t seem as though he could blink. After a significant pause, his nose scrunched up. “Wait . . . you knew all this time and you didn’t tell me? How could you do that to me, Mom?”

Finding my footing, I rose from the couch. “It’s complicated. And before you say anything, you need to know that I did what I thought was best.”

“Really? Best for who? You? I can’t believe this. All the times I talked about Cash Jameson. How I idolized him as a ballplayer, how I studied his pitches, how upset I was when he got hurt. We were just talking about him before spring break. About him coming here. Why didn’t you tell me then? And what about Cash? He didn’t know either?” His head snapped toward his father. “Did she lie to you too?”

A chill skated down my spine. He was right. I had lied.

“Your mom tried to tell me. I’m ashamed to say that your grandfather, my father, didn’t believe her.” He went on to describe all the other ways I tried, but it fell on deaf ears because the more Cash spoke, the redder Jimmy’s face became. Disappointment painted his expression. I did that. Not his paternal grandfather—me.

Jimmy began to pace, his steps quickening with each turn. “I can’t believe this. I should be happy, right? The man I’ve looked up to and wanted to be like is my dad. No wonder I’m good at baseball. Hold on . . . did you know at the game?” He stopped pacing and asked Cash, who shook his head.

“This is unreal. How could you not tell me, Mom? I’m not a kid. I’m fourteen!”

“I’m sorry, Jimmy.” My hand went to touch his arm, but he pulled away from me, sending my heart to my feet.

His chin quivered, reminding me of all the times I’d console him when he was upset. But now I was the cause of his pain. Me.

“Sorry? You’re sorry? Is that supposed to make me feel better? I don’t understand any of this. Especially you, Mom. The person I thought was the most honest in the world lied to me.”

“Jimmy, give your mom time to explain,” Cash said, but his soft voice did nothing to soothe the situation.

“Explain? How are you not pissed off? I can’t be here.”

His feet were heavy as he crossed the floor. “Wait, where are you going? I love you, honey, Let’s talk—”

“Love me? You love me? Sure you do. And no, I don’t want to talk. I hate you!”

The door opened, and the pictures on the wall rattled as he slammed the door behind him.

“I knew it.” Tears flowed down my cheeks. My son hated me. I knew from teaching that kids could say things they didn’t mean, but the look in my son’s eyes broke me. “I ruined everything.”

“I’ll take care of this. He doesn’t hate you, Hannah. He’s just hurt and confused.”

“Of course he is. Why did you blurt it out like that? How could you do that to me? I knew it was a mistake to have you here, but last night you were so convincing.”

Last night, after he kissed me, he could have convinced me to do a lot more than talk to our son. Damn him and his kisses. Those lips held some sort of hypnotic power, and that annoyed the heck out of me. Still, this wasn’t about me and Cash. It was about Jimmy. Everything else was frivolous in comparison.

“Hannah.”

“No, don’t *Hannah* me. He’s my son, and I let him down.”

Cash pulled me into his arms. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“How? We don’t even know where he went.”

“I’m sure I can figure it out. I’ll call you.”

He let me go, and once the door clicked closed behind Cash, I allowed the tears to fall.

# Chapter 11

## Cash

The black mountain bike that had been leaning against the porch was no longer there. Thinking he couldn't have gotten far, I hustled through the neighboring yard, got in my rental car, and drove to the one place I'd go—the diamond.

Keeping my eyes peeled for him, I took the two-lane roads leading to the school. If memory served, and if I were him, I'd avoid the street and hightail it down the dirt path that ran through the woods. Since he was nowhere in sight, I could only assume that was what he'd done—unless I was wrong and he went somewhere else. Then I'd need to rely on Hannah. I'd rather not stress her out any more than she was.

I'd never seen such a forlorn look on her face before. Not even when we'd parted ways. Thinking back to that time, I could kick myself for being an asshole and putting my career before anything else. Yes, we'd both agreed, but it was more me than her.

After pulling into the lot, I parked and, once out of the car, headed to the field. I stopped, taking in the scene before me: Jimmy sat on the mound, his legs crisscrossed, his finger idly moving the dirt around. His bowed head shot instant pain to my chest. His bike lay on the ground next to him.

Before revealing myself, I texted Hannah.



**I found him. Going to talk to him. Try not to worry.**

**HANNAH: All I've been doing is worrying. Please tell him that I love him.**

**I will.**

Tucking my phone away, I walked onto the field. There wasn't any other place like it for a ballplayer. It was our place of solace. Even during the biggest games, when excitement and nerves took over, I still felt at peace. I had a feeling my son felt the same.

My shadow preceded my arrival. Jimmy raised his head. His eyes were rimmed red, his lips curled down, and as quickly as he looked up, he turned his focus back to the ground.

"Mind if I sit with you?"

He shrugged his right shoulder. "Free country."

*Yeah, he was definitely a teenager.*

Lowering myself down to the grass, I extended my legs, leaned back on my hands, and remained silent for a minute. "How're you doing?"

Jimmy huffed. "How would you be doing if you found out your mom lied to you for your entire life?"

"She didn't do it to hurt you. Your mom had her reasons. I'm one of those. I'm not innocent in this."

"Are you glad you didn't know?"

"Glad? No. I'd give anything to have known, but you need to cut your mom some slack."

"Why should I?"

"Because she loves you."

"Sure. And what do you mean that you're not innocent?"

*Shit.* How could I say this without sounding like an ass? I was definitely out of my element. Then I thought back to how I wanted to be treated at his age. So I put it out there plain as day. “Because I had sex with your mom before I left. I should have checked in on her. It’s what a good guy does. Except my world changed, and baseball was the only thing on my mind. When I decided to call her, I heard she had a boyfriend. I let it go. Let her go.” I raked my hand through my hair, buying some time. “Look, you’re upset. I get it. I’m not very happy with my parents, either—well, my dad. All of this could have been avoided if he had told me about your mom coming to him. She tried, Jimmy. Remember, she was only eighteen when she got pregnant. Four years older than you.”

“She wouldn’t have had to try with me. I’d believe her.” He shook his head, and his eyes met mine. “I didn’t even know you two dated in school. I still can’t believe you’re my dad.”

“Me either.” Changing the topic, I smiled. “Heard you sent me a card when I got injured.”

“Yeah. I never knew if you got it or not.”

A little light bulb lit in the corner of my brain. Rather than tell him that I don’t think I did, I said, “Your mom didn’t stop you from sending it, did she?”

“No, but she didn’t say, ‘Hey, by the way, he’s your dad.’”

“As far as she knew, I didn’t want anything to do with her or you. I never got her messages. In a way, she did it to protect you.”

“You guys keep saying that. I get it. I’m fourteen, not a toddler. It’s *her*, don’t you understand? She lied or omitted the truth. Whatever. Same thing. I didn’t need protecting. What was the worst that would’ve happened? I would have stopped idolizing you? Small price to pay,

don't you think? I mean, you weren't the only great pitcher."

Ouch. Okay, that hurt.

He was right, though. Hannah could have told him. She *should* have told him. And she could have easily made me out to be the bad guy. Instead, she told him that I was a good man. It'd never been clearer that she didn't only protect him; she protected me as well, and unlike Jimmy, I didn't deserve it.

We needed a break in topic. Mainly because I didn't know what else to say surrounding his paternity.

So I stuck with what I knew. "I used to come here when I wanted to think about things."

"Is that how you found me? Not that this stupid small town has a lot of hiding spaces."

It did. I knew that for a fact because Hannah and I would steal time away under the small walking bridge at the park, in the alcove behind the library, and, like a lot of others in our class, in the lot behind the abandoned drive-in theater.

Choosing to not tell him about those places, I addressed his question. "Yes, that's how I found you. This is where I learned I was going to the pros. A scout talked to my dad and my coach. I threw pitches to my catcher at the time. The scout clocked it while my father and coach preened on the first base line."

"I've always loved baseball. Do you think that's hereditary?"

I chuckled. "I'm not sure. Maybe. Although I'm the only one in my family who played. Well, except for you."

His head slowly nodded. "Right. Me. When I woke up this morning, I was Jimmy Hall. Who am I now? Jimmy Jameson? Is that why my name is James?"

“That’s a question for your mother. Maybe when you go home, you can ask her. She loves you, Jimmy. And I know you don’t *really* hate her.”

He yanked out a few blades of grass and let them flit off into the wind. “Maybe not, but I’m pissed off. Can’t blame me. So do I want to go home? No, no way.”

Hannah was going to be beside herself. “Where are you going to go?” That question earned me another shrug, this time with both shoulders.

*Shit.* I had zero knowledge of how to handle this. I couldn’t even pull the *What would Hannah do?* card since I had no idea. But I knew that she’d know exactly what to say.

A flock of birds flew by, their chirping filling the awkward silence around us. “Don’t punish your mom, Jimmy. You know, she was my first friend when I moved here.” I laughed in an attempt to lighten the conversation and began to tell him a funny story. Because that would work, right? Wrong. “One day—” I started.

“Can I stay with you, or are you leaving again?”

Again . . . like that wasn’t a reminder of how he felt. All I did was blink. Of course he could stay with me, but *should* he? That was the question. Time with him would be amazing. Time with him and Hannah would be one-hundred-percent better. I thought that maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea, that while he was with me, I could get to know him. Try to smooth things over between the three of us, especially between him and his mother.

“I’m not going anywhere for a while. I think we should talk to your mom.”

“Why? You’re my dad, right? Unless you don’t want me there, then I can go—”

“No, I want you there. It’s just—”

What the hell was I saying? I had no idea how to be a parent. For once, I was glad I had that house for a few months.

“You want me to ask my mom? Fine. But if she says no, I’m still not staying with her. I’ll go to a friend’s house.”

This hadn’t gone as planned. My intention was to talk and try to explain a confusing situation. Instead, my son asked to move in with me. It’ll be temporary, I told myself.

“Yes.”

“Yes, I can stay?”

Those mirror-image eyes lit up for the first time since I’d sat down. “Yes, you can stay.”

Fuck. I was screwed.

# Chapter 12

## Hannah

The air in the room was heavy with tension, and the echoes of Jimmy's disappointment still lingered. I couldn't help but replay everything in my head. How I should have done it differently. I paced the room anxiously, waiting for Jimmy to come home.

After what felt like an eternity, the front door opened, silencing my thoughts. Oh, thank God. I spun on my heel. Jimmy walked in first, Cash behind him with a stiff grin on his face. Something wasn't right. All I wanted to do was wrap my arms around him, but Jimmy's rigid posture and lack of eye contact had me rooted in place. Not knowing what they'd talked about or if Jimmy was still upset with me, I defaulted to my normal question: "Hi, are either of you hungry? I can make us something."

Jimmy looked at Cash, and when I saw Cash's Adam's apple bob heavily in his throat, my previous relief of seeing my son vanished.

"I don't want anything," Jimmy said when I knew damn well that kid had a bottomless pit for a stomach. "Well, that's not exactly true. I don't want anything to eat. Cash and I have something to ask you." Then he looked at Cash. "Right?"

"What's going on?" I asked.

Cash scrubbed his scruff-covered jaw, and I sighed, knowing it wasn't going to be good.

"Tell me."

Silence followed for long seconds that felt like an eternity. All the while, I wasn't sure my heart still pumped.

"Jimmy, why don't you run upstairs? I'd like to talk to your mom."

Without a second glance at me, my son listened and was up the steps in a flash.

"What's going on?" I repeated, this time with a bit of bite to my tone.

"Let's sit down."

"No, just tell me. And where did you find him?"

"School's baseball field."

*Cash Jameson Field.* Of course he'd be there.

"We had a talk. I explained that this wasn't your fault. That I didn't blame you, and neither should he."

I finally breathed. "Okay, thank you. I should go talk to him."

"Wait," Cash hurriedly said, stopping me in my tracks. "First, you need to know this wasn't my idea."

"What wasn't your idea?" Oh God. Now what?

"Jimmy asked if he could stay with me, and I said yes. If it was okay with you."

"You played that card? If it was okay with me? No, it's not okay with me. I can't even believe you did that. Divide and conquer. The oldest trick in the book. Now, if I say no, then I'm the bad guy." He opened his mouth to say something, but I hadn't finished. "Let me guess, he said that if I did, he'd just go somewhere else, right? Just not here. Not with me."



“I didn’t want to tell him no. In all honesty, I didn’t think you’d want me to. You’re right. He did say that if it wasn’t with me, then he’d go somewhere else. I panicked. I’m not quite sure how to handle a teenager, and I know that’s on me. The only thing I could go on was how I was when I was a teenager. Ironically, it had been when my parents told me we’d be moving to Blossom Berry Falls. Do you know how awful that sounded to me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Right, because I told you after the fact. But while I packed my things, I begged my parents to let me stay behind. Either with my aunt, grandparents, friend, or even my coach. I was pissed off at the world.”

“Did you storm out of the house?”

He half chuckled. “No, I threw a baseball through the large bay window in our family room.”

I knew he was trying to make me feel better, to let me know that Jimmy wasn’t acting out of teenage character. But this was my teenager, and his mood had been because of me.

“So you’re the hero and I’m the villain. Perfect.”

Cash shook his head, walked up to me, and cupped my face with his hands. Tenderness flashed in his beautiful blue eyes. “You’re not the villain, and I’m not a hero.” His soft voice soothed my nerves. “We . . . the three of us are in this together. Am I a bit out of my element? Yeah, I am. But remember, I currently live right through that backyard.” He pointed to the sliding glass door. “I’m going to do everything in my power to bring us together as a family. You’re my new teammates.”

I tested the word on my tongue. “Teammates.”

“Yes. You’re an amazing mom. He knows it, I know it, and I’m sure everyone in Blossom Berry Falls knows it.

This is just a bump in the road.”

“Right. Bump . . . you mean more like a mountain.”

“A steep hill.” He winked, and I let out a breath.

“He has school this week. One of his classes is giving him a hard time,” I said.

“I’ll be there to help him. And I promise I’ll call you. You’ll see him at school, right?”

“Yes. God, what if he ignores me in the halls? No one else knows, and they will for sure if that happens.” Tears stung my eyes, and this time I let them fall.

Cash slid his thumbs toward the outside corners of my eyes, wiping the moisture away.

“I won’t let it.”

“I’m not sure that’s your choice.”

Heavy footsteps forced me to step back. Cash’s hands fell to his sides, and I wiped my face with my sleeve. My living room was bathed in late-afternoon sunlight as I stood looking at my son coming down the stairs with his backpack slung over his shoulder, a suitcase in his left hand, and a duffel with his baseball gear in the other.

Not wanting to unleash another bout of tears, I swallowed them and gave the best smile I could muster.

“Did you tell her?”

“Yes, but I need to make a few things clear.” Cash’s words brought a frown to Jimmy’s face. “Take a seat.”

Reluctantly, he moved to where his father pointed and plopped down on the sofa. “I told your mom what we discussed.”

Jimmy sat there blinking. I knew that face. It was one that silently said, *Yeah, so what?* Like most teenagers, he had perfected it.

“You need to tell your mom you don’t hate her. We’re not leaving here until you do. And you aren’t going to go anywhere else either. I know you’re upset. I am, too, and so is your mom. Like I just said to her before you came downstairs, we’re a team.” Cash looked at me over Jimmy’s head before bringing his focus to my . . . our . . . son. “Team Hall-Jameson or Jameson-Hall. Whichever way you want to look at it, we’re in this together.”

I stood there watching Cash try to smooth things over. For not being a parent for more than forty-eight hours, he wasn’t doing too badly. I could almost forgive him for the “If Mom says so” card.

Shifting my position, I knelt next to Jimmy and looked up at him. “I’m sorry. I know I should have told you. Please don’t hate me. I’ll understand if you want to stay with Cash for a bit, but I can’t bear it if you hate me, Jimmy. I love you more than the moon and stars. More than all the fish in all of the oceans and seas. It’s immeasurable.”

“I know. You always say that.”

“Because it’s true.”

He sat there looking more and more like a young man than my little boy. “I know. I guess I don’t hate you, Mom.”

Schooling my features, I nodded, relieved. “Thank you.”

He looked at Cash. “Can we go now?”

That ache in my chest returned as I forced myself to stand up. “Yeah, we can go.” Cash reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. “Head on over. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Leave your stuff. I’ll bring it.”

Jimmy took the keys. Keeping his backpack on his shoulder, he turned to look at me. This was it. I should

put my foot down. I was the mom. The one in charge. The one with the power to say no. Except part of me didn't want to. Part of me wanted him to know his father. It was what I'd always wanted. Except I never thought Cash wanted it. Now that I knew he did and that he honestly didn't know about Jimmy, I couldn't deprive either of them.

Like a good mom would, I let him go, praying he came back with the clarity he needed. He moved to the door, turned, and looked at me.

"Would you like a ride to school tomorrow?"

"No, I'll take the bus."

The only time he'd taken the bus was when I had an early meeting or conference with a parent. "Okay, sure. If you change your mind—"

"I'll call you." He paused, and the smile I waited for never came. "Thanks, Mom."

This time the door quietly clicked behind him. Cash, who had been silent through all of it, walked over to me. "Are you okay?"

"No. Yes. I just . . . take care of our son."

"Our son," he repeated. "I will. And I promise this will all work out. You're still the sweetest person I know. Jimmy and I are lucky to have you in our lives, and I'll make sure he knows that."

Cash reached down, grabbed Jimmy's things, and kissed my forehead. Just like our boy, he walked out of the house.

\* \* \*

I found myself sitting alone in my bedroom. Just me and my thoughts on how I should have done things

differently. The saying *shoulda, coulda, woulda* popped into my head. Yes, I should have, but if I could have, I would have. That was my only justification.

Cash told me it wasn't my fault. He was right. It wasn't. Except aside from his dick for a dad, he still hadn't provided an explanation of how my calls seemed to fall into the abyss. Why? Why didn't he get them?

Getting up, I went to the closet, reached under the stack of ten-sizes-too-big sweaters my grandmother had knitted me, and pulled out a shoebox full of memories. Back on my bed, I lifted off the cover.

Carefully, I took the top picture between my thumb and forefinger. It was when I wore Cash's jersey to a game for the first time. I smiled at the memory.

*"All the girlfriends wear one."*

*"I'm not your girlfriend."*

*"Are you a girl?"*

*I rolled my eyes.*

*"Are you not my best friend?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Then you're right. You're not my girlfriend." He chuckled at my scowl. "You're my best girlfriend. Or at least I want you to be."*

*"You want me to be your girlfriend?"*

*Cash shook his head. "You small-town girls . . ."*

*I swatted his shoulder anytime he made that comment. At that point, he should have had a bruise.*

*That damn smile had me wanting things with him that I'd never even thought to want with any other boy in class.*

*“Us small-town girls what?” I prodded with an arched brow.*

*“Are the sexiest girls in the world.”*

*I knew that wasn’t what he meant, but I ate it up anyway. Especially when he followed that with, “Well, you are. I don’t like anyone else. Me and you, Hannah and Cash. Hall and Jameson. Boyfriend and girlfriend . . . if you say yes. Will you, Hannah Hall, be my girlfriend and wear my jersey?”*

*At that moment, if he had proposed marriage, I might have said yes. Not that I’d get married at sixteen, but I could see myself with him forever. My mom and dad said best friends make the best spouses.*

*“Yes, Cash. I’ll be your girlfriend.”*

*And like that day in my basement when he’d kissed me for the first time, I turned into a puddle of molten goo. If he hadn’t wrapped me in a hug at that very moment, I might have fallen down.*

*“Forever, Hannah. You’ll be my girlfriend forever.”*

A tear ran down my cheek as I turned my head to look out the window facing my backyard. Thanks to the barren tree that died when it was hit by lightning last year, I could see straight through Cash’s window. He and Jimmy were sitting on the couch, both facing forward, presumably watching something on TV.

An unwanted pang of jealousy hit. I didn’t want to feel that way . . . especially when it came to my son and his father. They should be bonding. Years ago, I’d prayed for that moment. To see them together, laughing as they were now. Grabbing my pillow, I hugged it to my chest and continued to stare. Jimmy said something that made Cash ruffle his hair before shoving his shoulder.

Turning away, I covered the box and set it aside. Time moved on, our lives went in different directions, and yet I still smiled because those two kids had created an amazing one.

Love. Love did that.

Between the photographs and the mix of emotions from the day, my energy was depleted. Before I went to bed, I sent Jimmy a message and said what I had every night since the day I knew he was growing inside of me: **Good night. I love you.**

Rather than wait for a reply that I wasn't sure would come, I turned off the light and crawled into bed. But when my phone pinged, I couldn't help but snatch it off the nightstand.

**CASH: Jimmy's sleeping, but I saw your text. I didn't want you to think he was ignoring you. Everything is fine. We watched a movie. Talked about pitching. Little League. And how you were the team's mom. Our son loves you. I know you know that. But since he's asleep, I'll say it for him.**

**Thanks.**

**CASH: Are you doing OK?**

**Yes, I guess. I'm not used to being alone. He's stayed at friends' houses, of course, but that's usually for a night.**

**CASH: You can always come over for a slumber party. \*wink emoji\***

**You're funny.**

Like a schoolgirl, I stared at my phone, and his banter started to make me feel a little better, so when my phone rang and his name flashed across the screen, it surprised me.

“Hi.”

“I’m funny?”

I smiled for the first time since this afternoon. “A little.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you miss me?” When I didn’t answer, thanks to a slurry of responses dancing in my head, he added, “Do you miss me as much as I’ve missed you? Because I have, Hannah. Maybe I didn’t realize how much I did until I saw you again. I know that sounds shitty. You were my girl.”

I glanced at the box and the memory I’d just recalled. “Your best girlfriend.”

He chuckled. “You remember.”

“Confession? I looked at our old pictures. There was the one where I had your jersey on.”

“Love that picture. I’m surprised you didn’t burn it.” Not wanting to tell him the thought had crossed my mind, I didn’t say anything. “Can I see it?”

“Sure. The next time you’re here, I’ll show you.”

“Take a picture of it and text it to me.”

“Okay, hold on a second.” Once I had the photo in hand, I did what he asked.

“Hang on, it just came through.”

I could hear him breathing, but he remained silent.

“Cash?”

“Damn, did I screw up letting you go. Prettiest girl in school.”

“Yeah. Okay. Only you thought that.”



“Because I’d kick anyone’s ass if they came near you. And I know that your claws came out when Janice and her sidekick Sally came around.”

“Susan. And they were bitches.”

Cash’s laugh brought on one of my own. “Some things never change.”

“No, I guess not.”

“Want to know what else hasn’t changed?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re still the prettiest girl I know.”

Even though he couldn’t see me, I rolled my eyes.

“I decided something.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m calling my boss tomorrow and taking time off. I have this house for a couple of months, and there’s nowhere else I want to be.”

“What about the team?”

“Right now, the only team I care about is ours.”

“I . . . um . . . I don’t know what to say. I think it will be great for Jimmy.”

“It’ll be great for me. Get some sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Okay. Good night, Cash. And thank you for responding to my text. Means a lot to me.”

“I know, and you’re welcome. Sweet dreams, Hannah.”

He ended the call, and I finally let sleep take me.

# Chapter 13

## Cash

To say I was unprepared was an understatement. I didn't have anything to make breakfast. I didn't even know what he liked and didn't. Or if he was more of a grab-and-go kid. Not that I had that either. Once again out of my element. Luckily, Jimmy said he and his buddies usually met in the cafeteria and grabbed something before the bell rang.

Still, I needed to go to the store. I had no idea how long he'd be at my house. Waking up to him walking down the stairs this morning was different from what I'd imagined—not that I knew what to expect. His hair was damp, his shirt untucked from loose basketball-style shorts, and his backpack slung over his shoulder.

How no one in this town had put two and two together that he was my kid surprised the hell out of me. Rather than harp on what the people around here thought, I grabbed my jump rope and headed outside to the back deck.

Back in Utah, I had a well-equipped home gym with rubber flooring and exercise equipment. But here, I had to make do with what I had. Wearing athletic shorts, no shirt, and a pair of sneakers, my earbuds playing my favorite workout playlist, I gripped the handles and took a deep breath before swinging the rope. Jumping rope was my favorite cardio. Probably because I didn't just bounce

up and down. I created routines in my head to the songs playing in my ears.

Thanks to the morning's dewy air and the rapid movements, beads of sweat formed on my forehead. Turning toward the backyard, Hannah's house came into view through a gap in the tree line. I bounced side to side on my toes as though I were a boxer in a ring. Exhaling, I crisscrossed the rope as it whipped around me with intense speed.

Normally working out cleared my head—no way did I expect that to happen. All I could think of was the look on Hannah's face when Jimmy walked out last night—her words that she had disappointed her son and the way she asked me to take care of him—all of it weighed heavily on me.

When the last song ended, I slowed the pace and transitioned into my cooldown stage. Glancing up, I noticed Hannah in her kitchen window . . . looking at me. How long had she been there? If I wanted to be an ass, I could lift my hand and wave, letting her know she was busted. Without any more thought, I slung my rope back, draping it over my left shoulder, and then I guess I was an ass because my right hand went in the air.

Hannah jumped back, making me laugh. I was too far away to make out the expression on her face, but when her hand rose, I had a feeling it was a pretty shade of embarrassed pink. I gave her a nod, turned, and headed back into the house to shower.

The warm water ran down my spine as my forehead rested against the cool tile. *Hannah*. How did everything get so out of hand? Back when we were young, we talked all the time. Usually we didn't even need to speak to know what the other was thinking. Some people may wonder how that was possible, only knowing someone for

two years, but when it came to us, it had always just clicked.

One weekend my parents went back to California, and Hannah came over after a game. We just messed around a little bit. We still hadn't gone all the way. Although both of us were on the precipice of explosion. So there we were, Hannah in a white cotton bra with a pink bow in the middle that may as well have been a pendulum because it could hypnotize me. I had stripped down to my boxers, and I knew that the cotton did little to camouflage how I felt about her.

*"You know . . . ,"* she said all breathy, bringing a smile to my face. *"When I saw you pitching today, it really turned me on."*

*"Oh yeah?"* I chided, tracing invisible circles on her shoulder. *"Tell me more."*

*"Well, when you struck out the second batter in the sixth inning with your four-seam fastball, a chill ran down my spine."*

*"Baby, you knew what pitch I threw?"*

*Her soft hair tickled my chest as she nodded. "Yes."*

*"Do you know what that does to me?"*

*The prettiest brown eyes met mine. Her chest rose and fell, and the small swell of her cleavage tempted me. She licked her lips, the thin sheet covering us shifted, and her hand wrapped around my hard dick.*

*As a seventeen-year-old who hadn't had sex yet, it almost caused a mess in my shorts. Instead, I groaned. She smiled and answered my unasked question. "I'm ready."*

*She was ready. "Are you sure?"*

*"Yes."*

*Our lips softly touched. Slow, I kept telling myself. Despite the wild beating in both our chests, we were unhurried. Maybe that was because we were nervous, but whatever the reason, it tested my resolve. Once we were void of all clothes, I worshipped her body as much as I knew how to and kissed her all over.*

*Hannah reached behind her, grabbed a condom out of a brand-new box I told her I had bought after the game, and handed it to me. She spread her legs, allowing me to rest between them, my forearms supporting my weight as I hovered over her.*

*When my girl smiled, I gently slid home—and met the euphoria that was Hannah.*

Rather than let my skin prune or turn back into that horny teenager, I quickly washed up, dried off, and got on with my day.

I couldn't imagine how Hannah felt this morning. Seeing her standing in the window, although I'd love to think that it was about me, I knew it had to be about Jimmy. Waking up without him in the house had to be tough. They had a routine, and today that changed. I knew what it was like to have a sudden change in familiarity. It could screw up the entire day.

After my injury, I felt lost. For years my days were the same: sleep, work out, eat, play baseball, eat, sleep. Naturally, I'd toss in fun every now and again, but the glamorous life that most people thought professional athletes had was mythical. I knew some guys went out of their way to have fun, which I enjoyed as much as the next guy, but work came first.

I sat on the sofa, grabbed my phone, and decided to get the ball rolling. It was still early in Utah, so I left a voice mail for the Hawks' GM, Vince Hardy, requesting personal time. He knew that regardless of whether I was

working, my eyes and ears were always open. I'd never let an opportunity pass us by. Right now, Jimmy Hall was one of them.

Since Leo was on vacation, I hesitated to call him, but I was anxious for information. I'd make it up to him and give him a bonus on top of his already generous salary.

"Hey, Cash." His groggy voice told me I'd woken him up.

"Good morning. I'm sorry to bother you while you're on vacation, but I need a couple of things."

"It's okay. I'm back home. Our youngest, Mallory, got sick, so we came home. She's fine, had an allergic reaction to something she ate."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but glad she's all right."

"Thank you. So what's up?"

"I'd like you to send me the contact information for this house."

"Okay. May I ask why? I've handled the rental agreement."

"Because I may want it longer than the three months."

Leo cleared his throat. "Sorry, I haven't had coffee yet. You're staying there? Why? Cash, I really don't think that's a good idea."

There was a lot that needed to get done today, and I didn't have time to play twenty questions. "Good thing I didn't ask for your opinion. Send the information. Also, I tried logging on to my email, but the password changed."

I couldn't tell you the last time I logged on. Leo always took care of it for me.

"Cash, are you in some sort of trouble?" he asked, sounding as though he'd just slammed an energy drink.

“No, of course not. There are things I need to figure out, and that is where I’m starting. Text me the password.”

“Okay, is that it?”

“No. The box of mail I received when I was a player is in the closet in my home office. I’d like that sent to me.”

“Why? Is there something specific you’re looking for? I can go through everything.” When I didn’t reply, he added, “All right, I’ll do that today.”

“Also, I’m taking some personal time, and I’ve already left Vince a message. I’m not sure when I’ll be back.”

“Cash, this isn’t like you. Are you sure there isn’t something going on that I should know about?”

“Everything is fine. Thanks, give your family my best. Talk to you later.”

We hung up. I grabbed my keys and headed to good old Blossom Berry Falls High School to check in on a sexy art teacher and put another idea in motion.

\* \* \*

Blossom Berry Falls’ school office hadn’t changed much since I had first walked through the door . . . the day I met Hannah. Mrs. Higgins, who was the school secretary when I went to school there, still held her post behind the tall counter. She looked up over her reading glasses and greeted me with a familiar warm smile, then slid her glasses off until they hung by the chain around her neck. “Well, if it isn’t Cash Jameson. Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. Everyone told me how handsome you were, but they didn’t do you justice.”

I bowed my head once and brought my hand over my chest. “Thank you, Mrs. Higgins. It’s very nice to see you,



ma'am. And might I say, you haven't aged a bit."

She laughed and waved her hand back and forth. "Still sweet as sugar, too, I see. What brings you by?"

"I was hoping you could tell me where I could find Hannah Hall's class."

"She's wonderful, isn't she? And so pretty, don't you think?"

"Yes, very much so."

"I knew you two were perfect for each other the day you walked into this office. It's why I paired you together."

Narrowing my eyes, I remembered it differently. "I thought it was because we had the same homeroom."

She conspiratorially glanced around. "Who do you think made that happen?" She winked, and a smile spread across my face. "Heard you two got reacquainted at the reunion."

"Reacquainted . . . yes."

"That girl is special. And her son is a wonderful, smart boy. Well, you met him at the game. Reminds me of you a little bit."

A lump formed in my throat. All I would need is to spill Hannah's fourteen-year-old secret. That was the last thing I wanted for her or Jimmy. As for what I wanted, I wanted to shout from the rooftops that he was mine. As far as the sweet lady's comment, I let it roll off my back.

"Is Hannah in class?"

"Oh, right." She flipped through a binder on the desk, completely ignoring the computer screen in front of her, then glanced at the clock. "Miss Hannah doesn't have a class or lunch duty this period. My guess would be she's probably in the teacher's lounge. It's down the hall, past

the cafeteria, turn right, and across from the bathrooms. Here's an ID"—she reached into a basket in front of her and gave me a badge from it—"not that everyone doesn't know who you are, but it's the rule."

"I'm happy to oblige. Thank you, Mrs. Higgins."

"Please call me Annie."

"Annie," I repeated with a wink.

As I walked out of the office, nostalgia washed over me. The squeak of my shoes on the linoleum flooring bounced off the metal lockers, sparking memories from my past. Vibrant displays of artwork decorated the pale-yellow walls. I couldn't help but wonder if they were from Hannah's students or if Jimmy had created any. Did he have a talent of hers as well?

When I reached the teachers' lounge, I pushed open the door and walked in. The room was small enough that my arrival had three heads turning and one person gasping. *Hannah*. She set down the book she was reading, abandoned the muffin in front of her, and hustled over to me.

She looked beautiful in a pair of dark jeans, a red shirt with the school's logo over her left breast, and what looked like blue chalk on the side of her neck.

"Cash? What are you doing here?"

"Hello to you too," I said. "I came to see you."

The two female teachers who sat next to a water cooler glanced in our direction before leaning toward each other and whispering.

Hannah wrapped her fingers around my arm and pulled me to the side and into a little kitchenette. "How did you know I was in here?"

“Annie told me.” When her perfectly shaped brows pulled together, I explained, “Mrs. Higgins. And I hate to tell you this, but I think she knows about Jimmy, or at least suspects.”

“Great.” She rubbed her temples. “What else is going on? Did something happen with Jimmy last night after we spoke?”

“No. It was a calm evening. Just watched *The Sandlot*. And talked.”

“That’s one of his favorites. Did he recite the lines?”

“He did, yes.”

She let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, but the bell is going to ring soon, and I have a class. Why were you looking for me?”

The melancholy etched on her face told me everything I already knew. She missed her boy. “I would like to invite you to dinner at my place tonight. Me, you, and Jimmy.”

Her eyes brightened. “I’d love that, thank you. I know it was only one night, but I missed him so much. I barely slept. He might not be too receptive to the idea. He can get stubborn.”

“Wonder where he gets that from?”

She cocked her hip to the side, and I couldn’t stifle a small laugh.

“Kidding.” *Sort of. Not really.* “I know you were upset. It kept me up last night, knowing you were sad. I think it would be good if we all talked it out and stopped casting blame, but that needs to start with us, Hannah.”

Her eyes shifted to the door when it opened and two teachers walked in.

“We can talk about that more later. Also, I contacted my assistant. He’s going to send the box of fan mail from my house. The phone will just be a lost cause. I can’t prove that I didn’t get calls. You’d need to take my word for that.”

“Okay.” The bell sounded, and she nervously smiled. “I need to go.”

Without much thought, I reached forward and ran my thumb down the side of her neck, smearing the blue line away. Her pulse thrummed beneath my finger. Pulling it away, I showed her the tint I’d gathered.

God, how I wanted to kiss her. Another place and time I might have tried. “One more thing . . .”

It was almost as though I was that horny teenage boy who wanted to touch or kiss his girlfriend every time he saw her. We were no longer those kids, but that didn’t matter when it came to Hannah.

“Seriously, Cash, I’m going to be late. What is it?”

Not caring where we were, I leaned forward and pressed my eager lips to her soft ones. The kiss was chaste but had its usual effect on me. Someone coughed, and Hannah jumped back.

“Sorry, seems I can’t resist when I’m near you. I have a plan for tonight. Do you trust me?”

The second bell rang. “Sure. No. Whatever. I’ll see you later.”

Spinning on her heels, she hustled out of the room, bumping into the door before she left. Part of me wanted to walk her to class, but I knew she’d hate the attention. As far as my heart was concerned, Hannah Hall was still mine . . . she just didn’t know it yet.

# Chapter 14

## Hannah

Good lord, that man made my insides flutter. Why the hell did he always need to look so good? This morning when I saw him jumping rope, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I'd never seen a body like that before. Well, not in real life, anyway. Even when we painted models in my college art class, they didn't look like him. Something told me if they did, the enrollment would have been higher.

Speaking of art, his tattoos. Art in all forms intrigued me. Having it permanently inked into your skin was something I often thought of doing. One day I'd create something that would resonate enough to make me pull the trigger and get it done.

My classes went by torturously slow. Maybe it had to do with a certain ex who seemed to be able to throw me off-kilter. When he said he had a plan, I couldn't imagine what that would be.

"So he didn't say anything?" Mia asked, sipping her iced mocha latte.

"No, just that he had a plan. Oh, and that he thinks Annie Higgins knows about him being Jimmy's father."

"It's only a matter of time. Do you know that he's now the volunteer coach for the baseball team?"

My matcha frappé tasted more like grass as it sat on my tongue. Finally forcing it down, I made her repeat

herself. “Did you say he’s coaching?”

“Yup,” she replied with a cute pop of the *p*. “I ran into Michael in the parking lot before I left to meet you here. The man looked as though he were walking on springs. His steps were so bouncy. Then again, how often does a former professional ball player come and work with the team?”

“People are going to start to piece things together.”

“Would that be so bad, Hannah? I saw you two together when you were young and then at the reunion. Don’t tell me your hoo-ha doesn’t get all tingly when you’re around him because I know you better.”

I glanced around the small coffee shop, making sure no one had heard her comment. Thankfully not many people were in the place or paying attention. “Can we not discuss my hoo-ha in public . . . or anywhere, for that matter?”

She giggled and leaned forward. “Hannah, can we agree that the man is a walking orgasm?”

“He does look good,” I simply stated, which earned me an eye roll. Fine, he looked spectacular. Trying to find the right adjective proved to be difficult. There were times when I couldn’t believe he and I were once a couple.

“Why do you look as though you drifted a million miles away? Are you imagining him doing all sorts of dirty things to you?”

Not needing that thought in my head, I explained where my mind had wandered. “This morning, he was in his backyard working out. Well, jumping rope.”

“Jumping rope?”

“Yeah. He was doing it to a rhythm . . . almost dance-like. It mesmerized me. So there I was, staring, and he

waved.” Mia’s laugh brought an immediate scowl to my face. “Completely busted and so embarrassing.”

“What did you do?”

“What else? I waved. Thank God he had the decency not to bring it up.” Leaning back in the chair, I sighed. “Everything is just a mess right now. Then he tells me he has a plan.”

“Nothing wrong with a man with a plan.” Mia’s phone dinged. She glanced at the screen and blushed. “Speaking of, I have a study session to get to.”

I cocked a brow.

“Mr. Tillman and I are working on his thesis for grad school.”

“Mm-hmm.” I shook my head, and she laughed.

We both stood with our drinks in hand. “Maybe you should give him another chance, Hannah. Cash was never a bad guy, and if everything he said is true, then . . .”

“I know. Maybe. We’ll see.”

“That’s my girl.”

We hugged and parted ways. Mia had a point. If Cash was telling the truth, which I have a feeling he was, then I shouldn’t be upset with him. That didn’t mean Jimmy shouldn’t be upset with me. Grabbing my phone, I called the one person who would know what to do.

After one ring, she answered, “Hi, sweetie.”

“Hey, Mom. How’s Aunt Maggie?”

“Getting better every day.”

“That’s good. And Daddy?”

“He’s good. Ready to come home. He’s been working remotely, but you know your father. He likes his routine. We should be home in the next week or two. How’re you?”



How's my grandson? I haven't talked to anyone in a few days. I was starting to worry. He left a message that they beat the alumni."

She paused, and I had a feeling she was waiting for me to tell her what she already knew to be true, so I did. "Jimmy knows."

"Oh boy. How is he? Jimmy, not Cash."

"Mad at me." I went on to explain the past couple of days. "I just don't know what to do. Jimmy is confused, upset . . . I can't blame him for his feelings. I don't know that I can make him understand. Cash says he has a plan. Not sure what that is." I could hear my dad calling for her in the background. "Go on. It's okay. I need to go anyway. I wanted to tell you just in case Jimmy calls you."

"You going to be okay?"

"Yes."

"Hannah, follow your heart. It's one of the strongest muscles we have for a reason. Jimmy knows you love him. He's just confused right now. And as far as Cash goes, that boy always loved you. Maybe you two—"

"I don't think that will happen."

My dad's voice rang out again. "I'm coming!" she shouted back.

"It's okay, Mom. Go on."

"Sorry, I'll talk to you later. You're a great mother, sweetheart. Jimmy knows that too. He'll come around, and everything will be just fine. You'll see."

"Thanks. Tell everyone I said hi."

"Will do. And you kiss my grandbaby for me."

After the call ended, I got in my car and headed home to get ready for dinner at Cash's.

\* \* \*

Dinner was quiet. Cash had made roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, and steamed broccoli. To say I was a bit impressed was an understatement. Jimmy sat quietly through most of the meal while Cash and I made idle chitchat.

Normally dinnertime was when Jimmy and I caught up on our days. He was always interested in mine, or at least pretended to be. Tonight the tines of his fork were too busy making figure eights in his mashed potatoes.

“How was your day? I saw the announcement about the end-of-year jamboree.”

Cash took a sip of his water. “Wow, they’re still doing that? Remember when we went, Hannah?”

I glanced up at Cash, and his eyes prompted me to talk. “Yes, of course.”

“Crowned king and queen, if I recall.”

“I still have my sash,” I admitted.

“I still have my crown.”

“You were king and queen of the jamboree? They don’t do that anymore.”

An instant smile spread across my face thanks to Jimmy’s question. Well, not the question exactly, but that he was interested. “Yes, two years in a row. Your father was quite the dancer. Didn’t hurt that he flirted with the female judges.”

Jimmy chuckled, his cheeks taking on a cute pink tint.

“FYI, I still am a good dancer, and for the record, smiling isn’t flirting,” Cash retorted. “I can’t help it if I’m charming.”

I shook my head with a grin.

Jimmy shoveled some food into his mouth. I knew it would be only a matter of time. After swallowing, he shook his head. "I'm not going to a hokey dance."

"Why not?" Cash asked. "I heard Max say that Jasmine Landon wanted you to ask her."

Giving my son a bit of a reprieve, knowing he didn't want to acknowledge Cash's statement, I changed the subject. "Was the team excited to have Cash as a coach?"

"Yeah, they are."

Cash and I exchanged a glance. "Are you?"

Jimmy looked at me. "Yeah, I guess. It's just weird. No one knows about . . . you know."

The last thing I wanted was for my son to be stressed out. Cash meant a lot to him, even more so now if I had to guess. "That he's your dad?" He nodded. "Would you like them to?"

Jimmy looked at me, then Cash. "I'm not going to say if it's okay with your mom, then it's okay with me."

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle. "Quick learner. Honey, if you want to tell people, you can. And they might have questions, and that's okay. If you don't know the answer, you can ask us."

"Or if you don't want to answer them, you don't need to. What happened between me and your mom is our business."

"Yeah. Thanks. I'll think about it. But I'm still not going to the jamboree . . . dances are boring."

The legs on Cash's chair scraped against the floor as he pushed it back to stand. He walked toward the center of the room and pushed back the furniture until an empty

square of hardwood was left. Jimmy and I exchanged a curious glance before Cash came back and offered me his hand. “Will you do me the honor?”

Confused, I furrowed my brow and glanced at Jimmy, whose expression mirrored mine. “There’s no music.” He told his phone to play Country Playlist One, and “Chicken Fried” by the Zac Brown Band came on. Pulling me up, he looked at Jimmy. “Watch and learn, Son.”

When Jimmy smiled, I couldn’t help but do what Cash asked. Before I knew it, we were dancing like we had all those years ago. We moved in sync, his hand flexed around mine as he guided me around the small square he created in the middle of his living room. He spun me out of his arms before pulling me back toward him, only for him to make me squeal as he dipped me.

Jimmy’s laugh was better than any song that could have been playing. Cash brought me back into his arms and continued to two-step me around his living room. The song changed, and Cash stopped dancing and looked at Jimmy.

“Your turn,” he said, to which our son shook his head. “Come on, you never leave a beautiful woman waiting.”

Slowly Jimmy got up, and I had a feeling this was all part of Cash’s plan. And if that was the case, I needed to thank him. Jimmy stood in front of me. Before I knew it, we were moving around the room. Every so often, he would stutter-step, but Cash kept encouraging him.

When the second song ended, Jimmy gave me a tight smile. “Thank you for the dance,” I said.

“What do I tell them about you and Cash? Not back then, but now? And what do I call him?”

Taking his hand, I moved us to the sofa, where we sat down. Glossing over his first question, since I didn’t have

an answer, I moved on to a more important one. “What would you like to call him?”

He looked at Cash, who stood off to the side with his arms casually crossed over his chest. “I don’t know.”

We remained silent as Jimmy looked off into the distance. After a few long minutes, he turned toward Cash. “Can I call you Dad? It’ll be weird for a bit, but I think I could get used to it if it’s okay with you.”

Cash’s eyes misted over, and a lump formed in my throat.

“I’d love that.” Cash dragged the coffee table in front of us and sat down on it. “What about your mom? Do you think you can forgive her? People make mistakes, and if I can understand why she did what she did, maybe you can too? I mean, you’ve got to admit, she’s pretty cool . . . and beautiful too.”

Sitting there listening to them talk about me as though I weren’t there was odd. Even after a short time, Cash and Jimmy’s connection was undeniable.

Not being able to remain silent, I added, “If you’re not ready to forgive me, I’ll understand. I was wrong, and I’m so sorry. Please know that everything I did and didn’t do was because I love you.”

“I know. That’s what Grandma said.”

“You talked to Grandma?” Why that surprised me, I had no idea. Of course she’d called him.

“Yes. She explained some things to me. I still don’t get it, but I suppose I can understand it a little bit better. But you never answered my question.”

So happy that he was coming around; I’d answer anything he asked. “Which one?”

“You and Cash. I mean Dad. Are you going to get back together? You’re not still mad at him, right?”

Was I? Should I be? “I’ve realized that you’re not my little boy anymore. So I hope you understand that my relationship with Cash is a bit more complicated. Do I believe that he didn’t know that you were his son? Yes. Do I forgive him?” I took a moment and looked at Cash. “Yes, I do, but that doesn’t mean we’re getting back together.”

Cash chimed in, “Your mom and I will figure things out. For now, why don’t we take one day at a time?”

“Cool. Is it okay if I stay here one more night?”

*One more night.* A gentle tingle spread through my chest as though my heart had doubled in size, knowing we were going to be okay.

“Yes, of course.”

“Thanks. I’m going to call Max now. He’s going to freak out. Oh, Mom, I need to sign up for camp soon. I can still go, right? I have my allowance if you need it.”

I could practically feel Cash vibrating. Yes, he had a lot more money than I did, but Jimmy never went without. We just didn’t go overboard.

“Yes, you can still go.”

“Great! Thanks.” He ran upstairs.

Cash and I worked together cleaning the kitchen. When the last dish was put away, he leaned against the counter. “We need to talk about something.”

I wiped my hands on the towel before laying it on the dish rack to dry.

“I have money, and the way I figure it, I owe you years and years of child support. I’d like to take care of you.”

“No, but thank you. We’ve been fine. I’m not after your money.”

“Stubborn woman. You don’t think I know that? Let me start over. Hannah, I’d like to pay for our son’s camp.” His brows tugged together. “What type of camp is it?”

“Baseball. It’s at the local college.”

“So he can get scouted?” he asked with a lilt of sarcasm—or maybe irritation, I couldn’t quite tell.

“No, to help him hone his skills and possibly get a scholarship.” Cash took a moment to reply, so I added, “I understand your profession and that you played professional ball, but this is about Jimmy, not you. Our son is very prideful, and as much as I know he’ll appreciate anything you can teach him, getting into college and doing it on his own is important to him.”

“Yes, I understand. I’d feel the same way. Our son has the talent to make it. I saw it. It’s why I want him for the Hawks. I just know that in a couple of years, I won’t be the only one who notices. Hell, I’d be shocked if the college didn’t send him a commitment letter with a full ride attached. If he goes. He could possibly do what I did. But we can talk about all of that later. For now, and with your permission, I’ll go to the bank and establish an account in your name for him for whatever you need. Please set your stubbornness aside.”

“Thank you, it’s a lot to take in at the moment. If you’d like to pay for his camp, that’s fine. The account would only be used for him and if completely necessary. I’m not prepared to think about him going to college or playing ball. I’d like to get through the next couple of years first.”

“Okay, so we have a deal?”

“For now, but that’s it.”

“See, stubborn.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

“Care to prove it?”

“Although I feel as though I already have, what do you have in mind?”

“Let me take you out.”

Rather than prove him right, I gave him a bright, toothy smile. “Maybe.”

Right when I thought I had the upper hand, a sexy-assin smirk spread across his face. “I’m going to make you fall for me again, Hannah Hall.”

“I’m not going to fall for you.”

“Stubborn.”

“Just being honest. It won’t happen.”

“We’ll see about that.”



# Chapter 15

## Cash

After Jimmy left for school, I decided to start getting some things done. First, I grabbed my laptop, and although on a brief hiatus, there was a report I needed to send in. Once that was completed, and despite the early hour on the West Coast, I needed to call my mother.

There was no telling how she would react to hearing my father's part in not telling me about Jimmy and dismissing Hannah. I knew if my mom had answered the door the day Hannah went to their house, life would be completely different.

Which was something else that weighed heavily on me. Would we have stayed together? Would we have more kids? The only answer I could come up with was yes. Our breakup wasn't our best decision. Granted, hindsight is always twenty-twenty, but that didn't make it less true.

After grabbing my phone, I scrolled through my contacts and tapped on my mom's number. When the call connected, I heard breathing, and for a second, I wished I had texted before dialing.

"Hi . . . honey. Hold on. Let me pause Franco." I could hear a man's voice in the background saying something about pace and power. The baritone faded off in the background. "Okay. Sorry about that."

“Who’s Franco?”

“My virtual spin class trainer. Your father bought me one of those stationary bikes that I wanted. Anyway, it’s not often you call your mother before noon my time. Is everything okay?”

“I know. I’m sorry to bother you, but have you spoken to Dad recently?”

She laughed. “Of course. Why?”

“Did he mention he talked to me?”

“No, and you never answered me before. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. It’s just—”

“Cash, you’re starting to make me worry. Do I need to call him at work?”

“No.” That was the last thing I wanted her to do. “I have something to tell you.”

“Okay, can you please do that because right now I’m imagining all the bad things?”

“You’re a grandmother,” I blurted.

“What?” Her shriek had me pulling the phone away from my face.

Maybe I should have asked if she was sitting down. Once the vibration in my eardrum dissipated, I cleared my throat. “I’m in Blossom Berry Falls for my class reunion.”

“I heard about that. Mitzy Barber told me that the school had renamed the stadium. That would have been nice to hear from you.”

“Sorry, it was a surprise to me too. Anyway, that isn’t important. Do you remember Hannah Hall?”

“Oh yes. Such a sweet girl. Broke my heart when you two went your separate ways. And that was your fifteenth reunion, right? I can’t bel—” Her pause told me the pieces were starting to click together. Giving her a moment to process, I remained quiet. “Honey, are you saying that you and Hannah have a child?”

“Yes. His name is Jimmy. He’s fourteen, smart, funny, and pitches for the varsity team.”

She sniffled. “Oh my word. I’m just . . . I can’t believe this. We have a grandson. He’s named after you too. I’m confused, though. She didn’t reach out to tell you? Wait until Dad hears.”

“He knows. Not that he has a grandson or his name, but that Hannah was pregnant.”

After I explained everything as best I could, my mother was appalled and horrified. “I can’t believe your father did that.”

She sniffled again, and I felt horrible. Except I wasn’t the cause of her tears. My dick for a father was. Still, I apologized, prompting her to go into mom mode. “It’s not your fault, honey. I’d love to defend him and say he did it for your own good, but I call bullshit on that.”

“Mom, you swore. That’s very unlike you,” I said with a laugh uncharacteristic for the conversation but trying to bring a sliver of levity to the heavy situation.

“Yes, well, this is cause for it. And other than your father, she never tried to reach you? I wish she would have come to me.”

“No, she said she emailed, called, and wrote letters. I just never got any messages. I wasn’t exactly in charge of my emails or my phone, really. Leo took care of everything.”

“I never liked that shady man. I told your father that he was wrong for that job.”

Thinking back to when I found an agent, I had also been told to get an assistant to help me with my schedule and other things that could fall through the cracks otherwise. It seemed other players had one, so I figured, why not? My dad helped me get organized before I left. Leo was part of that organization, but I got his name from my agent.

“What does Dad have to do with Leo?”

“Leo’s uncle and Dad play golf together. I don’t want to assume anything, but something tells me that—”

“Dad suggested Leo to Thomas so he could control the events surrounding my life, including my son.”

More pieces to this skewed puzzle that had turned out to be the last fifteen years of my life. I thanked my mom, and we ended the call, promising to video chat later. The room felt heavy with the weight of disappointment and betrayal. Anguish knotted in my chest as waves of frustration washed over me. For years this had gone on. How could I have been so blind? My fists clenched, and my body tensed thanks to a slurry of emotions, none of which were good.

Thoughts from the past flashed through my mind. The day my agent, Thomas, introduced me to Leo. How I hired him right then and there, never knowing his loyalty was with my father. The truth had been hidden, shrouded behind a facade, and the revelation pierced my heart like a jagged knife. How could I have been so blind?

First things first, I called Cal and asked if Leo had been there for that box in my closet. Thankfully, and now not surprisingly, he said no. Then I explained the situation and asked if he’d handle it for me, which he said he’d do. I also told him that Leo was no longer

employed and I was sending someone to change the locks to my house.

Not long after, I called the man himself and fired him. He barely defended his actions, which spoke volumes. I'd made him a very rich man, only to be lied to. I should sue his ass. Frustrated, I grabbed my keys and headed to the school, but not before sending a text to Hannah.

**Hi. I hope you're having a good day. My morning has been eventful. I told my mom.**

HANNAH: **Oh, wow. And?**

**She's thrilled. Wants to video chat with all of us later.**

HANNAH: **Does she hate me?**

**Not at all. In fact, she thinks you should go out with me Friday night.**

HANNAH: **She does not.**

**But you should anyway. Remember all the fun we used to have?**

HANNAH: **I'm at work. I should go.**

**Agree to one date.**

HANNAH: **And if I don't?**

**I guess you'll need to wait and see.**

Tiny dots bounced and disappeared a couple of times before she replied.

HANNAH: **Okay. One date.**

HANNAH: **As friends.**

**Friends don't date.**

HANNAH: **You're ridiculous. Fine. I'll go out with you.**

**See you later.**

HANNAH: **Still not a date.**

Just like all those years ago, Hannah Hall could make me smile. Now it was my turn to repay that favor.

# Chapter 16



## Hannah

All week I've been getting looks and fielding questions about Jimmy and Cash. Once Jimmy told the team, everyone knew. And by everyone, I meant *everyone*.

Welcome to Blossom Berry Falls . . . home to where everyone knows everyone's business.

Naturally, some people claimed to have already known. But I didn't care about any of that. My only concern was how it all affected Jimmy. We were back in a good place in our mom-son relationship . . . which I couldn't be happier about. Except things were different. For the past fourteen years, I'd been the one with all the answers and advice, but having a celebrity for a parent threw me out of my comfort zone. Thankfully Cash knew how to handle that end of things. It was upsetting to hear how people would attach themselves to him for money or popularity. The thought of that happening to our son didn't do my anxiety over this situation any favors.

When Cash first told Jimmy what could happen, my sweet son shrugged it off as though he didn't believe him. That was until five other girls, including a couple of seniors, asked him to go to the jamboree. Of course, he and his buddies thought that was the best thing since the invention of baseball. Meanwhile, I found five gray hairs on my head that weren't there before.

Then I heard Jimmy ask Cash about condoms, and fifty more instantly sprouted.

It started after practice. Since they were both there, Cash drove Jimmy home, and their conversation that began in the car should have ended there. Except it didn't. Cash thought it best to finish it in my living room. I wasn't sure if that had been the best course of action. Especially when I heard him ask Cash about protection right after I'd taken a sip of water, which I ended up choking on.

Both guys ran to me with panicked looks on their faces. It wasn't that I was naive to the fact that my son would be asking these questions. I tackled the basics with him a couple of years ago when they started discussing it in school. Then I told him he could talk to his grandfather about anything he was uncomfortable talking to me about.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

"Yes, sorry. Wrong pipe," I hoarsely whispered.

Jimmy put his hand over his chest, clearly relieved that I wasn't dying, then he went upstairs. *Sweet kid*. Unlike his father, who, when I glanced over at him, was leaning on the counter, arms crossed, those damn biceps bulging and making his inked images stretch, and a smirk on his face. When I narrowed my eyes, he chuckled.

Now glaring at him, I shook my head. "He's only fourteen."

"I realize, but I hate to tell you that it won't be long until he decides to have sex." Cash shrugged. "It's natural."

Wrapping my head around that concept wouldn't come easy. "How about rather than buy him a box of whatever, you talk to him about taking his time? Find someone he cares about. He's young and should be

having fun.” He cocked a brow, and I swatted his arm. “Clean fun.”

“Sweetheart, if it will make you feel better, I’ll talk to him. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you what he asked me in the car.”

*Sweetheart.* Those damn blue eyes sparkled with mischief, and I was almost afraid to ask. But it was clear I was nothing if not a masochist. “What did he ask you?”

“How old I was when I first had sex and other stuff.”

“Other stuff? Ugh. I thought I’d have more time to deal with this.” First Cash, now sex. I knew both would be a topic in my future. I just didn’t think they’d both happen at the same time . . . or so soon. “Not for nothing, but the car ride isn’t that long? How did *that* conversation initiate?”

He laughed. “Relax, it’s fine.”

*Yeah, tell me to relax. That’ll work.*

“Apparently, some of the other guys were talking about girls and . . . locker room stuff.”

I crinkled my nose.

“Yes, I know, but it happens. Anyway, when he brought it up, it made me feel good that he felt that comfortable with me already, and I didn’t want to lie to him or blow him off.”

I could understand why Cash would feel that way. It was soon after finding out that he had a dad. All I could do was force a smile because, all at once, it hit home as to how much time he’d missed from Jimmy’s life.

“You’re right. It was good that he talked to you. Makes me feel even worse that he didn’t have you all those years.” Then I remembered what he said about Jimmy’s

question. “What did you tell him about how old you were?”

Cash rubbed the back of his neck with his hand before smirking. “Sixteen.”

My head dropped into my hands, and I asked without looking up, “Did he ask if I was your first?”

“He didn’t need to.”

Bringing my head up, I softly asked, “Why?”

“Because while you think I gave him a talk on which prophylactics were best, ribbed or not”—I grimaced and he shrugged—“I went a different route and told him that sex is a big step. While it’s natural and a part of life, it should be shared with someone special the first time.”

“You said that?”

“I did because I believed it then, and I do now. It may have fallen on deaf ears, though, because he then said that Scotty said . . . now these are Scotty’s words, not Jimmy’s or mine.”

I almost told him not to continue, but he went on to say, “Nutting for the first time is like jumping out of a plane without a parachute. Best rush ever.”

“OH MY GOD!” Being a teacher in a high school, I’d heard my share of teenage chatter. It wasn’t as though I were naive to it all. Except this was *my* teenager, and there were certain things I didn’t need to hear—the *nutting* explanation being one of them.

Cash laughed. “I know. Remember . . . teenage boys. You’ll be happy to know that I told him that being with someone you care about will be the same, except you’ll be wearing a parachute because you’ll want to survive to do it again.” He paused. “Then he asked me if I loved the person I was with.”

Our eyes locked, and Cash pushed himself off the counter, bringing him to his full height. He put his hand on my hip, and that familiar tingle zinged through my body.

“I told him I couldn’t have loved anyone more.”

He took a small step forward, our bodies almost flush against each other. I wanted to say, *But you left for baseball*. Except that wasn’t fair of me. It was his future, his passion, and what he wanted to be a career and, in part, still was. Then there was the fact that I agreed it was best for us to take a break.

“Thank you for talking to him.”

“Hannah, tell me you still feel it. The heat between us. Does your heart beat faster when we’re together? Do you think of me when you’re alone? Because I do. I feel it deep in my bones. Even when I was pissed off about the secret you kept, I still felt it.”

I had to think before speaking. Feel it? The more he talked, the more my body pulsed with need. And as far as thinking about him when I was alone? Little did he know our kiss at the reunion ran on a loop in my memory bank.

“I feel . . . nervous.”

“It’s me, sweetheart. No need to be nervous.”

I was about to tell him to stop calling me that when the sound of thundering steps had me jumping out of his grasp. Jimmy walked into the kitchen with his duffel bag. “Mom, can you give me a ride to Max’s?” His eyes shifted between us, and much like his father, he smirked.

Would it be ridiculous to state that he was not old enough to drive, so he shouldn’t be thinking about sex? Probably, so I didn’t. I was glad that Cash had told him to wait. Well, sort of told him.

Cash's phone rang, and he pulled it out of his back pocket. "It's my mom," he said. "One second." He tapped the screen, and the way he held the phone, I knew it was a video call. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, honey. Is this a good time?"

He turned, looked at Jimmy, then me. When I nodded, he smiled. "Yes. I'm actually at Hannah's."

"Oh, can I talk to her? Is my grandson there?"

On instinct, I strode over to Jimmy and placed my hand on his arm. "Let's sit down for a minute."

We all walked over to the sofa, and Cash sat between us. I hadn't seen his mother in years. She didn't look much different, except her blonde hair looked more platinum. She was still a very pretty woman.

"Oh, Hannah. It's so nice to see you."

"Hi, Mrs. Jameson."

"Please call me Claire. Hannah, honey, I'm so sorry about what John did. If I had known, things could have been so different. I just feel awful."

Not wanting her to feel bad since there had been enough of that going around, I smiled as best I could. "It's not your fault. Would you like to meet your grandson?"

"Oh yes." Tears filled her eyes when Cash stretched his arm straight out and angled it slightly toward Jimmy. She gasped. "He's a mini you, Cash, but with Hannah's nose." She dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "Hi, Jimmy. It's so nice to meet you. I'm your grandma Claire."

"Hi. It's nice to meet you too."

I loved how polite he was. And it didn't go unnoticed since Claire mentioned the same. "Such a nice young

man. You remind me a lot of your dad at that age. I understand you're quite the pitcher."

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah." Then surprising all of us, he said, "Maybe you could come to one of my games. If you're ever in Virginia."

Claire nodded. "I'd love to. I'll have your father send me the dates."

"Will Grandpa be there?"

My heart dropped, and just as Claire shook her head, Cash answered the question. "No, he won't. Sorry, Mom."

"Honey, it's okay. I'm actually not home. I'm in Florida. I needed to get away for a bit. I won't keep you. I just wanted to call and say hello and meet my grandson."

"Thanks, Mom. We'll talk to you later. Love you."

"Love you all too."

The call ended, and we just sat there, taking it all in. Had she left her husband?

"She's pretty," Jimmy said, breaking the tension.

"Yes, she is. Just like your mom."

Jimmy nodded, making me smile. He looked at me. "Can you drive me to Max's now?"

"Sure, let's go."

"I'll take you," Cash interrupted. "Your mom has agreed to go out with me tonight. She can get ready while we're gone." He looked back at me. "Pick you up at seven."

"Bye, Mom. Have fun."

They walked out, and I grabbed my phone to call Mia. As soon as the call connected, and before she could say hello, I blurted, "I'm in big trouble."

She laughed. “Trouble like you need bail money? Or trouble like you want in your hot ex’s boxers?”

“Not funny. And I don’t need bail money.”

“So it’s the boxers. Can’t say that I blame you. Look, it’s been way too long since you’ve had sex. I honestly don’t know how you’ve gone so long. Can you tell me why it would be wrong to hook up with Cash Jameson? I mean . . . you’re Hannah Hall. You’re supposed to hook up with him.”

“Yeah, a lifetime ago.”

“Honey, I hate to break it to you, but there has always been only one man for you. If not, Pinky wouldn’t be your main source of orgasmic fun.”

“Have you been drinking?”

Mia started laughing. “No. I’m drunk on the fact that my best friend is finally doing something for herself.”

“I do things for myself.”

“Are you talking about Pinky again?”

“Oh my God, I wasn’t talking about that in the first place, and please stop calling it that. I’ve just been thinking.”

“That’s your first problem.”

“Mia, please.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I just want the best for you, Hannah.”

“I know. I’m just not sure if that’s Cash. It’s been years, and I’m sure he’s had more than his fair share of hookups. We’re not the same people we were back then. I just don’t know . . .”

“There’s one way you can find out. And half the battle is over.”



“What do you mean?”

“I’m quite certain that Cash is more than sure about you. Just have fun, Hannah. Get out of your own head and negativity. You’re sexy, smart, gorgeous, talented, and any man would be remiss not to want you. You just need to get out of your own way.”

One thing I didn’t tell Mia was that my entire body craved Cash. Going out with him tonight was going to amp that up, and deep down, I didn’t want to end up reaching into my nightstand. I wanted him. Yet giving in to him so quickly after all these years went against everything I told myself not to do. Except the anticipation swirling between my legs told my brain it should shut the hell up.

“You’re right. Okay. I’ll try to relax and have fun.”

“That’s my girl. Oh, and I may or may not have left something in your nightstand . . . you know, just in case.”

“Do I even want to know?”

She giggled, and I shook my head.

After hanging up with Mia, I got ready for my nondate with my ex.

What was I getting myself into? And why didn’t Jimmy seem surprised that his parents were going on a date? Cash, that was why.

Always Cash.

\* \* \*

Rather than go out, Cash brought dinner to my house. At first, I was disappointed, but then I remembered there were eyes and ears all over Blossom Berry Falls. It would take only one town crier to see us for everyone else to find out.

I'd never wondered before if it were possible for someone to get more attractive within a matter of hours. Yet there I was, staring at Cash and wondering that very thing. Maybe it was the damn conversation I had with Mia. I swear, since we were teenagers, that girl had my mind going in places it never would have on its own.

Another thing that caught me off guard was my reaction to the intricate tattoos adorning the contours of his muscular arms. They were an unexpected aphrodisiac, and I couldn't help but stare at them. Cash's confidence was unmistakable as he leaned back in the kitchen chair that almost looked too small for his body.

Catching on to my ogling, he pointed to his forearm and the reptile etched around it. "Got this one in Tempe, first year of training camp. Almost stepped on a snake outside the apartment I'd been renting."

"I would have had a heart attack."

"Not going to lie, scared the shit out of me. But George was harmless."

"George?"

"Yeah." He chuckled. "Figured may as well give him a name since he greeted me every morning."

"Okay, I suppose that makes sense. It's so weird, isn't it?"

He reached across the table and placed his hand on mine. "What is?"

Flicking my gaze down to where his hand met mine and trying to ignore that electric zing that shot up my arm before looking back up at him, I admitted, "That we share a son but barely know each other."

His hand flew from mine to his chest. "You wound me. No one knows me like you do."

“Not anymore.”

“Okay, what do you want to know? I’m an open book.”

I cocked a brow. That was my chance. To find out everything I wanted to know without sounding like I’d taken a job as a reporter at the *Blossom Berry Falls Tribune*. “Have you been in any relationships . . . longer than one night?”

“No. Next question?”

“Wow, that was a fast reply.”

He shrugged. “It was an easy question. What about you?”

No, I was the one who should be asking the questions. Feigning ignorance, I countered with, “What about me?”

“Well, I now know that Rob was just a friend from school, but you said something during one of our conversations about me being the only guy you’ve been with . . . sexually. That can’t be right, can it?”

*Dear floor, please open up and swallow me whole.* Knowing that fact about myself was one thing, but hearing someone who wasn’t Mia say it out loud made me sound like I had a sparkly chastity belt slung around my waist with a big old padlock and a lost key.

Feeling the weight of his eyes on me, my face grew heated with embarrassment. I could only imagine my normally pale skin now a nice shade of pink. Taking a breath, I forced myself to look at him, and I immediately regretted that decision. Not because he looked at me with sympathy but because those pale-blue eyes darkened thanks to the weighty stare I knew to be desire. I’d seen that same look years ago, and seeing it again had my body ready to burst out of my chair and onto his lap.

Except I couldn't do that. No, I needed to keep a clear head when it came to Cash. Forcing the chair back, I stood, grabbed our empty plates, and moved to the sink and began to clean. Because that was what one did when they'd just admitted to not having sex for a ridiculous number of years. The plate slipped from my hand, and a tattooed arm reached in front of me to turn off the faucet.

His strong body pressed against mine. My back to his front . . . his very firm and *hard* front. Warm breath caressed my neck before landing on my ear.

"Hannah, stop washing dishes."

A chill, which I was sure he felt, ran down my spine. Still, I kept my fingers lingering in the lukewarm bubbles filling my sink. Big strong hands with light calluses slid down each arm, starting at my shoulders and stopping just before getting wet. Skilled lips kissed that taut muscle between my neck and shoulder. Then they moved up, landing on the soft spot just beneath my ear.

I should put a stop to whatever was starting to happen. But someplace deep inside, I didn't want to. It had been so long . . . ridiculously long . . . since I'd been with a man. It figured the same man who'd kick-started my libido all those years ago was the same one who jump-started it now.

On its own accord, my head rolled to the right, giving him more real estate to tease. Transfixed by the way my body remembered him and the power he still had on it, I remained quiet. Again I thought to tell him to slow down, except my lady parts begged me not to . . . and for once I decided to listen to them. The hell with consequences. Right then, all I wanted was to feel good. Wanted. Sexy.

Hopefully I made the right decision.

“Tell me, has there been anyone else? Has anyone touched you other than me?”

“No. I went on a couple of dates, but they sucked.”

I could feel his lips curl into what I assumed was a victorious smile. “I’m going to give you more pleasure than you’ve ever known. Tell me you want that, too, Hannah. Tell me you want me buried so deep inside of you that you’ll have no choice but to remember how good we were together.”

Good lord. My pulse spread through my veins straight to my eardrums. The Cash I knew never talked to me that way. I could feel my body clench with need. We were good together, but that was a lifetime ago. Falling for him wasn’t an option. Yet I desperately wanted what he offered. Swallowing, I closed my eyes, and before I could stop myself, I whispered, “One night.”

He playfully smacked my left butt cheek, sending my hoo-ha into a frenzied state. Where the hell did that come from, and why did I like it? Then a little voice inside my head, sounding a lot like Mia, said, “One night, my ass.”

# Chapter 17

## Cash

*Fuck.* Since Hannah had agreed to get together tonight, I'd told myself that I'd take it slow. That we were just two friends getting to know each other again. Except, when she opened the door wearing that red dress that flowed around her legs, I knew that theory would be tested. Then I bent down to kiss her, and her sweet perfume wrapped itself around me like some sort of love potion, practically pulling me into her.

Immediately I imagined her skirt bunched up around her waist as I kissed my way up her legs. She'd grip my hair with her fingers tugging almost painfully, but not enough to get me to stop . . . because even if she ripped it out by the roots, nothing would get me to stop bringing her pleasure.

Leaning down, I dragged my nose up her neck—something I knew she enjoyed. “Tell me you want this, Hannah.” Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths. “Do you remember how good I used to make you feel? How good we were together. How your body knew that it was me touching you? Licking you? Inside of you?”

Her ass pushed into my front. Swallowing a groan, I slid my left arm around her waist, and my right hand rose to hold her neck while my thumb caressed her increasing pulse point.

“Yes.”

If I were a Boy Scout, I'd be a candidate for the patience badge because, despite the green light, I didn't dive right in . . . literally or figuratively.

"Tell me *what* you want." Her eyes met mine, and a cute vertical line formed just above the bridge of her nose.

"You need me to tell you?" she countered, making me chuckle.

"No, I'm giving you options."

"Cash, for the past fifteen years, I've made so many decisions. For one night, I'd like not to—"

Screw the damn badge. Patience was overrated anyway. Not wasting another second, I spun her in my arms and gripped her around the waist, her legs instantly wrapping around me. Like in my imagination, I gathered the material of her skirt and bunched it around her hips, holding the gathered material in my fist just above her ass.

She flinched when I set her down on the cool granite countertop. Without a second of hesitation, I crashed my mouth onto hers. Her arms roped around my neck, pulling me closer, while my fingers sank into her soft hips.

Our tongues got reacquainted as they danced around with their familiar partner. I needed and wanted her to know how I felt. It had been years since my body felt this alive, and I knew it was because of her.

Breaking the connection, I let out a breath. "I've missed you, Hannah." I just needed a moment. Taking a step back, I admired the woman in front of me, waiting for me to take her. "You're gorgeous." Reaching forward, I placed my hands on her ankles and lifted them until her feet rested on the edge of the counter. I needed to see her . . . all of her. Hannah's pretty brown eyes met mine, imploring me to continue.



Her panties matched her red dress. I wanted to take my time. To make this moment last. More importantly, I wanted this to be all about her. It might kill me in the end, but tonight was for Hannah.

“I’m going to make you feel so good, sweetheart.”

She opened her mouth, and for a second, I thought she was going to tell me she wasn’t my sweetheart, but when I brushed the outside of her panties with my thumb, all she did was sigh, which urged me on.

“Did you wear these for me tonight?”

Hannah coyly shook her head.

“Liar.” I slid my thumb under the fabric and found out how turned on she’d become. Adding my opposite one to the party, I pulled her panties to the side and smiled at the glistening treat waiting for me to devour it—so I did.

Needing more, I stopped long enough to get rid of her underwear and quickly went back to work, driving her wild with my finger and tongue. Her legs tensed, and when I glanced up, her eyes smoldered with desire. I kissed her clit before sucking it into my mouth. Her breaths became ragged when my finger curled and found her sweet spot.

“Cash—”

After only a few more ministrations, her release came fast, and I feasted on her orgasm as she tensed and trembled through it. I wanted more, sliding my finger in and out of her while flicking her clit with my tongue.

“I know you have another one in there for me.” Her ass pushed forward, and I couldn’t help but smile. Not holding back, I tongue fucked her until she writhed against my mouth. Squeezing her ass, I sucked on her clit. Her body tightened before slowly pulsing around me.

Once her breathing had slowed, I pulled back my hand, and her eyes flew open as she stared at me. I slid my fingers in my mouth and sucked on them, tasting what I had just done to her.

“You taste even better than I remember. I could easily become addicted to eating your pussy.”

Hannah released her hold on me and covered her face with both hands. Gripping her wrists, I moved her hands away from her face and kissed her. Coaxing her mouth open with my tongue, she let me in, and once again, we got lost in the moment.

Afraid I was about to explode in my jeans, I stopped and looked at her. “See how good you taste? Like candy.”

Her cute nose scrunched up, making me laugh.

“Cash? Are we rushing this?”

“Rushing? It’s been fifteen years. That’s the opposite of rushing.”

“That’s just time. I don’t mean that.”

“Tell me what you mean.”

“We’re different people now.”

“Well, I would hope so.”

She let out a long exhale. “Our words are different . . . our wants . . . our experiences.”

Ahh . . . experiences. “If we must go there, yes. Our past several years have been vastly different. And although I understand what you’re saying, it doesn’t matter. Experiences don’t define us, Hannah. They help us explain who we are, where we’ve been and help us navigate where we’re going. I think deep down, I knew that this moment would be happening. You can’t deny that we fit together. I know you like to act all stubborn, but you forget that no matter how much time passes, I’ll

always know you”—I tapped the center of my chest right over my heart—“in here.”

“One thing *I* know is you’ve definitely matured into a smooth talker. Tell me, what other talents have you acquired?”

Without another thought and with ease, I lifted her off the counter and tossed her over my shoulder in a fireman’s carry. Hannah shrieked at the sudden change in position. My hand immediately went to her bare ass, squeezing and caressing it as I walked us up the stairs and deposited her on the bed.

She watched with wide eyes as I began undressing.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m more of a show-and-tell kind of guy.”

The way her eyes slowly raked over my body as I disrobed had my dick getting hard as granite.

“You don’t look real,” she said, nibbling on the side of her thumb. “So defined.”

She reached forward and ran her fingernail down my stomach, stopping at my boxers. Then a realization hit. “I don’t have a condom. I didn’t think this would be happening. I can run home.”

She glanced at her nightstand.

“You have condoms?” I moved toward the small table and pulled open the drawer.

Hannah screamed and lunged toward me. “No, wait! Don’t look in there.”

Too late, because a yellow sticky note stuck to the top of a box of Magnums caught my attention: *Save a vibrator, ride a man. You’re welcome, Mia.*

I’ve always liked that girl. And next to the box sat said vibrator. Pulling it out, I teased, “This looks like fun.”

Hannah's face flamed red. "Oh God. Can you just please put that away?"

"For now, yes. One day, though, I'm going to use that on you. Maybe at the same time I'm inside of you. Would you like that?"

*Shit.* The thought of me pushing that toy in and out of her while my dick did the same had my hard-on turning to steel. How far would she let me go? "I want all of you, Hannah. Every inch."

Once again, her eyes went wide. "Cash," she breathed out.

Not wanting to push too much, I grabbed a foil packet, ripped it open, and slid it halfway down my cock before her hand reached around me and finished the job. "Sweetheart, you're going to make me come."

Pride filled her eyes, and her coy smile told me she knew exactly what she did to me with a single touch. Needing her naked, I lifted her dress off her, cast it aside, and maneuvered us under her sheet. I knew that it had been a ridiculous number of years since she'd had sex. The fact that the last time was with me made me want to pound my chest in triumph and, at the same time, kick my own ass for walking away from her.

"I'll go slow." Once buried in her tight, warm heat, I began to pump slowly in and out of her. Her slickness coated me as we moved in unison. The room around us faded, its existence reduced to simple background noise. There was only us and the unspoken longing that sparked in the air. We moved closer, drawn together by an invisible thread of unfinished business, of promises left unfulfilled.

With our gazes tethered, our lips met, and the taste of her flooded my senses. It was a blend of familiarity and newness as if reliving a lost moment. Our kiss deepened,

fueled by the ache of time lost. No matter what I said to Hannah, that was exactly what it was . . . time lost. Time when we could have raised our son. Time lost where we could have maybe had another child. Time lost . . . no, stolen from us.

The touch of her skin against mine stirred a yearning for her that never faded. There wasn't any doubt that our bodies remembered each other. The years apart had changed us, shaping us into different versions of ourselves, but the connection that tied us remained unbroken.

Pleasure built like a rising tide crashing against the coast of our shared history. I reached between us and began tracing circles around her clit.

“Cash . . .”

Hannah's hands went to my ass—squeezing, pulling me closer to her. That and the culmination of us then and now had me thrusting faster. I wanted to make this last, but the more she touched me, the more I knew that would be impossible.

“Give it to me, Hannah. I want everything you have.”

We moved in unison until I felt her constrict around me. I couldn't hold on because when she called out my name, followed by God's, I gave her everything *I* had.

Our breathing evened out as I lay on top of her. Peppering her face with kisses, I felt a profound sense of gratitude for having another chance to be with her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, are you?”

“Never better.”

“I don't want you reading anything into this, though. Tonight was just sex.”

“The fuck it was.”

“I meant what I said before, Cash. I’m not going to fall for you.”

The one woman I wanted to fall for me, the one I desperately wanted back, didn’t want me. Well . . . not yet, anyway. “Here’s the thing, sweetheart, one look at you, and I knew I wanted you back. So while you’re determined not to fall for me, I can’t say the same because, like that day in the office fifteen years ago, I’ve already fallen.”

She tilted her head to the side. “You didn’t fall for me that day. We were friends.”

“And then we kissed, and that was it for me. I shouldn’t have left you. I’m sorry. But like I said before, we’re a team now . . . a family. You, me, and Jimmy. So you can tell yourself that what just happened between us was just sex, but I’ve had *just sex* before, and trust me, what happened here was so much more than that.”

Not wanting her to challenge anything I just said, I slid out from underneath the covers and headed into the bathroom to get rid of the condom before getting dressed. I knew Jimmy was out all night, but I wouldn’t be staying over.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to my place.” I leaned down and kissed her lips. “I’ll lock the door behind me. Talk to you later.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks, um . . . for dinner.”

I nodded once. “You’re welcome. Thanks for dessert.” I winked. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Cash.”

When the front door clicked closed behind me, I let out a breath. I should have never let her go. I shouldn’t

have believed the rumors that she'd moved on. Shaking my head, I whispered into the night air, "Get ready, Hannah Hall. I'm about to remind you what it's like to be loved by me."

# Chapter 18



## Hannah

It had been seven days since my night with Cash. Aside from watching him jump rope while having my morning coffee or occasionally seeing him in the school hallway when he was on his way to meet with Michael or the coaching staff, I barely saw him.

Maybe that had been by design since I'd told him I'd never fall for him again. Today, however, while Mia and I sat in my kitchen going over details for the jamboree that we had just been voluntold to chaperone, thanks to Janice, Cash was in the backyard with Jimmy. They exchanged words that I wished I could hear before Cash walked away, turned, and squatted like a catcher. He flipped his cap around and raised his mitt, preparing for Jimmy's pitch.

"Holy shit, Hannah. How in the world did you turn him down?"

I had told Mia that whatever transpired between me and Cash was physical. And when he asked for more, I said no. Of course she thought I'd lost my mind, but in my experience, I was doing the opposite.

"Shh."

"Why? He can't hear me. Please tell me he sucks in bed, so I don't feel completely jealous." When I looked at her with a tight grin, she shook her head. "I hate you."

“No you don’t. You love me,” I countered, batting my eyes.

“Yeah, well, I shouldn’t.”

“Look, it just won’t work. I live here. He lives in Utah.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “That’s what you’re going with? You’re here and he’s there?” When I shrugged, she just stared at me. “First of all, that’s a weak excuse. But since I know you better than you know yourself, what if he said he’d stay here?”

“He wouldn’t.”

“Hannah, please. Humor me. What if—”

“Mia, I love you, but what-ifs don’t help. Do you know how many times I’ve said, ‘What if?’ What if I didn’t leave the stadium that day when I saw him with that Tina person? What if I didn’t care about that other girl? What if his mom answered the door and not his father? What if Cash and I never broke up? What if . . . what if . . . what if! Do I need to go on?” When she didn’t say anything, I felt bad for spouting off, but it clearly got my point across.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I know it wasn’t an easy time in your life. I was there, remember? All I’m saying is that things change. You have. He has. And Jimmy loves him. You can tell.”

I looked out the window to see Jimmy high-five Cash before swapping positions. Cash was now pitching to Jimmy and saying something that I could only assume was about the pitch he was throwing. My heart warmed at the sight of them.

“Father and son. Playing catch. Did you ever think that would happen?” Mia asked me.

“No.”

“It’s funny how life works. Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure.”

“Do you still love him?”

Nothing like going for the jugular. “Love? I think I’ll always love Cash. He gave me Jimmy.”

“Hannah, come on. This is me you’re talking to. Get out of your rational head for a minute. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“Here’s the thing, I don’t know. Sometimes it feels as though we’re those kids who were the best of friends who fell in love. Then other times, I feel as though I don’t know him anymore. I also need to think about Jimmy. What if we got together and it didn’t last. Then what?”

“Another what-if.”

“Exactly, I’m drowning in them. I just don’t know if my heart can handle loving Cash Jameson again.”

That was the truth. It wasn’t even loving him that would be difficult because that would be the easy part. It was the aftermath of that love that scared me. Yes, on the one hand, it could be wonderful. Just looking at him and Jimmy could be a glimpse of our future. On the other hand, it could all fall apart, and I’d be left with trying to repair my broken heart again.

It would help if each time I saw him, a small grouping of butterflies didn’t take flight in my stomach. It wasn’t just his looks. There was so much more to it. Something told me that even if I didn’t have a sense of sight, I’d still be drawn to him. That thought didn’t settle my stomach very well.

I just wish he wasn’t so good at everything. But that had been his MO since we met. He walked into school and fit right in. Everyone wanted to be around him. Then

there was baseball, which was an extension of himself. He just had a way of making things work. Meanwhile, while he was relaxed, I felt frazzled. That was something about Cash I never understood. I knew it had to do with the years of coaching and having a high-profile spot on the team. He was the one who would get the win or loss in a game despite the team effort.

I didn't have that sense of calm in my life. The only thing that calmed me was my art. And since Jimmy was born, the only time I brought brush to canvas was when I was teaching my art class. Except none of that mattered because being a mother came before anything.

"Earth to Hannah . . ."

I looked at Mia. "Sorry, my mind wandered. Did you say something?"

"No, I'm just worried about you."

"See that out there?" I pointed to Cash and Jimmy, who were laughing about something. "That could have been us for fourteen years. Since day one, my son missed out on that bond. As much as I forgive Cash because I do, I'm just still so upset for all of us."

"This is what I'm saying. You can get it back. Cash—"

"Is leaving," I reminded her.

"Did you ever think of moving?"

"To Utah?" I asked incredulously.

"It would be horrible not having you here, but yes. Have you thought about it?"

"No. And for very good reasons." Raising my hand, I stuck out my thumb. "One, even if we moved there, Cash travels for work and wouldn't be around. Two," I said, raising my index finger, "my family and friends are here." Adding my next finger, I continued, "Three, I don't want

Jimmy's closest relatives by distance to be Cash's father. And lastly, and probably the most important reason, he never asked."

"I wouldn't want you to go. I was only wondering. And you know he didn't ask because he assumes you'd say no."

"Right."

Was that the reason? I had no idea, but it didn't matter anyway because it wouldn't happen. The wheels on the back door squeaked against the track as Jimmy slid it open. "Mom, do we have any lemonade?"

"No, but I'll make some."

"Great. Thanks. Cash—I mean, Dad and I are thirsty."

Cash stepped in behind Jimmy, and I couldn't stop my mouth from watering. Rather than risk staring at him, I busied myself with a pitcher, water, and lemonade mix.

"Hi, ladies."

Cash's deep voice had me gripping the spoon tighter as I stirred the tart liquid.

I turned and gave him a quick, close-lipped smile.

"Hi, Cash. You looked good out there, Jimmy," Mia told him.

"Thanks, Aunt Mia. I'm learning a lot. Adding a nasty sinker to my arsenal."

Cash laughed and Mia's brows furrowed. "I don't know what that means, but if you're happy, then that's great." Mia laughed again. "How are you doing, Cash?"

"I'm great. A band is playing at Earl's just outside of town. Thought it'd be fun and maybe you'd want to go?"

His eyes darted between me and Mia. For a moment, I wasn't sure who he was asking. Mia looked at me. "You

should go. I'll hang out with Jimmy."

"Hey! I don't need a babysitter."

"Did I say *babysit*? No, I said *hang out*." Mia playfully shoved Jimmy's shoulder.

He rolled his eyes. "Semantics."

"Smarty-pants," she joked.

Ignoring them, Cash went on to say, "I was thinking the three of us could go. Mia, if you want to ask someone . . ."

At the same time I said, "I don't think so," Mia chimed in and said, "That sounds like fun, but I don't really have anyone to ask."

"Maybe you'll meet someone there?" Cash waggled his eyebrows.

"Well, in that case," Mia said, now standing, "I should go home and get ready."

Was I invisible? "Why don't you two go?"

"Please, Hannah? It will be fun. And if it isn't, we'll leave," Mia pleaded.

"Go, Mom. I promise not to have a party."

"You better not," Cash and I asserted in unison.

Everyone's eyes were on me. Not wanting to be No-Fun Hannah, I relented. "Fine, I'll go."

Cash winked at Jimmy, who beamed. Those two were in this together. I was sure of it. I needed to make sure Jimmy didn't get the wrong idea.

"This is not a date," I emphatically stated, more to my son than to Cash.

"I know, Mom. Dad said you two weren't on the same page. I get it."

My jaw dropped. I couldn't believe he'd said that to him. Narrowing my eyes at Cash, I was ready to lay into him, but instead, I changed my tactic and smiled. "Good, I'm glad we all understand each other."

"On that note, I'm out. Ladies, I will pick you up at eight. Jimmy, I had fun today."

"Me too, Dad."

Cash left through the back door, Jimmy hustled upstairs, and I stood there with Mia.

"Damn, girl."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks for roping me into this."

"You're welcome. I'll be back later. Don't sulk because you'll get wrinkles."

With me glaring at her, she added, "That doesn't help those fine lines either. I'll let myself out. Love you."

The door closed behind her, and I found myself alone in my kitchen, wondering once again what the hell had just happened.

\* \* \*

Jimmy sat cross-legged on his bed, staring at the television, game controller in hand, as his fingers furiously worked the buttons. "Can we talk a minute?"

The sound of an explosion coming from the TV, and the way Jimmy's head dropped forward, was an indication that his character had just died.

"Yeah, okay."

Looking up at the wall, I noticed the jersey Cash had signed for him hanging in a frame. "When did you get that?" I knew Cash signed it, but that was as far as I got with it.

“Dad did it for me. Still so weird.”

Pulling his desk chair closer to him, I sat down. “It is for me too. I know you forgave me, but I wanted you to know how proud I am of you. You’re handling this like a champ. What I did, although for you, wasn’t right.”

“Just sucks. I get it, I suppose. Still wish you would have told me.”

“I know.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be going out? Please don’t say you’re not going because of me. I’ve stayed home before.”

“No, I’m going, but that was the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. You’re the most important person in my life. I know that you’ve always thought the most of Cash. I wanted you to know that going out with him doesn’t mean we’re getting back together.”

“I know, you’ve said. And he said the same thing.”

That came as a surprise. “When?”

“Earlier, when he told me you weren’t on the same page.”

Right, he did say that.

“We were in the backyard before he asked you and Aunt Mia to go out. He asked me first. Not to go, but if it was okay if he asked you.” Jimmy shrugged. “Not sure why he wanted my permission, but when I said that it was cool with me, he told me it didn’t mean that you guys were hooking up.” I felt my eyebrows literally hit my hairline. Jimmy laughed. “Not *that* hooking up, just together. I don’t know, Mom. This is all just weird. Can we not talk about it?”

“Sure. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Anyway, go out. Have fun.”



Thanks. I leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "I'll see you later."

Right before I walked out of the room, he said, "And Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

"I mean it. I want you to have fun. You deserve it."

"Thank you. I'll try."

*God, I loved my son.*

My best friend, not so much. As soon as I stepped out into the hallway, my phone chimed with an incoming message.

**MIA: Hey, sorry. I can't make it tonight. Something came up. Namely . . . Mr. Tillman. LOL Have fun! Do all the things I would. \*wink emoji\***

**I can't believe you're ditching me.**

**MIA: You'll have fun. I would have just been the third wheel anyway. Love you.**

**I don't know why at this moment, but I love you too.**

**MIA: HAHA talk to you later.**

Great. I thought of canceling, but I didn't want to be that person. This wasn't a date, I told myself. Except even I didn't believe that.

# Chapter 19

## Cash

As soon as Mia sent me a message telling me she couldn't go out tonight, my plans changed. Something told me Mia had become my ally. Suddenly I didn't want to be in a noisy bar. I wanted to talk to Hannah without shouting over the sounds of a band or dealing with a crowded room. Instead, I thought about where we could go, and one place came to mind . . . our place.

The sun was still shining brightly as I hurriedly set up the surprise picnic in the park. I carefully laid out a blue-and-white-checked blanket on the grass, placing cushions I took from the sofa in my house next to each other to create a little settee area.

I ordered some takeout from the Italian restaurant in town and bought a bottle of red wine that the chef at the restaurant paired with the meal.

Taking a step back, I admired the scene I had set. The best part of this spot was that it was where we used to go and hang out with each other. We'd sit under the big maple tree and make out for hours. It was one of my favorite places to be—when we were together.

We made good memories before we both decided to go our separate ways. Young and foolish. That was what I kept telling myself. But since none of that could be changed, we could move on and be a family.

Because I didn't want anything to happen to my romantic setup, I hired a driver to pick her up. Hopefully she wasn't upset by it, but when I spotted her walking toward me, her radiant smile told me I was safe. Her eyes widened with surprise as she looked at the scene before her.

Damn, she was stunning. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, which I loved. She didn't wear a lot of makeup, another thing that made her special, and her casual attire of jeans, a light sweater, and flat shoes was all Hannah. Never overdone and always perfect.

"Hi. You look beautiful."

She laughed. "Thank you. You don't look too shabby either." Glancing around, she shook her head. "I can't believe you did this."

"Sorry I didn't pick you up."

"That's okay. I was surprised, but again, not really a date, so I could have driven myself."

Ignoring her not-so-subtle reminder, I explained that I didn't want to leave the area unattended. Taking her hand in mine, I led her to the blanket, doing my best not to disturb the carefully arranged setup. She lowered herself to one of the cushions, and I did the same across from her.

Birds chirped, the spring breeze rustled the leaves, and the sun was hanging a bit lower than when I first arrived. The setting was perfect. Like our own private sanctuary, shielding us from the worries of the outside world.

I uncovered the meal consisting of a small cheese tray, bite-size chicken parmesan so we wouldn't need a knife, tortellini alfredo, and garlic bread.

“Wow, everything looks and smells delicious. I can’t believe you did all of this.”

Seeing how happy she looked made me grateful that our plans changed. “I almost didn’t get the garlic bread, but since we’re both eating it, it would cancel each other out.” When she looked at me, confused, I added, “For when I kiss you later.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Always so sure of yourself.”

I poured us each a glass of red wine and raised mine. “To you. Thank you for raising our son. Thank you for being strong and thank you for coming out with me tonight.”

I brought my glass to hers and softly tapped it. We both took a sip.

“Thank you, Cash. If I may say something?”

I nodded, and she smiled like only she could. “First, thank you for that toast. It means a lot to me that you think all those things. And I’d like to thank you for being a great role model to our son without even knowing it. I think that was what helped me get through the years without him physically having you in his life.”

“I’d rather have been here.”

“I’d rather that too . . . for his sake, but we can’t change the past. Life happens the way it’s meant to, I guess.”

I didn’t necessarily believe that theory, but rather than bring down the atmosphere, I instead dished out our meals. Her stomach gurgled, making me laugh and prompting her scowl.

“Sorry, that just reminded me of the pie-eating contest you won the summer before our senior year.”

She giggled. “I was starving. I didn’t eat for two days. Just water.”

“All because you wanted to beat me.”

“I did beat you.”

When I shoved a forkful of pasta in my mouth, she glared at me. “Don’t even say that you let me win because you know that’s not true.” The corners of her lips turned down. “Is it?”

“Nah, you won fair and square. I never told you, but I’d just had a burger and fries right before that. I tried doing what you did—starve for a day—but I didn’t have it in me.”

“Your loss. I still have that blue ribbon.”

“You were adorable with whipped cream all over your face. Actually, if memory serves, I recall licking it off you.”

“Yeah, in front of everyone.”

I chuckled, recalling her shocked face. It was only one swipe of my tongue. It couldn’t be more because I’d already been turned on by seeing her covered in the white, fluffy cream.

“We had good times.”

She nodded and slipped a fork laden with chicken in her mouth. Moaning, her eyes fluttered closed. “This is so good. Don’t tell Mia, but I’m glad she canceled. So much better than a loud bar.”

“My lips are sealed. Remember when we came here after your seventeenth birthday?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember what I said to you?”

She wiped her lips with a napkin and nodded. “Yes.”

“Tell me.”

Her chest rose and fell with slow, deliberate breaths. I wondered if her heart raced as much as mine did waiting for her to say the words. I thought she might ask me to repeat it, but then she recited what happened way back then. “That was the day you told me that you were in love with me. That being with me was better than hitting a grand slam or pitching a no-hitter. You said that . . .”

Our eyes connected, and I implored her to continue. I needed her to say the words I so clearly remembered. A few beats later, she went on to recite my words from long ago, “That you were grateful that I came into your life and that I let you into mine. You told me you’d love me forever.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes, lost in the depth of our connection. “I don’t think I ever stopped loving you, Hannah. It’s probably why I’m still single. Because my heart did and still does belong to you.” She went to open her mouth, but I stopped her. “Before you say no, please just give me a chance to prove to you that we belong together.”

“I don’t know.”

“What is it that you don’t know? Tell me.”

She looked down and fiddled with the blanket before her gaze again met mine. “For years, I thought that maybe one day this”—she waved her arm between us—“would happen. There were so many times I prayed for it, for us. But when it didn’t, I forced myself to forget how good we were together, even though we were just kids. That is why I need to keep you at arm’s length. Not because I don’t want to be with you, but because I’m afraid of getting hurt again. Seeing you with Jimmy today made me want more. But I’m worried, Cash. It’s not just me anymore. I have a son—we have a son—and he needs to come first. If we don’t work, then what happens? I

wouldn't want to keep him from you, but I don't want to not be with him either."

"I'd never want you to be without him. That's why I'm moving to Blossom Berry Falls."

I hadn't planned on telling her that. Mainly because I wasn't one-hundred-percent sure. The thought had crossed my mind when I was in her backyard playing catch. Then walking into her house to have a glass of lemonade. All with my son and Hannah. The thought of not being with them didn't sit well with me.

"You're what?"

"Moving. This is where I belong, with you and Jimmy. My family is here. Unless you don't want me to be here, because if I'm here, I want it all, Hannah. I want what we should have had for the past fifteen years."

Time stood still as I waited for her to say something . . . anything. "All?"

"All. Me, you, Jimmy. Together."

Hannah's jaw dropped and her eyes widened. Her normally composed and confident demeanor seemed to vanish. So did her eloquence because all she said was, "Um . . ."

I took her hand in mine. "I'm not giving up on us. Just give me a chance. That's all I'm asking. Let tonight be the first one. You trusted me in your kitchen and bedroom—"

She put her hand up to stop me. "Yes, I did. That was an amazing night of great sex."

"If that makes you feel better to say that, then fine. But you and I both know that's a lie. Just a chance, Hannah. Say yes. Even if my move here is on a trial basis. If you really don't think we can work, then I'll leave. But I'll never not be there for you or Jimmy."



“Cash, I’m not saying I don’t have feelings for you or you for me. It would be natural. And maybe we do feel love for each other, but that doesn’t mean we’re *in* love. You might be confusing that with guilt.”

*Stubborn.* That word sat on the tip of my tongue, and I left it there . . . for now. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I do feel guilty for everything people I trusted did to keep me away from you and our son. Guilty for not being there when you needed me or when Jimmy did. Guilty for so much more, but don’t tell me I can’t differentiate between love and guilt because I can.”

“What about your job?”

“I can do that from anywhere. I’ll speak to my GM. I’ll probably need to go back to Utah occasionally, and I will be here.”

“If that’s what you truly want, then I won’t stop you. Plus, it would be good for Jimmy.”

Finally, I said it. “Stubborn. Can you at least agree to give me a chance to prove to you that we can get back what we had?”

“I don’t understand how you can be so sure. I can’t just flip a switch and go back in time. I’m not Marty McFly.”

A chuckle flew out of me. “Thank God for that. Nothing against Marty, but you’re prettier.”

“Can you please be serious?”

“I’ve never been more serious, Hannah.” Falling on the adage actions speak louder than words, I leaned over the pasta and kissed her. After a bit of hesitancy on her part, our lips moved in perfect harmony. Hannah’s fingertips found their way to my face, tracing the contours of my scruff-covered jawline while I cupped the back of her neck, pulling her closer.

Tilting my head, her lips parted, and our tongues intertwined and explored each other. Every sensation felt heightened—the warmth of her breath, the softness of her lips, the intoxicating taste of desire. God, I wanted this woman. I needed to have her again but didn't want to rush things more than I already had. Plus, we were in a public place.

Breaking our connection, I leaned my forehead on hers and confessed like I did all those years ago: "Hannah Hall, whether you like it or not, I still love you. I'm going to win your heart back. I'm just stepping up to the plate. As you know, striking out is never an option."

"Baseball metaphors?"

"Whatever works. You and me, Hannah. You'll see."

# Chapter 20

## Hannah

“He loves you?”

Mia’s surprised expression mirrored my feelings on the topic. We nodded at a few colleagues as we made our way to our classrooms. The students would be arriving soon, and the solitude of the quiet halls would change into loud chatter and the opening and closing of lockers.

“That’s what he said.”

“Why does it sound as though you don’t believe him?”

Giving her a quick glance and seeing the optimism on her face, I answered the best way I knew how. “It’s too fast. I think he feels guilty about what his dad and assistant did. I think that if he truly loved me, he would have come for me all those years ago, but he didn’t.”

“In his defense, he thought you were with Rob.”

“Thought. Not know. Meanwhile, he was with models, an actress or three, and who knows who else. That doesn’t sound like a man in love.”

“No, it just sounds like a man. Although I know women who would do the same.” We turned the corner toward my room. “Did you stop loving him?”

“I had to. Call it self-preservation. And I did go after him. But that’s not all of it.”

I unlocked my door and flipped up the light switch. Individual workstations, each equipped with paintbrushes, pencils, charcoal, and an assortment of paints, pastels, and markers, made me smile. When I was a student, this was my place of solace, and it still was, even though I was the one in charge.

Putting my purse in the bottom drawer of my desk, I turned and looked at Mia. “He’s moving here. Or so he says.”

Her eyes widened. “I knew he would! What about his job?”

I explained what Cash told me about that. He seemed to have everything figured out, whereas I was still so confused.

“Jimmy loves Cash. Instantly. And I’m glad he’s moving here for his sake.”

The sound of students’ chatter and lockers opening in the hallway was the telltale sign that our day was about to begin. No one had art for homeroom, so I had a little more time. But Mia needed to get to her room.

“I know I’ve said this before, but maybe you should give him the benefit of the doubt. It’s clear that he’s trying to make amends. You were both dealt a shitty hand. You were both lied to. Maybe Cash is right, and you can get back what you once had.” The first bell rang. “I need to go. Thanks to the end of the year being around the corner, my students have turned into feral animals. They’ve been throwing pencils in the air, trying to get them to stick in the ceiling.”

I laughed but knew what she meant.

“Don’t even ask me how many times the boys have drawn penises on their homework. They’re obsessed with that body part. The other day one kid made a slingshot out of highlighters and a condom.”

*Condoms . . . it made me think of that conversation with Jimmy and Cash.*

“Didn’t even care when Annie Higgins walked in and got hit with a wad of paper. She unfolded it, took one look at it and the drawing of a dick, and asked, ‘Are they always that small?’ It was the funniest thing.”

Good old Mrs. Higgins. End-of-the-year energy was no joke. Thankfully my kids weren’t like that. My class was an outlet for all that pent-up energy.

“Anyway, promise me you’ll think about what Cash said.”

“Fine, I’ll think about it.”

“Good girl. And with a man like Cash, Pinky won’t need as many batteries.”

Before I could stop myself, I blurted, “He said he’d like to use it on me.”

Mia’s jaw slackened. “Now I really hate you.”

Giggling, I shrugged. “Better get to class.”

“I’ll see you at lunch . . . bitch.”

“You love me.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Having time to spare, I moved to my personal workstation near the window. The smaller table was neatly organized with an assortment of paintbrushes, tubes of paint, colorful chalk and dark charcoals, and a palette filled with an array of vibrant colors.

Selecting a medium-sized blank canvas, I placed it on the easel. I squirted different colors, including white, onto a small palette. Dipping a paintbrush into a jar of water, I wet the bristles and dabbed green and white onto it. With long strokes, I covered the bottom of the

canvas, stopping to add a deeper shade here and there, leaving trails of paint behind.

Switching to a smaller brush, I used white to create dimension in the grass. Moving on, I blended hues of blues together, creating harmonious shades and variations to the summer sky. Occasionally I'd stop and assess my progress, but before I knew it, I'd created a family scene. One that included me, Cash, and a young Jimmy in the park. I sat on a blanket much like the one from my picnic with Cash while he and Jimmy played catch. It wasn't an elaborate scene for the time I put into it, but the foundation was there. Enough to make my eyes water. It was how it should have been all those years ago.

As my class start time approached, I set aside my brushes and covered the painting with a small sheet I kept attached to the easel. What bothered me the most was thinking about how Cash used to make me happy. Now it brought melancholy. That wasn't good for anyone. I needed to get past this for my sanity. Cash had offered for us to be a family. Even though I wasn't sure about that, I knew it was best for Jimmy. And as he has all his life, he came first.

The day went by quickly. Jimmy had practice, and I knew Cash would be with him, which gave me time to myself. Time to think. Shortly after I got home, I changed into my favorite yoga pants and a loose cotton T-shirt, then pulled my hair back into a ponytail.

Needing to straighten up, I started with Jimmy's laundry. Opening his door, I couldn't stop my nose from crinkling. Damn, that teenage funk. I had no idea where it came from but couldn't wait for him to grow out of it. Thankfully he didn't try to mask it with awful body spray.

Glancing around, I looked at the poster of Cash on the wall. It was an image of him delivering a pitch. The look on his face was filled with concentration. I smiled at

the resemblance to Jimmy. I loaded the basket with dirty clothes and headed downstairs.

My doorbell rang, so I set the basket down and opened the front door to find my parents on my porch. I'd never been so happy to see two people before.

"What a great surprise!" I said, stepping aside to let them pass. My mom hugged me, then my dad. "What are you doing here? When did you leave Kansas? How's Aunt Maggie?"

"She's fine. We left last night. Your dad and I stayed longer than we'd intended. You look so good, sweetheart," my mom said, pulling me into another hug. "How's my grandson?"

"He's great. At practice."

"Is Cash around?" I knew that voice. My dad was a big softy, but when he had that stern, fatherly tone, I could tell *why* he wanted to talk with Cash.

"No, he's at the practice." For some reason, the need to protect him washed over me. "He's been trying to spend time with Jimmy. Since he wanted to be here, he volunteered at the school. Everyone thinks it's great."

"I'm sure they do," Dad quipped.

"Can I get you something to drink? Lemonade? I just made a fresh batch."

"No, thank you," they replied as one.

"Come sit down. Talk to us. Tell us all the things that have been going on." My mom's tone softened. "We're worried about you and Jimmy, Hannah."

It hadn't surprised me that they felt that way. So much had changed in so little time. My mom and I sat on the sofa while my dad sat in the chair adjacent to us.



“I wish you wouldn’t worry, but I understand why you are. To put your mind at ease, Jimmy is thrilled that Cash is his father. Both were shocked but elated all the same.”

“And you?” my dad said, leaning his chin on his closed fist. “How’s my baby girl? It had to be tough for you.”

How did I tell my parents that having Cash here had been tough, but not for the reasons they thought? That my heart felt as though it were in a tug-of-war between my past and future? The present didn’t seem to matter since it was a constantly changing entity. My past brought me both happiness and sorrow, and my future was another story altogether.

“Once Jimmy forgave me, I’ve been better. It had to be the most difficult and longest couple of days. Even harder than all those years ago when I thought Cash didn’t want him.”

“But he does?”

I couldn’t blame my dad for asking that question.

“Yes, very much so.” I smiled. “They’re so alike. We all saw the similarities even when Cash wasn’t around. Now that he is, it’s beyond obvious that he’s his father. The sad part is this has ruined Cash’s relationship with his own dad. Ironic, really . . . in an awful way.”

“That man made his bed,” Mom said with a huff. “What about Claire Jameson?”

“Cash’s mom is upset that she lost all that time with her grandson. She video chatted with him and Cash. Cried through the entire thing. Said that she hadn’t forgiven her husband yet.”

“John should be ashamed of himself for what he put the three of you through.” My dad shook his head. “He’s

not the man I thought he was when he lived here. Definitely not a Blossom Berry Falls fella.”

I couldn't help but smile at that assessment. John and Claire Jameson were far from small-town folks. When I'd first met them all those years ago, I was immediately intimidated. Claire seemed to be always put together nicely: perfectly styled shoulder-length hair that never had a strand out of place, clothes that appeared to be tailored just for her, and always just enough makeup to make her face glow. I remember me and Mia running into her at the grocery store. We were in cutoff jeans, tank tops, and flip-flops. Granted, we were teenagers, but she looked as though she had just finished selling one of those million-dollar houses on television.

“Cash is disappointed in him.”

“And what about you and Cash? How are you two getting along?”

*Oh. Let's see . . . first, I told him in no uncertain terms we would not be getting back together. So instead, we had mind-blowing sex. And every time I look at him, my insides turn to goo. He still can read me and knows how to turn me on like a light switch. Nothing major.*

Obviously, I wasn't going to share any of that with them. “We're doing fine. Once we stopped the blame game and realized we both made bad assumptions, things smoothed out for all of us. Plus, Jimmy adores him. Always had. That's the other thing. He wants Jimmy for the Hawks.”

My mom gasped. “He's fourteen.”

“That's amazing.” My dad beamed, making me roll my eyes.

“Yes, to both of those things. We still need to talk about the future, but putting that pressure on my son

isn't what I want to do. Although college is more important than baseball."

Before anyone could say anything else, the door swung open. We all turned to see Jimmy and Cash walking in, laughing about something. Jimmy tossed his bag down and looked up, a huge smile spreading across his face.

"Grandma! Grandpa!" He rushed to them and threw his arms around my mom first and then my dad. He looked back and waved Cash over. "My dad is here," Jimmy announced, bringing tears to both my mom's and my eyes.

Dad stood when Cash walked toward him. "It's good to see you, Mr. Hall."

Thankfully my father took Cash's offered hand and shook it. "You too. Please call me Bob. We're all adults now."

"And family," Jimmy announced. "Right, Dad?"

My mother and I exchanged a glance full of trepidation.

"Right." Cash turned toward my mom. "You haven't changed a bit. Still look more like Hannah's sister than mother."

"You're sweet. Always the charmer. How are you, Cash? We were sad to hear about your injury."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. But I'm doing well. Better than ever, actually."

Jimmy shared that he was going to go shower and ran up the stairs. Meanwhile, Cash walked over to me, kissed my cheek, sat on the arm of the couch next to me and started playing with my ponytail as though it was the most natural thing to do. "So what are we all talking about? Did Hannah tell you I was moving back to town?"

My mother brought her hand to her chest, and I rolled my eyes. “No, that is going to be wonderful. Isn’t it, Hannah?”

“Yes, it will be great for Jimmy.” That earned me a slight tug on my hair from Cash. I glanced up at him, and he smirked like only he could.

“Any other news you need to tell us?” my father asked, leaning his forearms on his knees.

I shook my head, and just as I was about to say, “Nope!” Cash chimed in with, “Yes, I’m still in love with your daughter.”

“Can you please excuse us?” I stood so fast I almost knocked Cash off the sofa. Snagging his arm, I pulled him into the kitchen. The first thing I did was open the refrigerator to get out the pitcher of lemonade, and I counted to ten as I did it.

Cash leaned against the counter, arms crossed in front of his chest, looking all gorgeous and relaxed.

“Did you want help pouring?”

“Are you out of your mind?” I whisper-shouted.

“You don’t want help pouring?”

An image of me pouring it over his head came to mind, but that would spark too many questions from my parents. “No. Why did you say that out loud?”

“Can you be more specific?”

His eyes focused on my rising and falling chest. I snapped my fingers. “Up here, please.” That damn smirk appeared again. “That you loved me.”

“But I do love you.”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

“Hannah, I’m pretty sure I’m more qualified to know my feelings than you are. Actually, I might be more qualified to know yours too. You’re just scared.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Ugh!”

“Everything okay in there, dear?”

“Yes, Mom. Just getting something for us to drink,” I shouted back. I filled the glasses and turned to Cash. “You don’t love me. And I don’t love you.”

Taking a few steps toward me, he cupped my face in his hands. “I’ll say it until you believe it. I love you, Hannah. If you don’t want to own up to your feelings, that’s fine. I can wait.” He glanced back at the counter. A vivid image of what he did to me popped into my head. Cash smiled. “I know you feel it too.” His lips met mine in a quick, soft kiss.

“You don’t play fair, Cash Jameson.”

“When it comes to you, Hannah Hall, I don’t play at all.”

“You’re infuriating.”

“You’re adorable. Just admit it. You want me just as much as I want you.”

“I don’t.”

“Liar.”

Ignoring him, I grabbed two glasses of lemonade and carried them into the family room, only to see my parents standing up. “Are you leaving?”

“Yes, we’re tired. We drove right here from the airport. Tell Jimmy we’ll see him at his game later this week. I can’t believe it’s his last one of the year.”

“Me either.” I set the drinks on the small table and kissed them each on the cheek.

“Bye, Bob. Bye, Elizabeth,” Cash said, waving from the family room.

“Bye, Cash,” they said in unison. “We’ll see you soon.”

“You can count on it.”

The door closed behind them, and I turned to look at Cash. “Must you be so charming?”

He shrugged. “It comes naturally. I’m going to leave now. Tell Jimmy I’ll call him later.”

“Okay.”

Before he left, he leaned in, our eyes locked, and he pressed his lips gently against mine. My breath caught in my throat as a flurry of emotions surged through me. Emotions I promised myself not to feel.

As our lips moved, my mind surrendered to the sweet sensation. Time seemed to stand still. My body responded instinctively, and I leaned into him, craving the closeness, the connection. I felt a surge of warmth and tenderness envelop me, spreading from my lips throughout my entire being. It was as if every nerve in my body sparked to life, tingling with a familiar sense of desire.

Yet, amid the dizzying whirlwind of emotions, a wave of uncertainty lingered. Coming to my senses, I broke the connection, and I found myself lost in his gaze, trying to find the right words, but they were lost to me.

“I . . . I . . .”

He trailed his knuckles down the side of my face. “No need to say anything. I’m going to go now.”

As soon as the door closed, I leaned against it and let out a long breath. “Damn you, Cash Jameson.”

# Chapter 21

## Cash

The rhythm of my jump rope matched the beat of the music pumping through my earbuds as I worked out. My breaths were quick and shallow as I bounced lightly on the balls of my feet, my body growing warmer with each passing minute.

Sweat began to bead on my forehead, and I shook it away, only to have more take its place almost instantly. Droplets fell onto the decking below, forming a small puddle that mirrored my exertion.

The jump rope whirred through the air with a soft, whooshing sound, slapping the wooden planks with each rotation. I increased my pace, feeling the burn in my calves and thighs. The music urged me to go harder, to keep pushing. It was like I was in my own world . . . until I looked up to find Hannah watching me through the trees.

Not slowing my pace, I continued my workout until the music in my ears began to fade as the playlist came to an end. Stopping, I caught my breath and smiled at Hannah. Unlike the last time, she didn't wave; just continued to stare.

I removed my earbuds, grabbed a towel, wiped the sweat off my face, grabbed my phone off the small table next to me, and called Hannah.

“Hi.”



“Good morning. Why are you up so early on a Saturday?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Plus, it’s laundry day. How do you have so much energy at six thirty a.m.? The sun is barely up.”

“I’m used to it. Plus, working out gets my blood flowing.”

“It’s impressive. Did you need something?”

“Yes, I was wondering if you could help me today. Can you be ready around eleven?”

“What do you need help with?”

“It’s sort of a surprise. Please just say yes. I really need you. It’s nothing dangerous. You can trust me.”

I could practically hear the wheels in her head turning. After a couple of seconds, she said, “Okay. I’ll help you.”

“Great. I need to go shower. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“All right. Don’t make me regret this.”

“I promise.”

Yesterday I called a Realtor, Becky Martin, and set up a couple of appointments to see properties in town. It was important for me to find just the right house, even if I needed to build it or renovate it. There was one property that was high on my list, and it was the farmhouse and barn where Hannah and I would sneak away as kids. When I first came to town, I noticed it looked like it was abandoned, and I was right.

I asked Becky to look into it, and come to find out, the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Polanski, moved ten years ago to be closer to their son in Seattle. They never sold the property, hoping that one of their other children would

eventually want it. According to Becky, that wasn't going to be the case. She contacted them, and they agreed to let her bring a client there.

Right on time, I walked up to Hannah's door and knocked. Jimmy pulled it open, looking freshly showered. "Hey. Mom said you would be here soon."

"Hi, yes. I need her opinion on something." Jimmy nodded, thankfully not asking any questions. "What are you up to today?"

"Meeting Max and a couple of people at the diner."

When he blushed, I couldn't help but ask, "Female people?"

A smirk I was all too familiar with crept across his face. "Yeah, maybe."

"Could it be Jasmine?"

"Nah. I'm not really into her. She's cool and all, but not really my type. I mean, she's gorgeous, but a lot of the guys like her. And have dated her. She's a bit too outgoing for me if you know what I mean."

I nodded. "I understand. So who do you like?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Do I need to like just one?"

*Shit.* How did I answer that? After searching my brain for a *What would Hannah say?* answer I came up with, "No, but you need to be nice to them. You're a good guy. Don't let baseball and popularity go to your head."

"Great advice," Hannah said, coming down the stairs in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, a lightweight jacket in her hand. "Hi, Cash. Jimmy, do you need money for the diner?"

I was about to reach into my pocket but stopped when he said, "No, I have money, but thanks."

“Want us to drop you off?”

“Nah, I’ll ride my bike.” He kissed his mom on the cheek before giving me a half hug, including a pat on the back. “See you guys later.”

“Be careful!” Hannah shouted as the door closed behind him.

“I think I need a book,” I blurted out, making her laugh.

“What kind of book?”

“A book of responses to teenage questions.”

“You’re funny. Your answer was perfect. Teenage years scare me, can’t lie about that.”

“Well, you have me here now, so you don’t need to do it on your own. Speaking of, we should get going.”

Once in my car, we drove down the country roads. Hannah rolled down her window, allowing the warm spring breeze to lift the ends of her hair. “I love days like this,” she said, closing her eyes.

“It’s perfect.”

I turned the corner and came upon the street leading to the farm. “Remember when we used to ride our bikes down here?” She sighed. “Life was so easy back then.”

“I remember a lot of things. Remember when we used to sneak onto the farm to pet the goats?”

She giggled. “I remember one of them biting the bottom of your basketball shorts.”

Talk about an embarrassing moment. Not only did that animal bite them, but he also wouldn’t let go. I had to take them off and ride back to my house in my boxer shorts.

“Yes, a moment I’ll never forget. Especially when my mom had her friends over for lunch, and they were all on the porch.”

Her giggles turned into full-blown laughter.

“Keep laughing.”

“I’m sorry, but that was hysterical.”

“Sure, for you maybe. Do you know that Mrs. Mangus asked me out that night?” I glanced over to see Hannah’s nose scrunching up. “Yeah, talk about a cougar. Needless to say, she was never invited over again.”

I pulled onto the property to see Becky’s navy-blue sedan in the driveway. “What are we doing here?”

After I parked the car and turned off the engine, I got out, walked around to her door, and opened it up. Hannah took my hand and stood. I closed the door and explained, “I’m thinking of buying this place.”

Her jaw slackened. “All of it?”

Becky walked up to us. “Hi, Cash. Hey, Hannah.”

“Hi, Becky.”

“You two know each other?”

Hannah’s brows furrowed. “This is Blossom Berry Falls. Everyone knows everyone.”

“Right. I forgot.”

“It’s good to see you two together again.”

Before Hannah could squash her theory, I took the reins. “Can we see the house now?”

“Yes, of course. The door is unlocked. Why don’t I let you two explore, and I’ll meet you back on the porch.”

“Thank you, Becky.”

With my hand on the small of Hannah's back, we approached the old farmhouse, its weathered exterior a bit more prominent the closer we got. The wooden planks creaked beneath our feet as we stepped onto the front porch, overgrown with live moss and surrounded by untamed weeds.

I glanced at Hannah, imagining us living here as a family. Pushing open the heavy, paint-chipped door, we stepped inside. We found ourselves standing in what seemed to be the living room, the remnants of an old sofa covered in a dusty white sheet and worn-out armchairs flanking a large red-brick fireplace.

"Wow," she whispered, her voice carrying a mixture of awe and sadness. "This looks nothing like I remember."

"Yeah," I replied, feeling a sense of sadness for this once-lively space.

We slowly made our way through the house, the wooden floorboards protesting with each step. Broken beams of sunlight filtered through the cracks in the curtains, casting patterns of light and shadows on the walls. Cobwebs stretched in the corners, giving it a very creepy vibe.

In the kitchen, we found a rusty sink and an old four-burner stove. A retro-style fridge, along with a large wood table, also filled the space.

Hannah walked around the perimeter, not touching anything. "It doesn't look as though anyone has been here in years."

"Because they haven't."

I went on to explain what Becky told me about the property. "A lot will need to be done, or it can be knocked down and a new structure can be built. It's the land that is amazing. Come on, I want to show you something." Grabbing her hand and thankful that she let me, I went

out the back door and pointed at the barn a distance away. "It's great, right?"

"Um . . . sure. For what exactly?"

"Pitching facility. When you mentioned that Jimmy goes to baseball camp, it got me thinking about the team, and having spent more time with them, there's a lot of potential. Small towns sometimes get looked over. If I turn that barn into a training facility, there's no telling what can happen. I can bring in some other pro players to help. They'd love it."

Hannah nodded. "That sounds wonderful. Jimmy will love it here."

"Will you?"

She spun around so quickly her sneakered foot caught on a raised floorboard, sending her into my arms. Her hands crept up my chest, prompting my blood to flow right into my pants. "Cash . . ."

I linked my hands behind her waist, and she looked up at me and me down at her. "I want a home for all of us. Me, you, and Jimmy. It's how it should have been from the start. And before you say no, just think about it."

"This is all too fast, and my home was my grandmother's."

Her house was very nice, but small. That being said, I'd live in a shed if it meant being together. "You're right. This was wrong of me. I'll tell Becky I'm not interested."

"Cash, if you like it, you should buy it. What about the training facility?"

"It was just a thought. Maybe down the road, I'll revisit the idea. Come on, let's get out of here."

Hannah was quiet the entire ride back to her place. My mind whirled with how dumb I was to push the issue.

Although I did need a place to live. Maybe I'd just see if I could stay in my rental long term. At least I'd be close to them.

We turned down the street next to the park, and Hannah looked over at me. "Can we stop?"

"Sure, is everything okay?"

"Yes, I just want to talk for a minute."

Rather than tell her we could talk while I drove her home, I pulled into the small vacant lot and parked the car. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"That'd be great."

We got out, walked toward the dirt path that we'd been on more times than I could count, and began our trek. Our hands brushed as they swung in the air.

"Remember when we came here after homecoming?"

"The bonfire party. How could I forget spin the bottle? I hadn't played that since the seventh grade."

"Right. All the girls wanted the bottle to point at you."

"Too bad I just wanted to kiss one person that night."

"Yes, I remember. Tori Landon. I think the entire male student body cried when she moved to Alabama."

"Not me."

"No, you were too cool for school."

"Funny lady." I playfully nudged her. Tori was beautiful. Light-blond hair, blue eyes, tall, she was very pretty, just not my type. The only girl I liked was Hannah, even though, at that time, we were just friends. "She wasn't the one I wanted to kiss that night. The girl I liked chose not to play. Claimed she wasn't feeling good."

Her eyes met mine. "You remember that?"

“I remember everything about you.”

“We were just friends.”

“Didn’t matter. Want to know something?”

“Hmm?”

We made our way to a large rock and sat down. Bringing my legs up, I leaned on my bent knees. “I was glad when you said you faked your illness.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want anyone else to kiss you.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it once again but didn’t say anything.

“Saved me from having to punch someone.”

She rolled her eyes.

“It’s true.”

“Well, I’m glad you only kissed Tori on the cheek.”

“Me too.” I leveled my gaze on her. “I’m really sorry about the house thing today. I got ahead of myself. It feels like I have a lot to make up for.”

“You’re here now, and that’s all that matters. Jimmy couldn’t be happier.”

“And you? What about you, Hannah? Are you happier? And please don’t say you are because Jimmy is. I get that. I do. I feel it too. At practice, during games, any time that kid feels joy, my heart fills. For a minute, think about yourself. I know I keep asking, but tell me. Are you happier with me here?”

She took a deep breath, seeming to gather her thoughts before answering. I couldn’t help but notice the way she looked at me, as though searching for something beneath the surface. Being at the park brought back memories of our time together. Hell, this entire town did.



Finally she broke the silence. "I've come to learn that my happiness isn't dependent on others, but rather how I feel when I'm around them. Take Mia, for instance. That girl makes me laugh and just knows how to lighten a situation, but more importantly, she listens and is honest. That makes me happy. When it comes to you being here, it's a bit more complicated."

I took her hand in mine, linking our fingers. "Complicated good or complicated bad?"

"Good?" she said, laughing. "Sorry. But you can't say it isn't confusing."

"Want to know what I can't stop thinking about?"

"Do I dare ask?" When I cocked a brow, she rolled her eyes. "Sex, right?"

"Have it your way. Yes. Sex with you. Each time I see you, I want to rip off your clothes. To lick every inch of your body. I want your sweet taste on my tongue and your warm wet heat pulsing around my dick." With each of my words, I could see her face flush with what I determined to be desire. "Trust me, sweetheart, there's nothing confusing about that."

"You really shouldn't say things like that to me."

"Why? Because it makes you want me?"

When she paused, I couldn't help but hold my breath. I knew she was overthinking, and I had to bite my tongue to tell her not to. Finally putting me out of my misery, she told me what I wanted to hear. "Yes, that is exactly why."

# Chapter 22

## Hannah

All I could do was stare at his mouth. Not only did the words turn me on, but I knew how those lips felt on my body. They were talented, skilled. He knew exactly how to vary the pressure and tempo, creating an array of sensations that left me breathless and craving more. Sometimes he would pull me closer, and his hands would gently cradle my face—which I came to find was one of my favorite things.

How could I *not* want him? I tried telling myself not to give in. That I needed to protect my heart. But hadn't I been doing that since he left? For so long, I believed he didn't want anything to do with me or our son. Yes, I still had a slurry of what-ifs running around in my head, but rather than the loudest one being, *What if my heart breaks again?* Now it was, *What if I'm missing out on the love of my life?* Because, let's face it, there had been no one since Cash.

"Take a chance, Hannah."

I knew he was waiting for me to make a move. To do something to assure him that we were now on the same page. "I'll think about it."

A sexy grin spread across his face. He cupped the back of my neck and pulled me to him. Our lips met in what started as a slow kiss and quickly became a heated one. Cash didn't hold back when he kissed me. There was

zero doubt that I was desired, and in that moment, there was nothing more important than the connection we had always shared.

I needed him. Every ounce of my body sparked to life. If there was anyone who could reignite my fire, it was Cash. He did it the night we had sex, and if I was truthful with myself, he did it again now.

Reluctantly, I broke our connection. “Your place,” I stated, leaving no room for argument, not that there’d be one.

Without hesitation, he grabbed my hand and led me to the car. Before I knew it, we were in his house, and my back was pinned against the front door. He gripped my ass and lifted me until my legs were wrapped around his trim waist.

“Jesus Christ, Hannah.”

I grappled for the hem of his shirt and yanked it free from his jeans. Keeping me in place with his pelvis, he leaned back and shucked his shirt off the rest of the way. Like a woman in heat, my hands couldn’t get enough of him. They brazenly caressed his rounded shoulders, down to his muscular back, and glided up to his neck. His hips thrust toward me, denim against denim. I could feel my body respond and knew once my pants were off, my arousal would be evident.

As though reading my mind, he brought his lips to my ear. “Are you wet for me?” *Thrust*. “Can you feel how hard I am for you?” *Thrust*. “Always you.” *Thrust*. “Only you.”

My entire body clenched. “I need to feel you, Cash.”

“First, tell me you’re mine.” He softly and assuredly peppered my neck with tender kisses, sending waves of goose bumps to cascade across my skin. His hand reached between us and unbuttoned my jeans. Supported only by the wooden door and his legs, he

lowered my zipper and slipped his hand into my panties. “So wet for me.” He teased my clit but didn’t enter me. Pushing forward, he ran his nose up my neck, followed by his tongue. “Tell me, Hannah.”

“Are you mine?” I couldn’t help but need to know.

“Always have been.”

My heart thumped loudly. His eyes bore into mine with such intensity that I couldn’t look away. The vulnerability in his gaze was both endearing and nerve-racking. His words hung in the air, and I found myself lost in a swirl of emotions. He’d said it before, and maybe it was the vulnerable position I was in, but I suddenly wanted everything and believed it could be possible.

Could I trust my heart with him?

His lips continued to pepper my skin with kisses, my heart raced, and I knew I’d never felt about anyone the way I did with him. No one could make me feel as alive as Cash. Fifteen years had passed, yet, whether I admitted it to him or even to myself, I’d never forgotten about him. Maybe that was why I had crappy dates and zero sex.

Deciding to take a chance, I swallowed whatever doubts I had and said, “I’ll think about it.”

“I’ll accept that for now,” he grunted.

Carrying me as though I weighed virtually nothing, he made his way up the stairs to what I assumed was his room. It looked nothing like him. The floral wallpaper, white cotton eyelet curtains framing the windows, and old-fashioned oak furniture made me smile.

“I know. Not very masculine.”

“It’s pretty,” I said. “Very you.”

“Are you calling me pretty?”

“If the face fits . . . yes.”

A giggle flew from my mouth. My body bounced off the mattress, and in a nanosecond, he was pulling off my jeans and taking off my shirt. Then, torturously slow, he took off the rest of his clothes.

I couldn't help but stare at the perfect man in front of me. “Still think I'm pretty?” he asked, now completely naked.

Propping myself on my elbows to get a better look, I was about to answer him when he wrapped his fingers around his hardened length and started to stroke himself. It had to be the sexiest thing I'd ever witnessed. My eyes were glued to the way his hand tugged, twisted, and caressed his dick.

All I could think of was if Pinky was here, I'd retaliate. Then again . . . I smirked and slowly began to lower my hand. I brought my knees up and let them fall to the side. Deep down, I knew if this was any other man but Cash, I couldn't do what I was contemplating doing. His eyes lasered in on my freshly shaven skin.

“Go ahead, Hannah. Touch yourself.”

Forcing a swallow, I let my middle finger slide toward my clit and began to make slow, steady circles, but it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted him. Knowing one thing that would set him off, I stopped and brought my wet finger to my mouth and sucked on it.

“Fuck this.” He let go of himself and got between my legs, the head of his penis rubbing against my slickness. “Do I need a condom? I swear the only woman I'd ever gone without with is you. Are you on birth control?”

I nodded. Taking that step was monumental for me, especially when I said, “I trust you.”

That was all he needed because, in one thrust, he was inside me.

“Fuck . . . you feel incredible. Your body was meant for mine.” He moved in and out of me, and I became slicker with each thrust. “No one else, Hannah.”

“No one else, what?” I breathed in a harsh whisper.

“No one else gets to fuck this pussy. It’s mine. You can deny it, but it’s a goddamn fact.”

Groaning, I didn’t want to dispute his claim. All I wanted was the euphoric feeling not to end. “Not even Pinky?” I teased.

On stiff arms, he lifted himself to look at me and stopped moving. “Who the fuck is that?”

Owning up to my vibrator having a name, I blossomed with embarrassment. “My vibrator.”

“No, not even Pinky, unless it’s by my hand. Does it feel better than this?”

He lunged forward, sending my head farther toward the headboard. His stiff cock slid in and out of me with purpose. I could feel myself gaining momentum toward orgasming until he unkindly slid out of me.

I was ready to curse him for leaving me on the edge, but he glanced up at me with those pretty eyes of his and smirked right before he blew a breath of warm air between my legs. “I’m going to feast on you for a bit.”

My hands gripped the sheet beneath me as he flattened his tongue against my opening. I may have called out to God when he slid it inside of me. Instinctively, my hips lifted off the mattress. Trading the sheet for his head, my fingers gripped the silky strands, tugging on them and doing my best to inch him closer to me—if that were even possible.

“You’re so fucking addicting,” he murmured against me.

Contrary to the situation happening between my legs, I let out a small laugh. I didn’t know why I did that, but stormy eyes met mine.

“More than baseball.”

“What?”

“You’re more addicting than baseball.”

Knowing what that meant, I lowered my hands to his face, cupping his cheeks, and gently pulled him toward me until we were face to face. “I’m more addicting than baseball?”

“One thousand fucking percent.”

Using what muscles I had left in my legs, I rolled us over and straddled him.

“My turn,” I said right before I slid over his stiff cock.

“Jesus Christ, Hannah.”

I’d never done that before. Anytime we had sex, Cash was in charge, but I needed this more for me . . . and maybe even for us.

His skilled hands cupped my breasts as my hips rolled and moved up and down his slick length. I couldn’t help but notice how his abs rippled with each upward thrust into me. Dropping my head back, I closed my eyes, letting our bodies dictate my movements.

In a flash, he flipped me over and sealed his mouth over mine. What started out frenzied and demanding morphed into slow and deliberate. He took his time, bringing both of us to the highest crescendo before cascading down into a pool of satisfaction.

Our ragged breathing filled the otherwise quiet room. “You’re incredible, Hannah.” Supported by his forearms,



his hands framed my head. Something washed over him that made him look younger, like the boy I fell in love with when I wasn't even sure what love was. Maybe it was an undeniable connection that by some greater power still coursed between us.

“We'll need to talk about everything.”

He pulled out of me, and I instantly missed him. “Be right back.” And he was, returning with a warm washcloth. Gently wiping away the evidence of our orgasms, he tossed the cloth aside and climbed into bed next to me.

Rolling onto our sides, we faced each other. “Are you really going to move here?”

“If you and Jimmy are here, then that is where I want to be. Of course, there's zero doubt in my mind that he'll be going pro. Our son has more talent than I ever did. With me coaching him and knowing the ins and outs of this business, he's going to go far. But that being said, it will be more him than anything I do.”

“College first, though.”

Cash ran his fingers up and down my arm. “If that's what he wants, of course.”

Not wanting to get into an intense discussion after mind-blowing sex, I smiled. “It's what we always planned. It's important.”

He pulled me into his arms. “Do you think he'll be happy that I'm going to move here?”

“Happy? He'll be elated.”

“What about you?”

Knowing he needed to hear it, I nodded. “Yes, I'm happy too. But won't it be hard for you?”

“No. Vince, the Hawks' GM, will understand. If he doesn't, I'll catch on with a closer team. Trust me, with

my scouting record, it won't be hard to do what I want."

"Always Mr. Confident."

He shrugged. "You love me anyway." My eyes widened at that declaration. Deep down, I knew I loved him, but for some dumb reason, I was terrified to say it out loud. "Figuratively speaking," he added, taking the burden of those words away from me.

"Right, figuratively speaking."

"When do you want to tell our son?"

"How about tonight? I can make you dinner."

"Sounds good. I'll provide dessert."

He winked, and I pushed him over and rolled on top of him. "How about we have dessert before dinner? Unless it's too soon—"

That sinister smirk appeared. He wrapped his arms around me, flipped us over, and grinned. "Batter up."

For the next hour, Cash made love to me, and suddenly everything felt right.

# Chapter 23

## Cash

It had been two weeks since Hannah agreed to give us another try—which was all I could ask for. I'd been spending more time at her house with her and Jimmy. Our son was thrilled that we were back together but understood we were taking it slow. That was more Hannah's idea than mine. If I had my way, we'd all be living under the same roof.

They were currently going over his homework. He laughed at something Hannah said, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy toward their close bond.

She was talking to him with a gentle smile, and I could see the love and care in her eyes. It reminded me of the times I'd spent with my mother. Really, both of my parents. My father was my biggest supporter. Little did I know that he'd also manipulated my life . . . something I never thought he'd be capable of or something I could forgive him for.

Not wanting to be an outsider, I rose from the couch and went to the kitchen table. Hannah's eyes met mine, and that spark I loved was back in them. "What am I missing?"

"Nothing," Jimmy replied with a roll of his eyes. When I chuckled, he said, "Shakespeare. Mom thinks it's eloquent. I'd rather take a one-thousand-problem AP

algebra exam. Plus, who wants to do homework on a Saturday?”

It seemed baseball wasn't the only thing he inherited from me. “Today is as good as any, and Shakespeare isn't too bad,” I lied. When he gave me an incredulous look, I shrugged. “Fine, I didn't like it either. But it's part of your curriculum, and you'll need it for your grades.”

“Do baseball players recite *Macbeth*?”

Hannah's eyes met mine. “Only a few,” I said with a smirk. “Look, I get it. How about this,” I said, not sure if bribery was an acceptable form of motivation, but since the parenting gig was new to me, I did it anyway, “if you finish your homework without giving your mom a hard time, I'll buy you that nine-hole pitching aid you wanted.”

“No way! That's over three hundred dollars!”

Hannah's eyes looked as though they were about to pop out of their sockets, but it was too late to ask for permission. I'd beg for forgiveness later when my head was between her legs.

“Yes, that's the one.”

“Deal!” he shouted. “Can I go upstairs to read?”

Not sure why I picked that time to look at Hannah for guidance, but that was exactly what I did.

“Sure, honey.”

“Great. Thanks for your help, Mom.” He kissed her cheek. My son caught on quickly. Then he looked at me. “Thanks, Dad.”

My heart tripled in size. “You're welcome.” Once he vanished up the steps, and we heard his door close, my girl turned and pinned me with a stare. Putting my hands up, palms facing her in surrender, I stated my case.

“Sorry, I wasn’t sure what to do. Plus, I already bought that training aid.”

She shook her head. “I know you have money, but we can’t spoil him.”

“What’s the sense in having it then? I have never bought him any birthday or Christmas gifts. I’ve never been able to take him out for a burger, to a movie, or for ice cream. I should have mentioned it. I’m sorry.” I stood, and she did the same. Linking my hands on the small of her back, I pulled her closer to me. “Do you forgive me?”

I lowered my lips to her neck and sucked on her pulse point. Her head tipped to the right, giving me more access. Hannah trailed her hands up my arms, rounding my shoulders and then coming back down again.

“You don’t play fair,” she said, a little bit breathless.

“I told you, I don’t play at all when it comes to you.”

“I know, but you make me want things, and our son is upstairs.”

“We can go to my place. It’s not like it’s far. Besides, I planned on asking for your forgiveness while I licked your pussy later.”

“Cash . . .”

“Do you want that? Tell me, Hannah. Because not only have I missed out on so much with our boy, I missed out on being with you. Consider it making up for lost time.”

Her chest rose and fell against mine. She brought her hands to my face and pulled me away from her neck. “Kiss me.”

In an instant, my mouth was on hers. Kissing Hannah had become one of my favorite things. A kiss was a simple act, but when with her, it ignited a blazing fire

within me. Just as I was about to lift her up and carry her to my place, we heard, “Get a room.”

Hannah pushed me back, her cheeks now boasting a pretty shade of hot pink, as she looked at him in horror. I laughed. Again, not the right response, but it couldn't be helped.

“Are you done with your homework?”

“Almost. Didn't mean to interrupt, but I was wondering if we could go to the store. I thought I'd get a new shirt for later.”

Tonight was the night of the jamboree. From what I'd been hearing all week at practice, Jimmy had been asked to go by four different girls. Some guys were jealous and claimed it was because I was his dad, but my son was a good-looking kid. He seemed to skip the dorky teenager stage that I went through. Much to his dismay, Hannah and I had been asked to chaperone, as had Mia.

She smiled, probably happy that he wanted to wear something other than a T-shirt to the dance. “Yes, I'll take you. Give me a minute to brush my hair.”

“I have a few calls to make,” I chimed in. “I'll pick you two up around seven.”

“Sounds good, but Jimmy is going with Max. Something about not wanting to arrive with his parents,” Hannah said, laughing before running up the stairs.

Jimmy rolled his eyes, then looked at me with curiosity. “What's on your mind?” I couldn't help but ask.

“I need advice.” My first thought was, *Let me go get your mom*. He then went on to say, “One of the guys said that Jasmine wanted to . . . you know. With me.”

*Shit.* “Is the *you know* you're referring to sex?”

“Yeah.”

*Great.* I glanced up the stairs, wondering how long it took someone to brush their hair. I could have showered by now. “Do you want to?”

“I mean . . . kind of. Just not sure it should be with her.”

“Then that answer would be no. Here’s the thing, like I’ve said to you before, being intimate with someone, especially for the first time, should be special. Now, a lot of guys will say the opposite, and I understand that too. But you’re only fourteen, Jimmy. I know you’re mature for your age and hang out with older kids, but you’re young. My advice would be, if you need to wonder if it’s the right thing to do, most likely it isn’t.”

Hannah appeared, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she heard what I’d said. “Okay, I’m ready. Everything okay here?”

“Yup,” Jimmy answered before I could say anything.

“Great.”

He grabbed his baseball hat, put it on his head backward, and headed outside. Hannah hitched her purse onto her shoulder and looked at me. “In case you’re wondering, that was a perfect answer.”

“Thank you. Maybe I’m getting the hang of this.”

“You’re doing great.” She rolled up onto her toes and kissed my cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

\* \* \*

After the jamboree, Hannah and I went to grab a bite to eat at the local diner. As soon as we walked in, heads turned and whispers started. It reminded me what it was like to live in a small town. Not wanting anyone to be



confused, I took her hand in mine and linked our fingers together.

She looked up at me and smiled as only she could. Leading her to a booth in the corner, I nodded at a few people who looked familiar. Hannah, on the other hand, greeted everyone by name as she passed them.

Sliding into our respective sides, I pulled the menus out of the holder behind the ketchup bottle and handed one to her. "I could go for a greasy burger."

"That does sound good."

Our waitress came over, plucked a pencil from behind her ear, and said, "Hey, kids. Good to see you. Can I bring you something to drink?"

"Hi, Sadie. Can I have an iced tea, please?"

"Sure thing, Hannah. And you, Cash?"

"I'll have the same. Unsweetened, though."

"You got it. And if you don't mind me sayin' so, I'm happy to see you both together. Your boy is the sweetest thing."

I couldn't help but agree. "Thank you. I'm happy that we're together too."

"Does that mean you're staying in town?"

"Yes, my family is here."

"I always knew you were one of the good ones." She winked. "I'll be back with your drinks."

"You're such a charmer," Hannah said as soon as Sadie went to the kitchen.

"Yes, so you've said on more than one occasion. Seems our son is too."

Hannah sighed. "I'm not ready for that yet. He's still my baby."

My chuckle earned me a playful glare. The moment Jimmy stepped into the gymnasium earlier that evening, decked out in jeans and his new blue button-down shirt, the energy seemed to shift. And when his friends joined him, it was as if a spotlight had been cast upon them. Not to sound cocky, but I knew that feeling. I remember when it first happened to me. From that point on, my confidence soared. I could see the same with Jimmy and his buddies.

But especially Jimmy. There had been no doubt that he'd been the center of several conversations. I'd seen it happen with the kids of former teammates. They were popular because their dad was. It couldn't be helped. People were curious about the lifestyle that they thought professional athletes had. Most of the time, media portrayals were vastly different from real life. Other times, they weren't—like other things in life, it depended on the person. When I first started in the league, I loved the attention . . . once I got used to it. But after a while, it got old. Still, some guys thrived on it.

Jimmy had it all and then some. He was smart, had enough charisma to fill a room, was a star baseball player, and, if I did say so myself, was a good-looking guy.

“Can you believe him tonight?” Hannah asked.

“Which part? The part where he suddenly became a country line dancer? Or when he fumbled his way through the two-step?”

Hannah's eyes sparkled with amusement. “Yes to both. But no one seemed to care that he didn't know the proper steps.”

I chuckled, remembering how the girls practically swooned as he twirled them around. Even some of the

shyest girls couldn't resist the opportunity to dance with him. "I think our son is a bit popular."

"You think?" Sadie dropped off our drinks, and we placed our burger order. "I hope it doesn't go to his head."

Shrugging, I took a sip of my iced tea. "It probably will at first. He'll just need to stay humble. That's where we come in. I'm not going to lie; it's easier said than done."

"Yes, I remember the pictures of you with various women."

I cringed. "I can't change my past, but all that matters is that I'm with you now."

"I know."

"Hey," I said, reaching across the table for her hand. "We're a family. You, me, and Jimmy."

"A family."

Sadie came back with our meals. "You two are adorable. Anything else I can get you?"

I shook my head, and Hannah looked at me and said, "No, thank you. I have everything I need right here."

Damn straight she did.

# Chapter 24

## Hannah

“I can’t believe this!” Jimmy said, standing on the mound of the Virginia Tigers before their game with the Utah Mavericks started.

“Cool, right?” Cash said, lifting the rosin bag off the dirt.

This morning Cash had surprised us with tickets to the minor league game a couple of hours south of Blossom Berry Falls. The last time I’d brought Jimmy to a Tigers game, he was six years old, and it was with his Little League team. And we were never on the field, but we also weren’t with Cash.

The teams were starting to take the field. Cash led Jimmy to Utah’s dugout. The young players’ eyes went wide upon seeing him. I couldn’t imagine getting that reaction. A gray-haired man in a Utah uniform stepped forward.

“Well, well . . . Cash Jameson.”

“Coach Glen, it’s good to see you.” Cash shook his hand and pulled him into a quick hug before turning toward us. “Coach, this is my girlfriend, Hannah, and our son, Jimmy.”

He nodded. “Heard something about that. Not that I wouldn’t be able to tell looking at you two.” Glen extended his hand to Jimmy. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too, Coach,” Jimmy said, suddenly sounding much older than his years.

Turning to me, Glen nodded. “Nice to meet you, Hannah. It’s good seeing this guy smile.”

Looking at Cash, I saw he was right. His smile shone as bright as the sun. “It’s nice meeting you as well.”

“We’re going to go take our seats. Have a great game.”

Cash led us through a gate to the first row behind the dugout, and we took our seats, leaving Jimmy between us.

He flagged down the concessions guy and bought us hot dogs and sodas. Everything felt natural. Like many other families, we watched the game, which was a close one until the sixth inning, when one of the Mavericks hit a grand slam.

“Bad time to throw a fastball. Full count, bases loaded, he expected it,” Jimmy said.

Cash nodded. “Definitely didn’t mean to hang it over the plate so long. What pitch would you have thrown?”

“Curveball. The batter fought off every pitch he threw at him. He got a piece of everything except the curveball. But at that pitch count, he’d expect a fastball . . . everyone does after that type of at bat. I’d rather finesse it.”

Cash looked at me over Jimmy’s head and cocked a brow. “You’re a smart kid.”

“What would you have done?”

“Exactly what you said.”

For the next couple of innings, we watched the Hawks win the game, and before the game ended, we left the stadium without incident or running into any reporters.

“Thanks for taking us to the game, Dad. Absolutely amazing.”

“One day, you might be on that field if you don’t go straight to the majors.”

“You think so?”

“Never say never, right?”

Jimmy beamed, and although still not being able to wrap my head around my son following in his father’s footsteps, I put a huge smile on my face and nodded. Cash and Jimmy talked about different pitches and scenarios the entire way home. Seeing them forming a bond was all I’d ever wanted. It was then I felt everything would work out . . . for all of us.

\* \* \*

Jimmy’s games always made me nervous, and today was no different. This was a big game for the team. If they won, they’d be in first place and the district champions. We didn’t have any playoffs or tournaments. This was it. To add more angst to my nerves, Cash’s mom was sitting next to my parents on the opposite side of me.

My parents were friends with the Jamesons when they lived in town but hadn’t spoken to them since they left. Claire apologized for her husband’s part in everything that happened. My parents assured her they didn’t put any blame on her. That only made me more thankful that his father wasn’t there.

We were all there for a common goal. To watch Jimmy pitch. I knew he was anxious about this game. For days, he and Cash had practiced with the new training aid that Cash bought him. Watching Cash pitch and teach Jimmy new things seemed as though it were the most natural thing. Every once in a while, they’d butt heads over what

pitch should be thrown and when. Jimmy liked to rely on his curveball, but Cash explained when not to use it.

*“You don’t want to be predictable,”* I heard Cash tell him once. *“Trust me, you’ll need a huge arsenal when you go to the big leagues.”*

My heart dropped. Each time I heard them talk about it, I wanted to say, “After college.” But I started to sound like a broken record even to my own ears.

The game was in the fifth inning, we were up by one, and Jimmy was still on the mound with the bases loaded. Cash ran out onto the field. Jimmy lifted his mitt to cover his mouth, and they had a conversation. I couldn’t help but wonder what was being said.

“I remember when Cash got into binds,” Claire said, sitting next to me. “His coach would tell him to think of a happy place but don’t get lost there.” She smiled. “I always thought it was a bizarre thing to say, but it used to work.”

I loved when Claire told me stories that could be passed down to Jimmy. Cash ran off the field. The catcher, Ian, went back behind home plate, and Jimmy positioned himself next to the rubber. He shook off the first sign from Ian, then got in his stance. He brought his arm back, and when he threw the ball, I said a prayer for the batter to miss. Thankfully he did. *Two more,* I thought.

Jimmy kicked the dirt with his foot, sending a small plume of dust into the air. He rubbed his right hand on the front of his pants. He glanced over at Cash, who gave him a sign before clapping twice. He got back in his stance, nodded at whatever pitch Ian called, lifted his mitt, and threw the ball. It was the perfect sinker. That time, when the batter swung, the ball went straight up in the air. The kids in the dugout popped up off the bench



and went to the railing. Everyone in the crowd looked toward the sky, and when Ian caught the ball for the third out, cheers erupted all around us.

Students rushed to the field. Once the teams shook hands, Ian and Jimmy were hoisted up on other players' shoulders. We all high-fived each other and the fans around us.

"This is so great," Mia shouted.

We followed the crowd down to the field. Cash spotted us and hustled over. His face lit up when he saw his mom, but first he wrapped his arms around me, lifted me off my feet, and kissed me. I couldn't help but laugh when he spun me around.

"Our boy killed it. Did you see his sinker?" he asked, setting me back on the grass.

"I did. All that practice paid off."

Cash nodded and looked to my left. He said hello to Mia and my parents before turning toward Claire. "Hi, Mom."

They hugged and Claire wiped her eyes. "Hi, sweetheart. What a great game."

Players and fans ran by us, shouting their congrats as they started to leave the field. Jimmy ran up to us, high-fived Mia, hugged my parents, and apologized that he was sweaty, then kissed me on the cheek. Every time he did that, I wondered when or if he'd stop. That would be the day I cried.

We all boasted about how great he played. Then he looked at his other grandmother.

Cash slung his arm around Jimmy's shoulders. "Son, this is—"

“Hi, Grandma Claire,” Jimmy said, bringing more tears to her eyes. “Thanks for coming to my game.”

She threw her arms around him while his hung loosely at his sides and then raised to hug her back. “Let me take a look at you,” she said. “You reminded me so much of your dad today. But I will say, I see a lot of your mom in you too.”

Jimmy glanced at me and smiled. “Yeah, she’s the best. Mom, the team is going to go grab burgers at the diner. Can I go?”

“Sure, but come home right after. I’m sure all of your grandparents would like to spend time with you.”

Something caught his attention behind us. When Cash followed his sight line, his jaw ticced. Turning, I saw John Jameson walking toward us.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Cash grunted.

We all turned. Claire gasped, and out of my peripheral, I saw my mother holding my dad’s arm. There had been zero doubt that he wanted to kick John’s ass, and I didn’t blame him one bit.

With his hands in the pockets of his slacks, he walked up to us. “What are you doing here, John?” Claire asked.

He didn’t say anything to her but instead looked at Jimmy. Instinctively, Cash and I flanked him. It didn’t matter that my son was almost six feet tall, thanks to a growth spurt. I still felt the need to protect him.

“You must be Jimmy,” he said with an outstretched hand.

*Oh, no. You’re not putting my son in that position, I thought.* But I didn’t need to do anything because, like his father, Jimmy crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“You’re not welcome here,” Cash finally said before sternly adding, “Leave.”

He looked at me. “Hannah, I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for—”

*Slap.* I couldn’t help it. It was as though my now-stinging hand had a mind of its own. “Don’t you dare say you’re sorry as though that exonerates you from what you did. You’re not welcome here or in our lives. You made that choice fifteen years ago, and I’m making it now.”

John nodded and looked at Cash. “Do you feel the same way? I made a mistake. I know it was a big one, and I’m sorry.”

“A big one? You disrespected Hannah. You disrespected me, not to mention Mom. All those years I missed out on with my son and Hannah were because of you. Do you know how lucky I am that Hannah is a great mother and has the support of her parents and friends? What if she didn’t? What if . . .” Cash ran his hand through his hair.

Jimmy stepped forward. Almost eye to eye with his paternal grandfather. A lump formed in my throat and lodged there. Breathing became difficult, and the air around us stilled. “I agree with my parents. You should leave. They don’t want you here, and neither do I. For the past fourteen years, I’ve had one grandfather. And you’re nothing like him. He loves his family.”

I heard my dad clear his throat, and my mom sniffled, but I kept my focus on Jimmy. I didn’t want this exchange to bring down the high of winning the game. I wanted to step in so badly to end it. I put my hand on Jimmy’s arm.

“I don’t know all of what you said to my mom, but I do know that you lost your chance to be my grandfather. My

mom is the best person ever. My hero. And you turned her away when she needed my dad. Now it's our turn."

"I agree with my son. And we don't want to hear any excuses because there aren't any you can give. Hannah and I are back together. We're with our son and our family. We don't need or want you around. As far as I'm concerned, I no longer have a father."

John shook his head. "I did what I thought was right and best for you."

I was half expecting Cash to tell him to fuck off, but instead, he took my hand in his, put his arm around Jimmy, and waited for his father to do the right thing and go back to where he came from.

"Claire, are you coming?"

She shook her head. "No."

"I see. Okay." He let his gaze roam over all of us before turning and walking away.

We all let out a collective breath. Cash gave Jimmy a quick hug and smack on the back, as guys did. "I'm proud of you, Son."

"Not sure what got into me. I just thought about what he did." Jimmy looked at me. "That slap was killer." He laughed and I reluctantly joined in.

"Like you, I don't know what got into me."

"I do. You're a badass," he said.

"Language. But you're right. I kind of am." I winked, and thankfully the air was lighter again.

"Here's some money. Go to the diner. It's on me."

Jimmy looked at the one-hundred-dollar bill in his hand. "Wow, okay. Thanks." He said quick goodbyes to everyone and hustled away.

Cash put his arm around me, leaned down, and whispered in my ear, “You are a badass, and that was a total turn-on. Can we ditch everyone?” I shook my head. “A quickie under the bleachers for old times’ sake?”

I pushed him away, laughing. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Yeah, ridiculously in love with you.”

Finally admitting to him what I’d known all along, I smiled. “I love you too.”

“I know, but it’s good to hear it.” I playfully smacked his firm stomach, and he kissed my temple. “Let’s get out of here.”

# Chapter 25

## Cash

School was over, Hannah was on vacation, and Jimmy had left for camp, but not until after I'd had an amazing Father's Day with my son. It didn't even matter that I didn't call mine because Jimmy made up for it tenfold. We went to breakfast, and he gave me a framed picture of us that Hannah had taken at the last game. It was one of my best days.

Then there was his mother. Ever since Hannah told me she loved me again, all I could think of was making her mine forever. How could I not? We were perfect. And since Jimmy had been away, I'd been staying at her house.

While she was in the shower, I decided to get my workout in. As soon as I stepped outside, the humid summer air clung to my skin. I set up my favorite workout playlist on my phone, stuck my earbuds in my ears, and clicked play.

The beat dropped, and I started to jump, the rope effortlessly gliding over me as if it had a life of its own. Every so often, I'd cross it in front of me, swing it to the right, then left, then continue jumping. Shirtless, I let the morning breeze brush against my skin, providing relief from the humidity. Still, beads of sweat formed on my forehead, and my heart pounded in sync with the music. I pushed myself, jumping higher and faster.

As the playlist neared its end, I slowed my pace, catching my breath. Grabbing a small towel, I mopped up the sweat, starting with my face, chest, then arms. I walked around the deck, slowing my heart rate with each step.

I headed into the house, and the air-conditioning felt like a balm to my overheated skin. Getting a glass out of the cabinet, I filled it with water and chugged it down. Glancing upstairs, I wondered whether Hannah was still in the shower and whether she wanted company, but my phone rang, and when I saw Cal's name flash across the screen, I tapped the green phone icon.

"Little early for you to be calling, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "It would be if I were in Utah, but we just landed in Charlotte."

"Why are you in Charlotte? And who's *we*?" As soon as I asked that, I knew. "You and Thor?"

"Dude, I couldn't leave him. Plus, come to find out, this dog is a total chick magnet. The flight attendants loved him, especially Gretta. She flies in and out of Nevada. Total babe. Got her number for when she comes to Utah. Then there was Vanessa. Met her in the airport lounge. Great tits, sweet ass, and legs that could wrap around me twice."

I ran my hand along my jaw. "I'm happy for you. You never answered my question."

"We're coming to see you before heading to Tennessee to see my cousins tomorrow. I have something that I think you want." I heard a female voice, and then Cal chuckled. Thor's name was mentioned, and then Cal laughed and spoke to who I assumed was the woman near him: "You got it. I'll call you."

"Yo!"



“Sorry. I’m telling you, man, I should have gotten a dog years ago. Anyway, I’m boarding in about two hours. Shoot me your address. I’ve got to go. Later.”

The phone screen went dark before returning to my home page. I sent him Hannah’s address and hustled up the stairs, where Hannah stood in a cute summer dress. “I love when you wear skirts.”

She reached up to her ear and put in a silver hoop earring before doing the same to the other side. Holding up a necklace, she said, “Can you fasten this for me, please?”

“Sure.” Walking over, she lifted her hair, giving me access to her neck, and I inhaled her sweet scent. “You smell so good.”

“It’s my new strawberries-and-cream bodywash. You like it?”

“Yes, it’s making me very hungry.”

Turning in my arms, her nose crinkled. “You . . . um . . .”

“Stink?” I laughed. “Just worked out.”

Her eyes roamed up and down my body. “You look good, though. I thought I heard you talking to someone?”

“I was. Cal called. He’ll be here this afternoon.”

“Did you know he was coming?”

“No. Apparently he has something to give me. He’s coming here before going to Tennessee to see his cousins.” I shrugged. “What time is Mia going to be here?” The two were going to breakfast and then to do a little shopping. Thankfully Hannah humored me when I gave her my credit card and told her to buy whatever she wanted. I knew she wouldn’t go overboard—not that I’d care if she did; in fact, I’d welcome it.

“She should be here soon.”

“Do you mind if Cal comes here instead of my place for now? I wanted to get some work done, and your Wi-Fi is better.”

“What’s mine is yours.”

My mind went to a very different place than her modem. Reaching forward, I used my index finger to trace the swell of her breasts peeking out of her dress. Tiny goose bumps peppered her skin. “I like that statement.”

She laughed and swatted my hand away. “Go shower. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Have it your way.” I jutted out my bottom lip in a dramatic pout.

Hannah shook her head. “I’m not falling for that. I’ve seen that move more than once raising Jimmy. It didn’t work for him, and it won’t work for you.” Per usual, when she mentioned something I missed Jimmy doing as a baby, I frowned, and she felt bad. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I like hearing about things he did.” That was the truth. Did it bum me out sometimes? Yes. Did I want her to stop talking about him? Absolutely not. My outstretched hand covered her stomach. “Maybe one day I’ll put another baby in here.”

The thought of having another child with her had crossed my mind more than once. We never really talked about it. Suddenly an image of a mini Hannah popped into my head. A sweet little girl with big brown eyes, blondish pigtails, and a smile that could light up a room, just like her mom. She’d wrap her little hand around my index finger and squeeze with all her might. I’d teach her how to play baseball, Hannah would teach her all about drawing and art, and she’d idolize her big brother. As far as me, I’d give her anything she wanted.

Hannah stared at me. I kissed her forehead. “You better go to Mia before she gets antsy.”

“Okay.” Her brows furrowed. “But you want to have a baby?”

“If you do. It’s nothing we need to decide now. Although we could always practice so we’re ready.”

A pretty pink hue filled her cheeks. “I’m not sure if I do or not, but I do like practicing. Maybe we can start when I get back from shopping. I’ll only be a few hours.”

“Cal and Thor will be here when you get back.”

Her brows tugged together. “Who the heck is Thor?”

Mia’s voice traveled up the steps. “Hannah, I’m here. Don’t rush if you’re getting a protein boost. I’ll be on the porch!”

Hannah shook her head. “I wonder about her sometimes.”

I laughed. “Go on, have fun. I’ll see you when you get back.”

She rolled onto her toes and swiftly kissed me. Back on solid footing, I smacked her on the ass. “Okay, I love you. See you later. And Cash?”

“Yeah?”

“I do think practice makes perfect.” She giggled and scurried out of the room and down the steps.

*God, I loved this woman.*

\* \* \*

Freshly showered, I sat at the kitchen table, looking at a few scouting reports. Yes, I was technically on personal leave, and despite not being the only scout for the

Hawks, I wanted to make sure no potential player had been overlooked. I also wanted to check on who was going to approach Jimmy because there was no way that wouldn't happen.

Word traveled fast. Curiosity about him being my son would get them to the park, but after they saw him pitch, any scout would realize his potential. The kid had the control of a minor leaguer. He had natural talent, was smart, took direction well, and worked hard. There was little not to like about him. That was why I knew everyone would strike while the iron was hot.

There were a lot of talented kids around the country, but only a few truly stood out. That was why when that diamond was found, contracts and early commitments were so important. Last year, a high school freshman committed to a college to play ball. So many people thought it was absurd for a fourteen-year-old to do that, but regardless, it happened. All they needed to do was a quick internet search, and all skepticism would be laid to rest.

Opening up my email, I saw a couple of them were from Vince, one from my dad (which was instantly deleted), several from coaches from various schools wanting me to take a look at players they thought had potential, and a couple from colleges inquiring about Jimmy. Not because I was a scout but because I was his parent. According to what I read, he would most likely be able to write his own ticket. Despite my having enough money to pay for his schooling, I knew that Hannah would love it if he got a scholarship.

Meanwhile, I still thought he could go straight to the pros, but that wasn't my decision or Hannah's to make. It was Jimmy's. Needing to make notes, I got up and grabbed a large spiral notepad from the coffee table and flipped it open. Rather than find a blank sheet of paper, I

found a sketch of a building that left me awestruck. It was a beautifully intricate drawing of a modern skyscraper that seemed to touch the clouds. The attention to detail was remarkable. I couldn't help but admire it. Then I noticed Jimmy's name in the bottom right corner of the page.

As I continued to turn the pages, I came across a modern take on a farmhouse, complete with a barn. It was beautiful. Letting my imagination wander, I thought maybe I could buy land and have this house built. Because how cool would that be? I knew my kid had talent on the field, but after seeing this, I knew why Hannah wanted him to go to college.

I set the book back down, leaving it open to that page to remind me to talk to Hannah about it. Then I got up, grabbed a scrap piece of paper out of the junk drawer I found in Hannah's kitchen, and jotted things down. In one of Vince's emails, he asked if I could take a look at a kid who played in a travel league two hours south of Blossom Berry Falls. Since he'd been so understanding, I replied that I would. Then there was a knock at the door, and as soon as I heard a high-pitched bark, I knew my friend and his sidekick had arrived.

Pulling the door open, I found my buddy standing on the porch with a rolling suitcase and small duffel bag next to him, Thor in his arms.

"Hi. Come on in."

He put down a tail-wagging Thor, who instantly scurried off to lie on a small throw rug near the sofa. "Hi, he's exhausted." Cal brought everything inside and set it by the door. "This is a nice place. So different from yours."

He wasn't wrong. Hannah's home was inviting and cozy. Mine was large and stark. I grabbed us each a

bottle of water, and we sat down on the couch. Curiosity got the best of me, so I rushed to ask what was so urgent.

Cal got up and went to his suitcase. When he came back, he handed me a turquoise envelope, a little tattered on the corners. “When you told me about that box of fan mail, I took it upon myself to look in it. I didn’t want to send it only for you to be disappointed. I knew you were stressed out.”

I nodded a couple of times and let him continue.

“You had a few marriage proposals, lots of pictures, a pair of lace thongs, which were from that high-end store, you know the one . . .”

I had no clue, so I stared at him, wondering how he did, but no way I’d ask.

He snapped his fingers and announced, “La Perla.”

As if that helped me, which it didn’t.

“I didn’t see any letters from Hannah or about you being a dad, but I saw this. Didn’t want to risk sending it and knew you’d want it.”

I took the card from him, slid it out of the envelope, and smiled. On the front was a turtle who had a bandage on one of his arms. Big, bold letters at the top said, WISHING YOU A SPEEDY RECOVERY. Opening it, I skipped the preprinted part and read the handwritten words on the blank side.

*Dear Mr. Jameson,*

*I’m sorry you got hurt. I hope you get better soon. I’m a pitcher too. Not like you because I’m only 11. My mom told me that you went to school with her. So cool. And you were the best pitcher on the team. We live in Blossom Berry Falls, Virginia. Her name is Hannah. My name is Jimmy. I heard on TV that you might not be able*

*to play again. Total bumner. Even if that happens, you will still be my all-time favorite player. I hope to be like you one day.*

*Your biggest fan,*

*Jimmy Hall*

The words blurred, and I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. If I'd only seen this card. Yes, I would have missed eleven years, but at least I would have known. Another wave of regret washed over me like a tidal surge—once again thinking about all the lost time, the moments I could never get back, and the absence I unknowingly left in his life.

“You okay, man?”

I'd almost forgotten Cal was next to me. “Yeah. No. I'm so pissed off that I missed my son growing up.”

“You're here now, right? He's still your biggest fan, and you got your girl back. They're your family. It sucks, don't get me wrong, and your dad is a total dick for what he did, but since none of that can be changed, don't harp on it.”

“I know. It's frustrating as fuck.”

The front door opened, and Mia and Hannah walked in. Their chatter preceded their entrance. Our heads swung in their direction.

“Holy shit. Dude . . . they're gorgeous.”

He wasn't wrong. The ladies were pretty, but I never noticed Mia in that way. She was obviously attractive, but Hannah was the only one who captured my attention.

We both stood. I was happy to see all the shopping bags that Hannah had in her grasp. Setting them down, they walked over.

“Welcome home,” I said, giving Hannah a quick peck on the lips. “Hannah, Mia, this is my friend Cal. Cal, you remember my girl, Hannah, and this is her best friend, Mia.”

He stretched out his hand to Hannah. “Good to see you again, Hannah. It’s been a while.”

She nodded with a smile. “It has, and it’s good to see you too.”

When he reached for Mia, Thor yipped. “Oh my goodness, who do we have here?” Mia said in a voice that I’d never heard her use before. She reached down, picked him up, and held him to her chest. She stroked his furry head with the underside of her chin. “Aren’t you a sweetie.”

“See, total magnet,” Cal whispered to me. “That’s Thor,” he said to Mia.

“Thor? Such a powerful name for such a cute little dog. Right?”

I couldn’t help but laugh since she was talking to the pup and not my buddy. She kissed the top of his head and finally looked at Cal. “Well, hi there.”

Hannah rolled her eyes, and I chuckled once more. “What brings you to town, Cal?”

I went to the table, picked up the card, and held it out to her. Hannah sucked in a breath and looked at me. “That’s the card Jimmy sent you.”

“It is. Cal found it and brought it.”

She looked at him. “Thank you. Did you happen to find any of my letters?”

He shook his head. “No, sorry. I looked through them all.”



Her shoulder hitched to her ear in a small shrug. “Thank you for checking. I’m happy that Cash has Jimmy’s card.”

“So,” Mia said, still holding Thor, “how old is this little guy?” She was always good at breaking the tension in a room.

“Eight months.”

Mia handed Thor to Cal. “He’s such a good puppy.”

“I need to get going. I have a meeting with another teacher . . . summer school curriculum.” Mia kissed Hannah on the cheek and had some sort of silent woman conversation. She then went toward Cal, bent down, and kissed Thor on the head. “Bye, cutie.”

Like an idiot, my buddy said, “Bye.” Mia giggled and walked out the door.

Cal looked at me and Mia. “What?”

All I could do was shake my head. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and a picture I had taken of me and Jimmy filled the screen. I couldn’t wait to tell him about the card. “Hey, buddy. How’s camp?”

“Great. There’s a friend of yours here.”

“Who?”

“Jake Webster. Said he’s a scout for Colorado. He heard I was your son.”

*Of course he did.* “He’s at the camp?” After Hannah moved closer to me, thanks to my harsher tone, I mouthed, “Everything is fine.”

“Yeah. That’s never happened before. Said he wanted to talk to me about possibly heading to Colorado after I graduate. I think he’s friends with one of the coaches here or something.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him I was busy. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

Dropping my head forward in relief, I let out a breath. “I’ll take care of it. You concentrate on playing ball. How are you doing?”

“Really well. I won all the skills challenges, came in second in batting, and my speed is in the top five of the fifty kids here at camp.”

*That’s my boy.* “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks. I need to go. Tell Mom I said hi.”

“You got it. Love you, son. When you come home, I have something to show you.”

“Okay. Cool. Love you too.”

He loved me. The exchange was so effortless I’d almost missed it. Before doing anything else, I tapped out a text to Jake once I found his name in my contacts.

**Heard you met my son.**

**JAKE: Great kid. Amazing player.**

**He’s there for camp. Leave him alone.**

**JAKE: Calm down. You’re not the only scout in the game.**

**No. But I’m the only one who’s his father. Don’t fuck with me, Jake.**

Those little dots bounced, then went away a few times, and no other texts came through.

“What’s going on?” Hannah asked.

“First, he wanted me to tell you hi.” Her bright smile quickly faded when I then said, “A scout for the Colorado Bears is there. Wanted to talk to Jimmy.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry. Jimmy told him he was busy, and I just sent Jake a text telling him to back off.”

“Do you think he’ll listen?”

Did I? Something told me he wouldn’t, but I didn’t want to freak her out, so I nodded. “Yeah. If he knows what’s good for him.”

Hannah let out a sigh of relief. “I guess we’ll need to talk to him when he gets home.”

“Probably. Everything will be fine, I promise.” I kissed the top of her head.

“I trust you.”

That was all I needed to hear. Shortly afterward, Cal, Thor, and I went to my place. He was wiped out from traveling, and my blood was still simmering about Jake. I needed to come up with a plan. While Cal snored on the couch, I grabbed my laptop and got to work.

# Chapter 26

## Hannah

I was so excited to surprise Cash today. When I was out with Mia yesterday, I picked up a couple of things for him. One of them was under the dress I had on, and the other was tucked away in a gift bag. I wanted to give it to him for Father's Day when Jimmy was still home, but it wasn't ready in time. Mainly because I didn't know what to get until the last minute . . . but it was fabulous, and I knew he'd appreciate it. If not, I'd strip, and once he saw the little lacy number, he'd forget about everything else.

Grabbing the present, I headed through our adjoining backyards and raised my hand to knock on his sliding glass door but was stopped midknock. Because a shirtless Cash was standing at the counter with his back to me. I took a moment to peruse my gorgeous boyfriend in basketball-style shorts that hung loosely on his narrow hips. The man could win a best-ass contest. Cash would say that about mine, but that was because he liked to squeeze it. He had the type you'd want to bite. Perfectly formed thanks to all his workouts.

Then there was his back, which was toned, defined, and had me licking my lips. That was the moment he turned around, and I smiled.

Shaking his head, he walked over to the door and slid it open. "Staring is very becoming on you."

I put my hand on his chest and moved him aside. “Funny. I wasn’t staring. I just got here.”

“Sure. Okay.” He winked, and I shrugged. “This is all yours. Feel free to do with it what you want.”

“Maybe later. First, I have something for you.” I held up the glossy gold-and-white-striped gift bag stuffed with matching tissue paper.

“What’s this?”

“Happy belated Father’s Day. I know that you’re not my dad, but I wanted it to be special for you, and this gift wasn’t ready yet.”

“You can call me Daddy if you want.”

I crinkled my nose. “Oh my God. No! What’s wrong with you?”

He chuckled and pulled me in for a kiss. “Sorry, this is what I get for letting Cal pick the movie last night. Please don’t ask.”

“I don’t think I will.”

“Good call.” He reached out and accepted the gift, walked over to the counter, and set it down. My heart raced with anticipation. I’d been so excited about this that I almost told him about it before it was ready.

He pulled out the thin paper before pulling out a square box. The cover had pictures of Jimmy printed on it, from when he was a baby to just a few weeks ago. The title across the top read *Adventures with Jimmy: A Home Movie*.

Cash looked at me, his eyes shining with emotion. “Hannah . . .”

“I thought maybe you’d like to see—”

In a flash, his mouth was on mine. I completely melted in his arms, molding myself against his body. His

warm hands cradled my face, sending shivers down my spine. His lips were demanding yet tender. It was a kiss filled with affection, desire, and what I assumed to be gratitude for the gift.

He shifted his hands to wrap his arms around me, squeezing me tighter and making my feet almost leave the floor. If we kept this up, he'd get his second gift before watching the first. Reluctantly, I broke the kiss.

“Does that mean you like it?”

“No, I love it and you. Can we watch it now?”

“Yes. It's on a thumb drive. There's also a link that you can download to the cloud.”

“Sounds perfect. Let's sit on the couch.”

I pulled my feet up and angled my body toward Cash, who positioned his computer so we could both see it.

“Is this okay? I know the screen is smaller than a television.” I nodded. “Great, because I can't wait to watch this.”

Once he removed it from the case, he slid the thumb drive into the drive opening. The screen changed from whatever he'd been working on to me, pregnant with Jimmy. My mom had taken that video. “I gained thirty-eight pounds,” I told him. “That was the day before I gave birth. I look horrible but thought you'd like to see it.”

“Hannah, you're beautiful.”

Soft music played to fill the spots where there wasn't any real-time audio. For the next several minutes, we saw Jimmy's first through fifth birthdays, his kindergarten graduation, and his first T-ball game. I smiled, watching my young son walk up to home plate, swinging a bat almost as long as he was. He lifted the bat, swung, and

spun around, missing the ball completely. You could hear me in the background yelling, “You’ve got this, kid!”

Cash paused the video. “You used to say that to me when I played. I heard you say it at the alumni game.”

“I know. I saw you look in my direction.”

“So that was you I saw ducking behind the person in front of you.”

“You saw that?”

“Yeah. I just hoped you weren’t hiding from me.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Okay, back to our son.”

Cash started the movie again. The camera zoomed in on Jimmy as he stuck his tongue out, swung, and hit the ball about four feet in front of him. He took off, and I couldn’t help but laugh, watching his little legs in his baggy baseball pants run to first base.

“Even then, my boy had a great swing and knew how to hustle.”

I nodded. “He’s always loved baseball.”

There were more videos of Jimmy during a spelling bee, losing on the word *boil* because he thought the teacher said *bowl*.

“That’s a technicality. Totally sounded like *bowl*. They should have given it to him.”

“That was the fourth grade. He got over it.”

Cash shrugged. “Still bullshit.”

I laughed again. “Keep watching.”

And we did, for two hours. When we got to the end, Cash set the laptop on the coffee table. He turned and reached forward, grabbing my hand in his and pulling me



on top of him. Now straddling his legs, I sat back and looked at him.

“Did you like it?”

“Next to Jimmy, that had to be the best gift you could have given me. Truly, Hannah, you don’t know how much that meant to me.”

“No, I do know. I can see it in your eyes. You love him.”

“More than I thought I could love anyone. It’s funny how your heart expands to allow more love in.”

“Are you getting philosophical on me?”

He laughed and slid his hand under the skirt of my dress until it reached my thighs. “No, it’s just hard to explain.”

“You don’t need to. I feel it too.”

He effortlessly stood, sliding his warm hands under my ass, and carried me upstairs. “Ms. Hall, what do you have on under this dress?”

“Another gift.”

We entered his room. “Can I open it now?”

“How about I do it for you?”

Being brazen had never been one of my strong suits, except when it came to Cash. Maybe because I knew that he loved me and that even if I did something that would normally embarrass me, he’d still be standing in front of me.

Setting me down, he backed up, leaned against his bedroom wall, and crossed his arms. “Be my guest.”

As slowly and sexy as I could, I reached for the hem of my knit dress and pulled it up, teasing him with flashes of the lace beneath it until he groaned. I could see his

excitement growing in his shorts. Knowing what I wanted to do and also knowing I had never attempted a striptease, I took my dress off all the way and let it drop behind me.

After stepping forward, I stood in front of him. Our eyes met, and I placed my hands on his smooth pecs before I kissed the spot between them. Continuing down, I pecked his skin, lowering myself as I went.

“Hannah.” My name sounded more like a plea because, at that moment, I lowered his shorts and took him into my mouth. “Jesus.”

I worked him with my lips and tongue, and I caressed the bottom of his shaft with my right hand. Inhaling his manly scent spurred me on. His fingers gripping my hair didn’t hurt my cause either. My knees protested the hardwood beneath them, but I didn’t care. I had one goal, and that was to bring Cash to a high that only I could.

“Christ,” he grunted. “Hannah, look at me.”

When I rolled my eyes up, his abs flexed. He put a warm hand on my cheek. Flattening my tongue, I took him as deep as I could, and right when I thought he was ready, he lifted me up.

“Not going to come without you.”

When he laid me on my back on top of his comforter, he spread my legs and smirked. “Crotchless?”

“Thought we might need the easy access.”

“Yeah, you thought right.”

Cash slid into me, and it didn’t take long for the two of us to reach a crescendo before saying each other’s names. We came down from our high, and he kissed me.

“You’re amazing, Hall.”

“Not too bad yourself, Jameson.”

\* \* \*

Still on a euphoric high, I woke up to the early-morning sun peeking through the curtains. I reached over to touch Cash, but instead, I was greeted with a cool sheet. After rolling out of bed, I stretched toward the ceiling. My muscles protested, but I bent over, giving my back a good stretch.

Not wanting to wander around naked, I picked up my dress from the floor, slid it on, and headed into the bathroom. Flipping the switch, I glanced in the mirror before sitting down to take care of morning business. I flushed, washed my hands and face, and brushed my teeth with the toothbrush I kept here. Then I took care of the tangled mane on my head.

Satisfied, I went downstairs, thinking Cash was in the kitchen, but all I found was a note telling me he had gone for a run. Needing copious amounts of caffeine, I prepared the coffeepot and pressed brew.

Glancing around, I smiled at the empty box with Jimmy’s pictures on it. Not wanting anything to happen to the drive, and since we had been too preoccupied to do it last night, I grabbed Cash’s laptop, tapped the power button, and pulled out the USB stick. Once freed, I gently put it in the box and shut down the video program. When the app closed, a document with Jimmy’s full legal name on the top line caught my attention.

I sat on the sofa and let my eyes roam the screen. At the top of the document was the Utah Hawks’ logo. Heat rushed through my veins as I silently read the words: *Player’s Contract. Parties. Between Utah Hawks, herein called the club. And James Arthur Hall, herein called the player.*

My chest ached as though a thousand-pound weight had just landed on it. “Herein called the player?” I said out loud, thinking it would make more sense . . . it didn’t. Instead, I stared at the screen, not believing what I read.

The door opened and a sweaty Cash walked in. He pulled his earbuds out. “Hi, I thought you’d still be asleep.” Noticing his computer, the document that was open, and most likely my horrified expression, he walked toward me. “Hannah—”

I stood and crossed my arms in front of my chest, hoping it would prevent it from exploding. “How could you, Cash? You had the Hawks draft a contract for Jimmy? We talked about this.”

“Let me explain. You don’t understand how this works.”

“You clearly don’t understand either. I’m his mother.”

“And I’m his father.”

“Yeah, for what? A few months? What happened to being a team? We’re supposed to talk about things and not keep secrets.”

His Adam’s apple dipped low, his chest rose and fell, and when he finally spoke, my heart dropped. “We are a team. And you can’t throw time in my face since it’s not my fault so much time passed. And what are you trying to say? That I don’t care as much? Because that’s bullshit. You know, he told me on the phone that he loved me. My son loves me, and I love him. I’d never do anything that would harm him.”

“I know that, but all of this is such a big decision. And I want him to live out his dream more than anything. That’s what I want. But you’re a prime example of why an education is important. You skipped school, then got hurt and lost your career. Is that what you want for your son? You dangle this carrot in front of him and then what?”

“This isn’t about me, but I appreciate you stating the obvious.”

“Am I wrong?”

His jaw ticced before answering, “No, you’re not wrong.”

It was the type of response that could be considered sarcastic, yet I hadn’t been able to decipher if that was the case. Instead, I took it at face value. “Right, so you understand where I’m coming from?”

“Completely.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I understand that you don’t trust me. I’m just an uneducated jock who suffered a career-ending injury, and now I look for young players to follow the same path . . . less the injury, of course.”

“That’s not true.”

“Really? Face it, you don’t trust that I have our family’s best interest at heart. That I’d never do anything to jeopardize what we have . . . I’m not my father.” He huffed out a chuckle. “It’s ironic, really. I trusted you when you told me you wrote me letters, yet I never saw them. But that’s what a strong foundation is built on, right? Trust. Except it’s a two-way street, Hannah.”

“I do trust you.”

“Say that all you want and maybe you’ll end up believing it.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Can you honestly say when you looked at that contract that you trusted me? Because if you had, we would be fucking instead of arguing.”

All I could do was blink. I’d never seen him that upset. His broad chest rose and fell a few times, and his

steely eyes bore into mine. “I think we should call it a night.”

“What?”

“Hannah, I’d like you to leave.”

“Cash.”

He ran his fingers through his sweaty hair, leaving it completely disheveled, before shaking his head. “Fine, you stay. I’ll go.”

I wasn’t sure what to do, but leaving with him so upset wasn’t it. Except the hardness in his features had me saying, “Okay, I’ll go.”

On shaky legs, I walked into the kitchen, where I’d left my purse, slid on my shoes near the back door, and looked at him. “I do love you, Cash.” For the first time, he didn’t reply in kind. Instead, he turned and went to sit near his laptop. *Trust*. He was right. It was one of the most important building blocks in a relationship, and thanks to me, I just rocked our foundation.

I walked out, closed the door behind me, and ran home. As soon as I made it inside, I dropped to my knees on the cold tile and cried until I had nothing left. After peeling myself off the floor, I dragged myself up the stairs, curled into a ball, and wondered how I could have been so awful.

Grabbing my phone, I called Mia. As soon as she answered, the tears were back in full force.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

Gasping, I choked out, “I lost Cash.”

“You lost him, where?”

“No, I mean, we’re over.”

“No way, Hannah. Why would you say that?” After I explained it all, she was uncharacteristically silent, which

spoke volumes. Finally, she said, “Once he calms down, I’m sure he’ll realize you didn’t mean what you said. He loves you, Hannah.”

“I’m not so sure about that anymore. You didn’t see the way he looked at me. I’d hate me too. I do hate me. It all happened so fast. If I could have sucked the words back in, I would have. I didn’t mean it.” I wiped my tears on my wrist. “I suck as a human.”

“You don’t suck as a human. I’m on my way over.”

“No, you don’t need to.”

“I was around the corner when you called.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mia.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

We hung up, and I grabbed the pillow Cash used when he slept over and pulled it close to me. It smelled like him, so I hugged it tighter. Losing Cash once was difficult. Losing him again felt unfathomable, yet it had happened. Jimmy was going to be devastated, and it would be all my fault . . . again.

Minutes later, my door opened, and Mia rushed in. She pulled me in for a hug and walked me over to the sofa.

“Hannah, you must know that this is just a little hiccup.”

“Hiccup? He asked me to leave. That’s not a hiccup.”

My laptop pinged with an incoming email. When I glanced at it and saw Cash’s name in the sender field, I looked at Mia.

“Do you want me to read it?” she asked.

Shaking my head, I tentatively opened it.

To: Hannah Hall

From: Cash Jameson

Subject: Contract

To set the record straight, the contract you saw is for when he gets out of college. I knew it was important to you and to him. It would give him time to hone his skills and still get him on a pro team. He'd need to wait until his junior year or after he graduated to enter the pros. That's the collegiate rule and what I asked the club to consider. After they read my scouting report, they agreed to the terms. I'll send it to you, and you can take it from there. If he decides to go down that road, and if he wants, I'll work with him to find an agent. If he doesn't, that's okay too. Like you said, it's his and his mother's decision.

Cash Jameson

Utah Hawks, Lead Scout

"What does that mean?" Mia asked.

"It means I just made a horrible mistake."



# Chapter 27

## Cash

I didn't know how long I stood and stared at the back door, but it felt as though it had been an eternity. The pain of her words hurt more than when I fucked up my shoulder. Her thinking that I'd enter Jimmy into a contract without her consent didn't say much about what she thought of me. Even though I was his father, I couldn't have even if I'd wanted to since my name wasn't on his birth certificate. The only reason I knew that was that I saw it when he needed it for camp, and that line was blank—something I wanted to rectify—and one day soon, I would.

Her words cut me like a knife. Her lack of trust gutted me. I finally thought we'd worked past things, that this was our second chance. Had I been wrong?

Before going upstairs to shower, I sent her an email explaining the type of contract I'd drawn up. The warm water ran over my skin as I dropped my head forward. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw Hannah crying. The look of devastation on her face when I didn't tell her I loved her back. Those three words stuck in my throat while my head and heart had gone to war. My head won, and I hadn't said anything.

For the first time in my life, I didn't know what to do. When I was younger, I'd call my father and talk it out. What bullshit that was. Now *I* was the father, and I

needed to act like one. There were several families that didn't live together and made it work. Technically I didn't need to be in Utah to do my job. I traveled to where the prospects were, not the other way around.

Once the water cooled, I closed the faucet, dried off, threw on shorts and a Hawks T-shirt, and headed downstairs to compose an email to Vince, telling him I wanted to work in Virginia. If Jimmy decided to forgo college and join the Hawks, then I'd move back. I didn't need to work, but I wasn't ready to give up the sport I loved so much. Scouting gave me the connection I needed.

My doorbell rang, so I abandoned my laptop and got up. It rang again. "Coming," I said before yanking it open to find Mia standing there.

She pushed past me and walked into the house. "Come on in," I said before closing the door.

When I turned, she was standing there, hands perched on her hips, the toes on her right foot tapping the hardwood floor, and her head cocked to the side. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. How could you do that to Hannah?"

The force of my eyebrows hitting my hairline widened my eyes. "You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I'm not. I just left her, and she's devastated. Do you know how much she loves you?"

*Think before you speak*, I heard a little voice say in my head for the second time that day. "I know she thinks she does. And even so, she doesn't trust me."

Her nose scrunched up. "You're an idiot. I thought you were smarter. You know, Hannah was skeptical that you two wouldn't work. Not because you didn't belong

together, but because she was afraid her heart would be broken. I never thought you'd do that again."

"Again? The narrative is a bit skewed, don't you think, Mia? I get that you're her best friend, but I didn't do anything wrong back then, nor did I do it now."

She put up her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't come here to play the blame game."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I love Hannah. I love Jimmy. And believe it or not, I'm quite fond of you. So what are we going to do to fix this? You do want to fix this, right?"

Rather than say anything, I blinked a few times. She shook her head. "Wow. Okay, I never thought I'd see the day when Cash Jameson threw in the towel. She gave you a second chance. I can tell you this, Hannah went after you once all those years ago, and I don't know that my girl has it in her to do it again . . . despite you being the love of her life."

Mia walked toward the door but stopped when she spotted the gift Hannah had given me. "She was so excited to give that to you. For years, she kept a file of photos and videos for you. Even though she believed you didn't want him as your son, she thought maybe one day you would. Imagine that . . . she gave you the benefit of the doubt. Did you know that?"

"No."

Mia set the box down and made her way to the door and opened it. She pivoted to look at me. "People make mistakes. Some are unforgivable, like what your dad did. But are you going to let a small misunderstanding—that she apologized for—break you guys up?"

"I don't know. It's not just a misunderstanding, Mia. Hannah doesn't trust me."

“Such a shame. I thought your love for her would be enough. Hate to say it, but you’re not the guy I thought you were. We all have regrets in life, Cash. Don’t let Hannah be one of yours.”

The door closed behind her, and after standing there awhile, I sat on the sofa and thought about Mia’s words. Too bad Hannah’s rang louder in my ear.

\* \* \*

As soon as the bank opened Monday morning, I walked through the door to set up an account for Jimmy.

“Cash, it’s good to see you,” said Mr. Lima, whom I vaguely remember from when I lived here.

“Hi, Mr. Lima. Thank you. It’s good to see you too. Can we go to your office?”

A couple of tellers looked at me as I made it across the smallish space. There was only one customer at the counter, so they had a bit of time to be nosy.

We sat down, him behind his desk, me in a chair whose red pleather squeaked as soon as my ass hit it.

“I’d like to open an account, please.”

He moved his keyboard in front of him and began clicking. “What type of account will this be?”

“I’d like a high-yield money market for now.”

“Okay . . .” He explained a few that would be best. Once I decided, he said, “Let’s fill this out. Then I’ll just need the deposit and signature. First things first, name of the account holder?”

“I’d like it to be a custodial account. James A. Hall in the care of Hannah Hall.” His eyes shifted from the screen to me. “Her middle initial is E.”

“Yes, right. I have the address. The account will need your name on it unless Hannah comes in and signs the paper. I can list her as a beneficiary in case anything should happen.”

My stomach dropped at the thought of something happening to Jimmy.

“Fine.” I had a feeling that he wanted to say something, but I wasn’t in the mood for small talk. I needed to get this done since I had other matters to take care of.

His pudgy fingers pecked at the letters and numbers. “The amount of the deposit?”

“One million.”

With his fingers hovering, he snapped his focus to me. “Did you say one million dollars?”

“Yes. Once I have the account number, I’ll transfer the money.”

I watched him swallow. “All right. Give me a moment.”

The small printer next to him whirred to life, spitting out several papers while we waited.

“I’m sorry about your injury.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s nice that you came back to Blossom Berry Falls. I heard you and Hannah were back together.”

I shrugged.

“Sorry, small town. She’s a sweet person. Our daughter, Lucy, was in her art class. She deserves to be happy. You both do.”

I gave him a tight smile. Maybe he saw something in my expression because out of the blue, he asked, “Did

you know a burned log burns brighter the second time around?”

A little confused at the question, I shook my head, still waiting for the printer to stop. What was it printing, a novel? “No.”

“It’s true. Kind of like love in that respect, don’t you think? I mean, you get”—he lifted his fingers to make air quotes—“burned, so to speak. Then a spark reignites the romance, and it shines brighter than it did the first time. But I don’t need to tell you that since you have that with Hannah.”

He reached over, grabbed what seemed to be a quarter ream of paper, stapled a small stack that was their privacy policy and another of online banking directions, and then he handed me the pages that needed my signature. Once they were signed, he gave me the routing and account numbers, and I moved the money in it. “I’d like Hannah’s name somewhere on the account to have access to it.”

“I’ll make a note that she can discuss this account. Was there anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

With the paperwork in hand, I walked out of the bank and drove to the vital records office to get the paperwork for amending Jimmy’s birth certificate. There had been no doubt that by the time my errands were over, all of Blossom Berry Falls would be buzzing with suspicions.

Except I didn’t care. I got in my car and, before going to the house, decided to take a detour around town. I found myself cruising down one of the tree-lined streets that hadn’t changed a bit since I’d lived there. It almost seemed to have been frozen in time. People strolled down the street, greeting one another.

Glancing at the storefronts, I remembered when Hannah and I would share an ice cream cone on a hot summer day. She'd giggle when I'd lick the melting drips off her hand. We'd go to the park and talk for hours, every so often stealing kisses. It felt like everywhere I looked, I had a memory of Hannah.

As I kept going, I admired the vintage architecture and remembered Jimmy's sketchbook. It had me wondering where he came up with the impressive cityscape he'd drawn, and then there was that house—which I still hadn't stopped thinking about.

Finally home, I had gone inside and headed for the stairs when, in a whoosh, the back door slid open, and Hannah marched straight into my house.

"Breaking and entering now?"

"I got your email."

"You could have just hit reply. That's generally what people do."

"I'm sorry that I jumped to the wrong conclusion." All I could do was nod. She ran her tongue under her top lip. "I heard you went to the bank."

*Fucking small-ass town.* My plan had been to give Jimmy the papers when I saw him. Cowardly, maybe, but I was still annoyed. Then Mr. Lima's words popped into my head. He wasn't wrong. I fell more in love with Hannah than I ever thought I could. Add Jimmy to the mix, and my soul burned like an inferno for them.

"So much for a privacy policy," I murmured.

"A million dollars, Cash?"

I shrugged. "Fourteen years of child support."

"That's absurd. Whose calculation was that?"



“Mine. I looked it up, but the website was so complicated even I couldn’t figure it out. There was some word problem about Antonio and Felicia that was supposed to explain the formula. I read that damn thing at least ten times and couldn’t figure out the right amount. And I’m good at math.”

“Well, it’s an absurd amount.”

“Not to me. That’s a drop in the bucket compared to my signing bonus and player salary. I could give him my current wages and not miss it.”

Had that been a cocky thing to say? Fuck yes it was, but I didn’t care.

“Right. I remember how excited you were when you saw all those zeros. We went out for ice cream.”

“Was there anything else you needed? Because that money isn’t going anywhere.”

“Yes, I’d like to explain.”

I waved my hand forward, and she let out a breath. “I’m sorry for what I said to you. I really am. You see, it’s like this . . . for years, it was just me. And I’m not blaming you. Honestly, I’m not. But when I thought you made a life-altering decision for Jimmy, I kind of lost it. You have no idea what it was like for me. You may think you do, but you don’t. You didn’t stand with him in a steam shower when he was two years old and had croup. You didn’t hold him at the doctor’s office while he cried hysterically when he got his shots. You weren’t there when he would come home crying because it was Father-Son Day at Cub Scouts. And I know what you’re going to say. That you didn’t know. I get that . . . believe me how I get that, and I hate it for all of us. I know I overreacted, but Momma Bear isn’t a fictional character. She’s real and lives in every mother who feels protective of their child.”

“Definitely not fictional. I can accept your apology.”

“Really?” Her hand went to the center of her chest.  
“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But that doesn’t change anything.”

“You don’t love me?”

Shit. I did love her. More than anything. Still, the words caught in my throat.

“I’m not sure what else to say, Cash. I made a mistake, a big one. I see that now. I’m just . . . it’s hard for me.” Her eyes widened. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

I watched her scurry out of my house, hop off the deck, and run through the yard until she disappeared behind a small pine tree near our property line. I couldn’t look away, and she reappeared with a canvas in her hand. Her brown hair blew behind her as she hustled back to my house.

Breathing a bit heavier, she handed the picture to me. A painting of me, Hannah, and Jimmy at the park was beautifully illustrated in pastel shades. Her name was scribbled on the bottom right corner.

I stood there staring at it. “That’s us,” she said, as though she had to explain. “We are a family, Cash. Please believe me when I tell you how incredibly sorry I am for not trusting you. I think I was scared. No, I know I was. Letting go is going to be difficult. But I trust you. I do. Honestly. And after reading the contract terms, you were more than right about it.”

“Thank you for the picture.”

She nodded, tiny dimples sprouted on her chin, and a lone tear fell from each of her eyes. “You’re welcome. I’m sorry that I broke us.”

Not being able to stand it, I set the artwork on my table. “I should apologize too. I lied to you. Well, didn’t lie. I did worse.” I took her hands in mine. “I let you think

I didn't love you, which couldn't be further from the truth. And you're right. I wasn't here then, but I'm here now."

"So you still love me?"

"More than you'll ever know. For the record, there is a Papa Bear in the family now. I'd never let anything hurt our son or you. You need to trust that, Hannah. To trust me, or we don't stand a chance."

"I do trust you. I promise on my soul that I do. If you give me the chance, I'll prove it to you. But I can't do it alone." She paused. "Team Jameson-Hall, right?"

"Or Hall-Jameson," I countered.

Not being able to stand the distance, I cupped her face and stared into those pretty brown eyes. "Okay, the chance is yours." A couple of tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes. "I love you, Hannah Hall." Having Hannah in my arms, with our mouths fused together, felt like home . . . and I never wanted to leave.

"Will you kiss me now?"

"I'll kiss you forever."

# Epilogue

## Hannah

“Remember when I told you I had something to show you?” Cash asked Jimmy as I cleared the rest of our breakfast dishes from the table.

“Yeah. Is it a signed ball from one of your old teammates? Because I really like Duke Montgomery.”

“No, it’s not a signed ball. It’s better.”

“A bat?”

“Honey, your father’s being serious,” I implored, sitting back down with them.

“So was I,” Jimmy said with sincerity.

Cash lifted the place mat in front of him and pulled out the turquoise envelope. Jimmy instantly recognized it, bringing tears to my eyes. I would never forget the day he wrote that card. It broke my heart. I almost caved that day and told him about his dad. Now I wish I had.

“You got it? This is amazing. Were Mom’s letters there?”

“No, but that’s okay. I’m here, and we’re a family. That’s why I have something I’d like to talk to both of you about.” Hannah and Jimmy exchanged a quick glance. “Jimmy, I know from your mom that artwork is personal until the artist is willing to share it.”

“Yeah, she gets ticked off when I look at something before it’s done.”

“I don’t get *that* upset.” I totally did, but it had been years since I had to worry about it. Most of my art was in my classroom, where everyone saw it.

“Anyway, the other day when I was here, I needed a piece of paper and stumbled upon your sketchpad.”

“Oh. Those are just doodles.”

“Doodles? I hardly think so. To prove my point, I’d like to buy one of those sketches from you.”

“Buy a sketch? Why? Wait, which one?”

Cash got up to go into the living room, grabbed the book off the table, and flipped it open. After returning to his seat, he set it down in the middle of the table.

I couldn’t help but gasp at the gorgeous home. “Wow, sweetheart, that’s incredible. The details on this house are beautiful.”

“I agree. So much, in fact, that’s why I’d like to buy this, then build it.”

Jimmy’s and my jaw slackened at the same time. “You want to build my house? I mean, this house in the sketch?”

“You were right the first time. I’d like to build your house, but have it be for us to live in . . . you, your mom, and me. I bought the land with the old farmhouse. After we visited it, I had an inspection done. It would take a lot to bring it to code. I’m going to level it and build this. What do you both think?”

“I think hell yes!” he exclaimed. He looked at me. “Mom, what about you? I know you love this house.”

My two guys looked at me, and I couldn’t help but nod. “I think it sounds like the best idea. And I had a

feeling that one day we'd need a bigger home, so I'm going to offer this one to Aunt Mia."

"Great idea," Cash said. "So you're both in?"

"Heck yes we're in. Team Hall-Jameson."

I looked at Cash, and he nodded. "I love the sound of that."

"Honey, there's one more thing." I exchanged a look with Cash and winked. He went on to tell Jimmy about the possibility of signing with the Hawks.

"No fucking way!"

"James Arthur Hall!"

"Sorry, but you're serious? They want me?"

"Yes, but no decision is needed now. Because there are a couple of other things." Cash wore a shit-eating grin, and I had no idea why. "Along with the report I sent to the Hawks, I also created a reel of your highlights. I hired a sports videographer to capture some of your best plays."

"You did?" Jimmy and I asked in unison.

"Cash, I had no idea," I added.

"I didn't say anything because *A*, I didn't want you to be nervous during a game, and *B*, I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up."

"Hopes up about the Hawks?"

He looked at Jimmy with such love in his eyes that my heart swelled in my chest. At the rate it was expanding, I should be cracking a rib at any moment.

"No, colleges. I looked up the top Division 1 colleges and universities for architecture and sent it to their athletic directors. There are quite a few, but they do have one thing in common . . . if your grades keep up, they all

want to give you a full ride. That's not a free pass to screw off in class."

Without hesitation, I flew up out of my chair and hugged Cash. "Thank you!"

Jimmy followed my lead and did the same. "This is the best day." Then he looked at his dad and shook his head. "Almost the best day."



# Cash

*Six months later*

Waking up each morning and having her by my side felt right. Going to bed and making love to her felt even better. Gentle rays of the morning light spilled through the blinds, illuminating the empty spot beside me.

“Babe?” When she didn’t reply, I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and sat up. That was when the smell of bacon hit me. Not wanting to prance down the stairs naked, I tossed on a pair of sweats and hustled down the stairs.

I didn’t go into the kitchen right away. Instead, I stood, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, and stared. Stared at the most gorgeous woman in my T-shirt. Her barely covered ass—which happened to be one of my favorite things to grab—swayed side to side as she flipped pancakes.

She was humming a tune, and that was when I noticed the little white earbuds in her ears.

Testing the noise-canceling devices, I called out her name. No response. Walking in, I knew I’d scare her, so instead, I stood my ground until she turned the stove off. When she did that, all bets were off.

Slowly walking toward her, I wrapped my arms around her from behind. She instantly reached up and plucked the small buds from her ears.

“Holy heck, you scared me.”

I leaned forward, giving her no option but to bend at the waist, shoving her butt cheeks into my growing erection, and I whispered in her ear, “Marry me.”

She tilted her head and looked at me. “Cash, stop messing around. Breakfast is going to get cold. I even went to the market to get blueberries for your pancakes.”

Spinning her so we were face to face, I laced my fingers behind her back. I hadn’t planned to propose that way, but it felt natural, so I went with it. “I’m not messing around. I want us forever. You, me, Jimmy, and if you want more kids, them too.” Her eyes went wide. “If not, we’ll be the perfect trio. There’s never been anyone for me other than you, Hannah. You own my heart. Let’s build the life together that we should have had years ago. We’ve lost enough time, and I don’t want to lose any more. What do you say? Will you let me be yours forever?”

She blinked, and tears rolled down her face. “Will I let you be mine forever?”

“Yes. Forever. One time. Me and you. What do you say? Will you be Mrs. Cash Jameson?”

“It’s always been you for me, too, Cash. Even when I hated you, I loved you.”

“I hate that you hated me.”

“Me too. Especially since it wasn’t completely deserved. So will I let you be mine forever? That’s probably the easiest question to answer.” When I cocked a brow, she smiled. “Yes, I want us together forever. I’d love to be Mrs. Cash Jameson.”

Sweeping her off her feet, I lifted her up. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and I kissed her breathless. Finally, Hannah Hall was going to be my wife, and I couldn’t wait to make it a reality.

She giggled when I spun her around. “I know we should christen this proposal, but I’m hungry, and I have plans with Mia today.”

“What do you two have planned?”

“A little shopping,” she said, placing a couple of pancakes and several strips of bacon on a plate, then handing it to me.

“We’ll need to do that too.” I took her plate from her and set it on the table. We both sat and when she looked at me, I explained why. “For a ring.”

“Oh. It doesn’t need to be anything fancy.”

“Do you still like an oval shape?”

“You remember that?”

Years ago, when we were watching some entertainment television show, a celebrity had gotten engaged. I couldn’t tell you what the ring looked like, but I do remember Hannah saying she didn’t care for it. That was when I asked her what she liked, and she said a simple oval. Back then, I didn’t know they came in any other shape but round and square.

“I do.”

“I’m impressed.”

I drizzled maple syrup on my pancakes and dug in. “Color me impressed. This is so good.”

“Thank you.” She bit off a piece of her bacon. “Jimmy is going to be so excited.”

“He already knows.”

“He does?”

“Wanted to talk it over with him. And, of course, ask him to be my best man.”

“Always so sure of yourself.”

“When it comes to us . . . absolutely.”

THE END

## Bonus Scene

\*Free bonus scene! Click [here](#) for more Cash & Hannah!\*

## **About the Author**

Carina Rose loves everything about romance. To her, it's the little things that matter. She also believes in insta-love, since she knew her husband was the one the first day she met him. She loves writing about swoony heroes and strong heroines. She adores that moment when a couple comes together despite any hurdles that may come their way. Most of all, she hopes her books put a smile on readers' faces.

# Contact Carina Rose

I love hearing from my readers. You all truly keep me going.

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## A note from the Author...

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *The Scout*. It means the world to me.

I also love hearing from you. Please don't be strangers. Feel free to drop me a note to let me know what you thought of *The Scout* or if you just want to hear about what I have going on. It's because of you that I get to do what I love.

Book reviews mean so much to writers, and I treasure each of them. If you have time, I'd love an honest review from you.

Once again, thank you for reading and for taking a chance on this book—and me!

All my best,

*Carina*



# Acknowledgments

As always, I'd like to thank my family for putting up with my long hours. I truly could not do this without your support. I love you all with everything that I am.

To my critique partners, Ann Marie Madden, Lauren Collins, and Jennifer Wolfel once again, thank you so much for being my sounding boards and for putting up with my numerous messages. I could not have done this without you.

To my beta readers, Yamara Martinez, and Amber Goleb, thank you for your honesty and for taking the time to read my words. You both rock!

To my editor, James Gallagher at Castle Walls Editing. I'm thrilled to be working with you again. I truly appreciate you and your attention to detail! I know we'll be working together again!

To my proofreader, Rosa Sharon at Fairy Proofmother Proofreading. I'm so happy to be working with you. I loved your comments, attention to detail, and your encouragement. I can't wait to work with you again!

Sommer Stein at Perfect Pear Creative. Thank you so much for all that you do for me. Like always, I am in love with this cover. I appreciate you to the moon and back!

Another shout-out to Lauren Collins for formatting this book for me! I love you!

A huge shout-out to Sarah Piechuta for helping me on the admin side of things and for handling the release events. You're the best!

To Elizabeth Clinton for helping me with my group...  
Thank you for all that you do!

To all the bloggers, thank you for the time you spend supporting authors and reading our stories. You take time out of your personal lives, and I am very thankful.

To the ladies in my reader group, Carina Rose's Sweethearts, you are all wonderful. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

Most important, I'd like to thank the readers. We all love to read and talk about the books and characters we love, and I am so thankful for all of you. If you have time and would like to leave a review, I'd be very appreciative. Thank you! XOXO

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