

ARIA HARDING

Loatthing
ryan



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* * *

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A Standalone Workplace Romance

LOATHING RYAN

CEDAR RIDGE SERIES

BOOK 1

ARIA HARDING



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Loathing
ryan



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Editing: Nice Girl Naughty Edits

Cover Design by: IndieSage

First Edition published 2024

ISBN (E-Book): 9798988278440

ISBN (Paperback): 9798988378457

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For Dee.

*Thank you for always believing in me and loving these
characters as much as I do.*

IZABEL

“CHOLERA!”

“Nope.”

“Tuberculosis!”.

“Try again.”

“Ebola!!”

“Izabel. Knock it off.”

“I can’t go. They don’t allow students with deadly diseases into the camp,” I urged as I fought against my best friend pushing me toward the bus.

“Well, good thing you don’t have any diseases then.” Juliet rolled her eyes at me as she displayed her athletic strength by giving me a little extra push on the back of my shoulders. When that didn’t work, she maneuvered herself to my side, looping one of her arms through mine and returning to her task.

With a firm grip, Juliet dragged me through the dirt, paying no attention to my feet working against her in an attempt to push my way back. It truly must’ve been an unusual sight for anyone observing from the outside. However, all my classmates didn’t even pay a lick of attention to me. This was an occurrence that took place every year without fail. My reluctance to get on the bus that would take us to camp was not something I grew out of as we all matured over the years.

“Seriously, Jules, I’m going to throw up.” I continued to fight my case, making gagging noises to drive my point home.

An unamused noise rumbled at the back of her throat as Juliet tried to wrestle me onto the coach bus. “Izabel, you say that literally every year. We’re seniors now, which means you’re too old to behave this way. You can’t just push through one more summer?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. I think I am truly coming down with something deadly.”

By this time, she had managed to maneuver me from our school’s front doors toward the bus waiting for us. White gravel dust now covered my tennis shoes, and my arms felt weak from fighting against the brute force of my friend. Sighing in defeat, I stood straight and glared at Jules. She stood in front of me, her arms crossed over her chest, with an expression that dared me to run.

“I loathe you.”

“You mean, you love me? Aw, I love you too, babes,” Juliet shot back with a wink.

I turned away from her, huffing a breath as I stared at the bus. Almost all my classmates had arrived by now and were loading their luggage into the undercarriage of the school coach bus. It had the logo of our boarding school printed on the side in dark blue letters, *Hawthorne Academy*.

Everyone was jumping around and screeching to their respective friend groups about which activities they wanted to do first and, more importantly, who would hook up with which boy from Bennett this summer. One name, in particular, was thrown around more than the others. The one name I tried my hardest to keep my brain from thinking.

It was depressing, really. Our county’s two most prestigious private schools were Hawthorne Academy and Bennett College Preparatory. Both schools started enrolling students at the tender age of sixth grade, hoping to achieve excellence with an extended curriculum and an intense schedule.

They were passionate about the belief that young boys and girls would receive a better education if they weren't distracted by the opposite sex. However, they didn't want to deprive their students completely of those interactions, which is how I found myself counting down the minutes until I was forced onto the coach bus, which would take us away to camp.

Students of the two schools—Hawthorne Academy and Bennett College Prep—came to Camp Wildwood for as long as anyone could remember. The schools were initially established by husband and wife, who still sat as headmaster and headmistress of their schools to this day. Their vision was to create two elite schools with unmatched curricula. As far as anyone else was concerned, they had succeeded. Students from our two schools routinely landed the most sought-after scholarships and secured spots at the most prestigious universities.

During the summer, both schools brought each class out to Camp Wildwood to spend a few weeks getting the chance to decompress along with the sibling school. The camp was three weeks every year, with each grade level staggering dates, so the camp wasn't overrun. In exchange, we finished classes a few weeks earlier compared to some surrounding public schools. After camp, we would get a chance to go home with our families for the rest of the summer before returning to school for the following semester.

Even though seniors' rotation at the camp was two weeks earlier than all the first and second-year students, we could not and would not walk at graduation—or receive our diplomas—until we returned from camp.

As I said, it was depressing.

My heart started skipping beats as I thought about the upcoming days and nights I would have to spend at my least favorite place on earth, and suddenly my feet were moving beneath me. I bolted toward the doors of Hawthorne, trying my damndest to get there before Jules caught me.

Unfortunately for me, though, my best friend was quicker than I was. She leaped on me before I could even make it two

feet and tackled me to the ground. I groaned and moaned as I felt her land on my stomach. She was taller than me and was built from years of intense soccer workouts.

“I think I’m having a heart attack. My chest hurts. I have angina!” I hollered.

“Cut the dramatics, Izzie. You’re behaving like a child,” a nasally voice snarked at me from above. “You do this every year. Can’t you give it a rest?”

Juliet? No. This person was worse. Way worse. Nahla Fenwick was the class Barbie doll. She was the one who would show up from a long weekend off with a brand-new hairdo and a fresh set of acrylics on her nails. For her, Wildwood was the chance to really show off her skills. And I’m not talking about classroom skills. The boys of Bennett all knew Nahla’s name, and they were quick to run to her side if they needed her for any reason.

“I will give it a rest when I never have to see your face again,” I shot back at her, rolling my eyes.

Her lips curved up into a snide smile. “Look, I’m not going to stop you from not going. In fact, I encourage it.” I raised my eyebrows at her, waiting to see where she went with this. These were the most words she’d ever said to me in one sitting before. Generally, I made it a point to avoid dealing with her altogether. “I have a very detailed list of things I want to accomplish this year. And guess who is at the top of my list?”

Juliet rolled off me and glared at the Barbie doll, knowing that by *things*, Nahla meant boys. “Please enlighten us.”

Nahla’s perfectly plucked eyebrow raised just a fraction of an inch as she stared at Juliet, who now had most of her attention instead of me. “Well, Ryan Miller, of course.”

Ryan Miller. The one name that students at both schools tossed around like candy at a parade. The bane of my existence. The King of Bennett. The sole reason I was now lying on the ground, despite knowing I was getting my white capris all dusty.

Generally, people would have found themselves lucky to have attention bestowed upon them by a king—but not me. Ryan Miller had a way of taking everything good and turning it into misery.

Juliet gave an amused laugh. “Ryan doesn’t have time for your games, Nahla. He’s not interested.” I mean, to be fair, Jules would know. She’d been going steady with Ryan’s right-hand man for the past two years.

Nahla narrowed her eyes. “I know. Because he’s always too busy playing games with this one over here.” She pointed one perfectly manicured finger at me.

She wasn’t wrong. While Nahla obviously had her own agenda regarding the summer at Wildwood, so did Ryan Miller. He found immense joy in ruining my summers. All because of one little slip-up on my part years ago.

A word to the wise: be careful when walking through an overly crowded cafeteria with a full plate of spaghetti. Someone might accidentally bump into you, causing you to dump your tray all over their pristine new white golf shorts. And that someone might be the King of Bennett College Prep. Also known as the king of holding grudges.

Ryan Miller devoted the last few summers to exacting his revenge on me. Honestly, it was exhausting. I hated him. It was a consolation, though, that after this summer, we would all split ways, and I would never, ever have to see or deal with Ryan Miller again.

I pushed myself out of the dirt and looked right into Nahla’s distrustful eyes. “Trust me, Nahla. I honestly don’t give a rat’s ass about what you do with that egomaniac.”

She smirked. “Well, good. Because I got a whole year’s worth of stuff planned, and I don’t need you getting in my way.”

I shook my head. “Trust me. There won’t be a problem.”

“Good,” I heard her mutter as she spun on her heel and walked back toward the bus.

Sighing, I looked back at Juliet, who stood staring at me with her hands on her hips. “Any more antics, Izzie?”

“No, Jules. You won. Let’s go and get this summer over with.” I stomped away from my friend and climbed the stairs onto the bus.

I went straight to the back and slumped in my seat. Rummaging through my small duffel bag, I found my headphones and popped them in. My favorite music flowed through my ears as I forlornly looked out the window and waited for the bus to load up and head out.

Eventually, one of my other classmates came and sat next to me. I looked at her, and she smiled sadly before patting my knee. Everyone in my class knew how much Ryan bothered me, but there wasn’t much they could do about it. Ryan never did anything that could get him into serious trouble. And to be fair, most of his games were just that—games. But still, I was the one always at the butt of the joke. But, whenever there was any type of heat on him, he played it off as an accident or a joke gone awry.

Besides, he was the King of Bennett, after all. He could do no wrong. I guess that’s what happens when your parents make a large donation to your school at the start of your freshman year. Suddenly, it seems that everyone’s on your side, too afraid to stand up to you for fear of the funds being withdrawn.

Every year, my experience at camp was the same. I had given up hope long ago that anything would be different. It was pointless to wish that, over the last year, Ryan would have matured enough to move past his games. Who knows, maybe we could’ve been friends if we hadn’t gotten off on the wrong foot from the very beginning. Everyone liked him, so there must have been something to him that wasn’t 100% cringeworthy. I certainly didn’t know what it was, though, and I doubted I ever would.

As the bus started moving, I looked out the window and watched my school disappear. The trip took two and a half

hours—two and a half hours to prepare myself mentally and put my walls up so I could survive the next few weeks.

I must have drifted off into a nap because, the next thing I knew, I was gently shaken awake. I ripped out my headphones, and the girl next to me smiled, her eyes lighting up. “We’re here.”

Of course, she was excited. Everyone was excited except me. But I was used to that by now. I was just about the only person who didn’t like coming to this camp. No one else had a reason to dread it, as I did. They left camp feeling rejuvenated and ready for a year. In contrast, I left camp feeling like a soldier returning from war.

Groaning, I wrapped my headphones around my phone and stuck them into my bag. As I looked out the window again, I tried to avert my gaze to anywhere but the hunter-green coach bus with the Bennett emblem that was unloading boys from our brother school.

I stood up and followed my classmates as they individually filed out of the bus. When it was my turn to get off, I took a deep breath and readied myself.

You can do this, Izzie. It’s the last year. You got this.

I hopped down from the last step and looked around. Same trees, same cabins, same lake. Everything was the exact same as we had left it last year.

As I looked around, I could feel someone’s eyes on me. Already suspecting exactly who it was, I knew what I would be met with if I turned around. I’m not sure what possessed me to do it anyway.

Without fail, my eyes met the smoldering greens of the King of Bennett. He stared at me for a second too long before tearing his gaze from mine and giving me a thorough once-over. A shiver tore down my spine as the weight of his attention fell on every inch of my body. When he was satisfied with his inspection, his green eyes found mine again.

I narrowed my eyes at him in a challenge for him to say something. He had grown more over the last year, his

shoulders filling into a broader stature. Even from my position, I noticed the angle of his jaw was sharper, giving his face a leaner appearance. His sandy blond hair was a mess as it usually was, a few strands falling over his forehead. As much as I hated him, I couldn't lie and say that Ryan Miller wasn't attractive.

Honestly, I think that made everything that much worse. It would've been one thing if I didn't think he was handsome, but he was. I'd have to be blind not to notice. As if he could feel me studying him, an evil, knowing smirk appeared on his flawless face. I sighed in deference.

Even though he had grown and changed, he was the exact same as I had left him last year.

RYAN

“HEY, RYAN!” someone shouted my name, loud enough that I could hear it through my headphones. I grumbled under my breath but pulled the ear bud out and looked around for whoever was calling me.

“What?”

“We were just wondering what you have planned for this year?” my buddy, Todd, said from his position three seats in front of me.

I raised an eyebrow at him questioningly. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, with Izabel? You always have such great pranks lined up for the minute we set foot off this bus. We were just wondering if we could get a sneak peek.”

“Maybe just wait for us to actually get to camp, bro,” my other friend, Liam, said from his seat beside me. “No point in ruining the surprise.”

I was immensely grateful for Liam’s input. Out of my two friends, at least he was somewhat socially aware. He must have picked up on my shitty mood right away—or maybe the fact that I wasn’t as giddy about my top-tier summer pranks this year. I looked over at Todd to see his crestfallen expression and felt a pang of regret.

My history with Izabel, a senior from our sister school, Hawthorne Academy, had become somewhat of a legend amongst our class.

It was stupid, really.

It started with a misstep; a total accident that got blown out of proportion when we were freshmen.

I'll admit, when she first tripped and dropped that bright red spaghetti on my new white golf shorts, I was pissed. I won't even pretend to deny it. Following that incident, I made it a point to make her pay for the rest of the summer.

I just never imagined that it would continue for the next three years.

What started off as payback quickly turned into an annual spectacle. Like clockwork, we'd get off the bus at Camp Wildwood every summer, and I'd see her staring warily at me as if expecting the worst. And like an idiot, I always lived up to the expectation.

The guys in my class anticipated the rivalry between Izabel and me almost as much as they anticipated the Super Bowl. I know some of them were taking bets on what evil scheme I'd concoct for her for the three weeks we spent at camp, and I'd usually deliver. It wasn't an option not to.

I was the *king*, after all. It wasn't like I had a choice if I wanted to keep my kingdom. They expected a certain level of animosity from me. So that's how, even now, the games with Izabel were still continuing.

Most of the time, I brushed it off as no big deal. I kept my head down and played the part that was expected of me for three weeks, then I went back home to Cedar Ridge and pretended Izabel didn't exist.

Until I ran into her at the grocery store, the car wash, or some bullshit place like that. She just so happened to live in the same small town as I did, on top of attending my school's sister campus.

It happened more times than I cared to admit. Whenever I ran into her in the real world, she tilted her nose up, gave me a scowl, and then turned on her heel without a word.

Can't say it didn't sting, but I probably deserved it. I never attempted to smooth the waters over with her when we were

outside of school or camp. I just let it be.

I wasn't a bad guy, but Izabel Sanders was the unlucky girl who got to experience the worst parts of me.

I wondered what Todd would say if I told him that I really had nothing planned for Izabel this year. He would be disappointed, but I was curious about what else he would do. Todd could be unpredictable sometimes. Though he was part of my little group of friends, I didn't trust him as much as I trusted my best friend, Liam. Todd latched onto this game with Izabel and blew it way out of proportion.

With my headphones securely back in my ears, I flipped on my favorite playlist. I let my mind wander throughout the rest of the ride to thoughts other than Todd and Izabel. When the bus eventually pulled up the gravel road leading into Camp Wildwood, I leaned my head against the cool window, watching the trees pass by. Only three weeks. And then I'd never have to set foot in this camp again.

The minute the bus stopped, my classmates hopped out of their seats and grabbed their duffle bags from the compartments above. I waited a few minutes, letting everyone grab their things and file off before I departed the bus.

When my feet hit the hallowed ground of Camp Wildwood, I took a deep breath, letting the fresh mountain air fill my lungs. Looking around, I noted that we had arrived before the Hawthorne girls. That was good. Now I had a chance to get my shit settled.

I had too much on my mind this summer to worry about playing mind games with Izabel.

Before we left Bennett this morning, my mother had given me a phone call as a way of a heads-up. She said that she and her boyfriend had something to tell me once I got home from camp, and she didn't want to catch me off guard.

I was already thinking the worst.

She and her boyfriend, Derek, had been together for over a year. He was a decent guy, but he still wasn't my dad. Though I liked him, it was sometimes difficult for me to reconcile the

fact that he might easily become my stepfather someday. Probably sooner rather than later.

That's what I suspected she wanted to speak with me about. She and Derek probably got engaged over their recent long weekend at the beach, and they would try to break it to me gently.

So, the significant changes that were inevitable in my life were taking a bit more priority in my head than coming up with games to play with Izabel. Yet, I still had a role to fill. I bet I could come up with a few tame jokes to play on her the first week and maybe just slowly wean off the teasing. Maybe the guys would be able to stomach that better than me just straight up refusing to follow through on their expectations.

My mind was a flurry as I walked to my dorm room to unpack my things. Mulling it all over, I wasn't sure why I cared at all about what my friends thought of me. Sure, I was the king of the school—thanks to a few soccer championships under my belt and a consistently high GPA—but we had exactly four weeks until graduation. Then we'd all be dispersing to the next chapter of our lives.

Would it really be so terrible to want to put the shenanigans that happened at this camp behind me?

Someone knocked on my door once I was just about finished putting my clothes away. I looked up to see Todd with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Hey, man," he said with an excited hint to his tone. "The Hawthorne bus is pulling up now. Might wanna get downstairs."

Todd didn't linger longer than he had to. I heard his laugh echo through the stairwell on his way to the ground floor as I gave my dorm room a good once-over. I still had a few things to organize, but this would do for now. With that, I walked downstairs and returned outside just as the Hawthorne Academy bus stopped in front of the girls' dorm building.

I stayed near the outskirts of the pack of guys waiting for the girls to depart their bus. Liam came to stand next to me and nudged me with his shoulder. I knew he was excited to see his girlfriend, Juliet.

It seemed unfair that my best friend would be dating Izabel's best friend. I didn't doubt Izabel found it just as ironic. But Juliet and Liam had been together for a few years now and were absolutely crazy about each other. I couldn't lie and say I wasn't slightly jealous of their deep attraction to each other.

Back at Bennett, Liam and I shared a room. He would be up all night, catching up with his girlfriend throughout the semester. It wasn't very often that the two schools got together, so camp was always something for the two of them to look forward to.

As soon as Liam caught sight of Juliet, he raced off. If Juliet was near, Izabel likely wasn't too far behind her.

The minute Izabel stepped off the bus, she looked around the camp, taking it all in. The moment I saw her, my throat seemed to close in, and swallowing became slightly more difficult. I tried to take a deep breath to calm my ever-increasing heart rate, but it continued to climb. Subconsciously, I recognized that my palms were starting to sweat, and I clenched them tightly, shoving them in the pockets of my shorts before I could think too far into it.

I contributed this weird reaction to the pressure of my classmates as they waited for the moment Izabel set eyes on me. It was like a heavy weight resting on my shoulders, knowing they expected me to behave a certain way whenever she was in my vicinity.

Finally, Izabel's bright blue eyes landed on me, and her face instantly fell into a scowl. I held her gaze for a second before making a show of dropping from her face and giving her a good once-over. She wore a pair of light-wash jean capris and dark tennis shoes that had dust covering them. A light purple shirt hung from her shoulders and accentuated the dips and curves of her figure.

Putting on the mask and stepping into the role all my friends anticipated, my lips curled into a sneer.

Izabel's frown deepened as she stared right back at me, and finally, as if she knew what she was in for, her shoulders

deflated. A knot twisted deep in my belly, but I kept my face neutral, not outwardly indicating my inner turmoil. As far as anyone else was concerned, this was just another summer and another round.

We just had to get through these three weeks, and then I would never have to put on this show with Izabel again.

Let the games begin.

IZABEL

RYAN WASTED NO TIME, sauntering up until he was in my space. He leisurely walked a circle around me, like a lion stalking its prey. My assumption that he had grown since last summer had been correct. Ryan now towered over me, providing yet another power imbalance between us. I could smell his cologne on him—that hadn't changed either. It was a bold mixture of spice and cedarwood. It sent up red alerts inside my head, my body urging me to get away from him, to go literally anywhere but here. I supposed years of being stuck in fight-or-flight mode around him would be to blame for that reaction.

“Well, well,” he said as he continued his slow steps. “You’ve changed a lot, Bells.”

I scowled. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why? I like it. It’s endearing.” He winked as he came to stand right in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest. His biceps bulged slightly out of the sleeves of the heather blue t-shirt he wore. I averted my eyes, not wanting to give him any more ammunition.

“I’ve told you this before, Ryan. You can call me Izabel, or you can call me Izzie. Not Bells,” I told him, hating that my voice wavered a little.

“Izabel Sanders, are you taking a tone with me?” he prodded, his smirk still plastered over his face. I wanted to punch that stupid expression right off.

“Seriously, Ryan? She’s been off the bus for all of two seconds. You can’t give her a break?” The sound of Jules’s voice had a sense of peace washing over me. She walked over hand-in-hand with her longtime boyfriend, Liam, a look of irritation settling on her normally angelic face.

To my surprise, Ryan did take a step back. I didn’t blame him. Juliet was a force to be reckoned with—she didn’t play around, and Ryan knew that. Her presence, however, didn’t manage to wipe the smirk off of his face. “Aw, Jules, I’m just saying hello to my favorite person in the whole wide world.”

I nearly choked, and Juliet’s glare hardened. “Don’t be an ass, Ryan.”

“What, I can’t tell little Bells here that she looks good? ’Cause she does. I’ve never seen anyone more beautiful in my life.” My breath stopped at his words and my eyes widened as they snapped to him. Ryan’s never said anything like that to me before. As if he could tell that his words threw me slightly, Ryan quirked a taunting brow and continued, “I mean, wow, is that chocolate on your cheek? It matches your hair.”

Any surprise or lingering hope that Ryan might have been taking a nicer approach this year was squashed and replaced by my usual annoyance.

“It’s *Izabel*,” I muttered as I wiped my cheek aggressively. It came back clean because, of course, it did. I hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast that morning. And it definitely didn’t have chocolate in it.

“Enough, Ryan,” Juliet growled. “Liam, make him go.” She turned to her boyfriend, giving him a pleading look.

He sighed and untangled his hand from hers. “Come on, man. Let’s go get our stuff settled.”

Liam walked over to Ryan and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, leading him off. Before they walked away, Ryan glanced over his shoulder and shot me a blinding smile and a wink. “Think of me while I’m gone, Bells. I’ll catch ya later.”

I was sure he would.

I sighed and looked to Juliet. She glowered after the two with her arms crossed and her hip cocked to the side. Shaking her head, she gave me a sideways grin when she felt me watching her.

“I think Liam had the right idea. Let’s grab our stuff so we can claim the best room.” She waggled her eyebrows before striding behind the bus to get her bags.

I followed, grumbling under my breath. I just had to stick it out for a little longer. After these few weeks, I would never have to step foot in Hawthorne Academy or Camp Wildwood again.

Each school had set up its own dormitories on the campgrounds. There were two large buildings assigned to both. The two girls’ dorms were on the east side of the camp, and the boys’ were on the west side. If we were lucky, we would be able to snag one of the bigger rooms with an ensuite bathroom.

Once Juliet and I had grabbed our bags full of necessities, we took off toward the east-side dorms. For a few minutes, the only sound was our feet crunching on the white gravel rocks below us.

Finally, Jules was brave enough to break the silence. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?” I scowled at her reference to my first encounter with Ryan of the summer.

Though I may never admit it out loud, she was right. This year, the first face-to-face moment hadn’t been so bad in comparison to past years. Only a handful of times was Ryan there to meet me right when I got off the bus. Over our many encounters, Ryan’s greetings ranged from mere annoyances to antics that made me want to mar that pretty face of his—preferably in a permanent manner.

The summer of our sophomore year, the year after the fateful spaghetti incident, Ryan made sure to meet me at the bus, almost as if he wanted to be the very first person I saw. He stood right by the doors and would comment as each of the Hawthorne girls stepped off. “*No. Nope. Nuh-uh. Well, hello there. Not who I’m looking for now, but I’ll definitely be*

looking for you later. Nope. Next.” Like he was labeling them in Duck, Duck, Goose.

I could see him from my position on the bus, waiting for me to appear. The temptation to run out the back door, even though I’d set off the alarm, was overwhelming. When it was my turn to hop off the bus, I stopped at the top step and made eye contact with the boy. His green eyes lit up when he met my blue, and a sly grin crept onto his lips. With a deep sigh, I stepped down and stood right in front of him.

He reached up his hand to my head and said, “*And Bingo was her name-o,*” then dropped his palm flat onto the top of my head. I felt a crunch, and slowly, raw egg slipped down my face. That one had gotten him an amusing admonishment from a counselor, and a punishment of chopping wood for the bonfire later that night.

Last year, Ryan found me standing on the sidelines of the ‘Welcome to Camp’ bonfire, as I often did. Juliet was talking it up with some of her friends from Bennett, probably about the soccer playoffs that had happened just a few weeks prior. I had chosen to stay out of sight of the Bennett Boys as best I could, but of course, the one I most wanted to avoid had zeroed in on me within the crowd. It was like he had a homing device that was programmed just for me.

He sauntered over to me with one hand in his pocket and one carrying a red solo cup. “Bells, I thought I’d find you over here alone, away from all the fun.” I could hear the delight in his voice.

“What do you want, Ryan?” I shot back, wanting to get the prank I knew was coming over and done with so I could get on with my night.

“I brought you a drink. I thought you looked thirsty.” He held it out as if it was a peace offering.

Sighing, I grabbed the cup, knowing he wouldn’t leave until I took it. “What’s in it this time? Worms? Rotten milk?” I spun the cup around, watching as the liquid sloshed. I didn’t see any solids or clumps of anything wriggling, though. The

surface looked normal, too, showing no signs of a film layered on top, but I was still on edge.

“No, just punch.”

I turned my glare toward Ryan. “What’s the catch?”

He shrugged as he met my gaze head-on. “No catch. Welcome back to camp, Bells.”

“It’s Izabel,” I corrected, a bite in my tone. Ryan snickered and turned away, leaving me alone for the rest of the night.

Staring down into the cup, I decided I didn’t trust it to risk drinking. Once he was far enough away, I turned and dumped the contents out. When it hit the ground, I bent over to examine it further in the grass. I didn’t see anything suspicious. Maybe Ryan had really just brought me some punch. But no, that would have been absurd.

I was very preoccupied with the beverage, so I didn’t hear Ryan turn back and beeline straight to where I was crouched. He made contact with me, taking me completely off guard, and we flew into the cold lake. I sputtered as I fought my way back to the surface, trying to calm the rising panic inside of me. My eyes caught Ryan, also treading water in the freezing lake, laughing his ass off.

“I hate you so much,” I muttered as I struggled to the bank and crawled out, dripping wet. I ran back to the dorms, trying my best to ignore all the catcalls and shouts at my expense from the wet clothes sticking to my skin.

So, knowing all of that history, senior-year Ryan greeting me with a hello and an “I’ll see you later” was suspicious. Too suspicious.

I pondered what exactly he had brewing in his evil mind as Jules and I climbed the stairs of the dormitory. I always liked to claim our dorm room on the top floor so that we wouldn’t hear any other girls stomping overhead. And to my relief, we managed to snag a two-bedroom with a bathroom ensuite.

Juliet hummed as she plopped her massive Louis Vuitton suitcase on her bunk. She went straight to work on her routine to make our dorm more home-y. Pulling out two sets of

printed sheets, she tossed one my way so we wouldn't have to sleep on the gross mattress pads.

I stayed quiet as I pulled my clothes out of my suitcase, stuffing them right into the chest of drawers next to my bed. I had gotten into the habit of packing way more outfits than I needed. You never knew when some rotten boy from Bennett would push you into a lake, after all. There was no such thing as being "too careful" when it came to my experiences at Camp Wildwood.

We unpacked and lounged around for about an hour, decompressing from the bus ride over. Eventually, Juliet hopped up and said she wanted to do some *reacquainting* with Liam. I stayed right where I was, perfectly content with waiting until someone forced me to go elsewhere.

I reached over to my bedside table and grabbed the pamphlet outlining camp activities this year. I read it over, wrinkling my nose at my least favorite activities such as sand volleyball or the kickball tournament. Tomorrow was a free day, full of orientations and overviews. We would probably end up skipping that. Juliet was not a fan of just sitting around listening to the headmasters drone on and on about nothing. Tuesday, during the day, was the infamous capture-the-flag match. The entire senior class would be divided into two teams, and we would battle for dominance. Wednesday was the big kayaking trip. Thursday was—

A knock at my door pulled me away from the pamphlet. I set it down just in time for Juliet to open the door and strut inside.

"Hey, ready to go check out the bonfire?" Jules asked me.

I looked down at my purple t-shirt and capris that still had dirt on them from being dragged through the gravel earlier. I had no intention of changing. I had no one to impress, but I couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious.

"Izabel, what in the hell are you wearing?" she asked, one of her eyebrows arching in accusation as she followed my self-appraisal.

I shrugged and looked down at my clothes again. “I didn’t really feel like changing.” Juliet stared at me for a second before she huffed and sashayed over to her side of the room.

“Jules, I brought my own clothes,” I protested as she began digging through the entire wardrobe she packed for the three-week camping trip.

“Well, clearly, I can’t trust you when it comes to dressing. I mean, honestly, Izabel,” she started as she held up a shirt in front of her before deciding against it and tossing it back down. “I keep saying this, hoping that you’ll actually hear me one of these days.”

I crossed my arms as I watched her veto one outfit after another. She hummed to herself as she sorted through her clothes. When she turned around to face me, she held up a white lace sundress. “This is the one.”

Grabbing the dress out of her hands, I decided arguing would be no use. Jules would not have taken no for an answer and would have gotten that dress on me one way or another. I didn’t feel like being pummeled to the ground by 130 pounds of pure blonde determination. I stalked into the bathroom, slid out of my comfy—granted, dingy—clothes, and shimmied into the lacy dress she gave me.

Once it was on, I spun in the big bathroom mirror, admiring how her clothes always fit me perfectly. The dress was pure white with cute, thick straps tied at the top. It curved into a sweetheart neckline and hugged my torso almost to the point of discomfort. It was very flattering. Much more so than anything I would choose to wear on any given day. But that was the difference between Jules and me. This was Juliet’s wheelhouse. She had a skill for finding the finest outfits and accessories, whereas I was perfectly content to continue to wear my favorite outfits over and over.

We complimented each other like peanut butter and jelly.

Giving one last turn in the mirror, I took a deep breath and prepared to show Juliet. She was sitting on the bed, facing the door with her hands clasped in front of her expectantly. When

the door opened completely, her eyes went wide, and she stood up with a grin on her face.

“Yes! That’s perfect! I thought it would be.” She walked around me as if she was appraising me for the ball. “You look like a southern belle!”

I looked at Juliet’s outfit: cutoff white jean shorts, a midriff tank, and a jean jacket to keep her warm once the sun went down.

“I feel overdressed.” Before I even finished my sentence, Juliet shook her head.

“No, babes, you’re perfect. Trust me.” She grinned even wider. Turning away to grab her purse, she looked back at me and took my hand again. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I responded, resigned.

By the time we arrived, the bonfire was in full force, the blazes reaching high into the night sky. Seniors from both schools were scattered around, joking and catching up with each other. The sun was barely slipping below the trees, casting a warm glow over the grassy field next to the paddleboat lake where the fire pit was. Staff had set up a vast snack table over to one side with every type of snack you could have wanted. Veggie sticks, cheese cubes, hotdogs, hamburgers. On the very far end was the s’mores table, which would be ravaged as the night wore on.

A few teachers walked around, ensuring no one got too close to the huge bonfire. Seeing our teachers dressed like normal people was always so strange.

Juliet grabbed us some drinks and then looked around. “I bet Liam ran off to find Ryan.”

I shuddered at the name. The last thing I needed was Ryan catching wind that I was dressed up like I had made an effort. He would come sniffing around like he always did and torture me to no end. Fancy clothes might have looked nice, but in reality, they served little protection. I could picture it now. It was my worst nightmare.

Once we got into the mix with our classmates, I didn't feel quite so overdressed. I looked around and observed what all the other girls chose to wear. After all, tonight was the big night, likely the first time most of these girls got to see their boyfriends from Bennett since the winter formal. I spotted a few other sundresses, many cutoff tops, and different varieties of jean wear.

Juliet found Liam right away, sidling up and giving him a big kiss on his cheek. He smiled back at her and wrapped his arm around her waist. I looked around and relaxed when I spotted Ryan over by the drinks table on the other side of the bonfire. He was busy chatting with another one of my classmates. He leaned against the table with his arms crossed over his chest, listening to what she was saying with a slight smile.

Against my better judgment, I watched him. He didn't look menacing when he was talking to her. It was always one of the biggest mysteries to me. Ryan was the King of Bennett, meaning he had to be a decent person, right? Something about him had to have attracted everyone enough to build that level of support. What was it about me that turned this Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde whenever we interacted?

As if he could feel my gaze burning holes into him, he glanced up and caught my eyes with his own. He watched me intently for only a minute before returning to his conversation, and despite not feeling cold, I shivered.

Taking a breath, I turned back to my small group too, steeling myself for the rest of the evening. I was glad that Ryan had chosen to take the high road in that instance. Though I was sure that wouldn't be the case for too much longer.

As the night wore on, my patience thinned.

One of the Bennett boys had snuck contraband into the camp by means of disguising it as mouthwash and had spiked the punch. I had no interest in getting wasted on my first night at camp, which meant I stuck to water or soda. Juliet had taken off with Liam about thirty minutes ago, leaving me to my own devices.

I had found my way from the crowd around the bonfire and went off by myself to stand by the lake. It was a little quieter over here, allowing the subtle buzz in my ear from the many conversations to fade. The moon was reflecting on the black surface of the water, creating an alluring mix of colors that drew me in. I could hear the frogs chirping over on the bank's other side as if their song was just for me. This was my favorite part of the camp.

I couldn't care less about the activities or the team building. I just liked to sit by the lake and disappear. It's what I did best. It was peaceful and serene.

And then—

“Heya, Bells!”

I groaned but didn't give him the satisfaction of turning around. It was inevitable that he would find me at some point. As soon as my guard slipped even slightly, he was there. “What do you want?”

“You look lonely over here all by yourself,” he said as he came up to stand a few paces away from me.

“Yeah, well, I'm not. I prefer being alone,” I shot back at him.

“I don't believe that. You always seem to be happy around Juliet.”

Turning around to face him, I scowled. “What do you want me to say, Ryan? Fine, I prefer being anywhere that you're not. I don't care who I'm with, as long as it's not you.”

I watched his face as I delivered my blow, hoping he would pick up on my hint that I was over his games. He stared back at me. Something I couldn't name flashed across his eyes, but his face remained blank. Finally, he cleared his throat and looked out onto the lake.

“Nice night,” he remarked.

“Seriously?” I retorted. He looked over at me again as his lips twitched into a smirk.

“What do you want me to say, Izabel?” His voice took on a light, teasing tone, and the hairs on the back of my neck instantly stood up. Oh, he was mocking me now. “You amuse me, and I prefer being anywhere that you are. So it seems we are at an impasse here, are we not?”

I blinked at him, unsure where this side of Ryan was coming from. Uneasiness swirled in my belly as I considered his words. I crossed my arms over my chest and didn’t say anything back, hoping to appear unbothered by him standing in front of me, when really, I was battling to reconcile what I previously knew to be true about Ryan Miller, and whatever new version of himself he was showing me now.

We stood in silence for a few minutes, before he took a sip of the alcoholic punch, turning his head back to me. I braced myself for whatever was about to come out of his mouth. This new Ryan was unpredictable, so I had to be ready for anything.

“You look nice tonight, Bells.”

My arms dropped from across my chest, and my jaw went slack. *What?* Did he just have a stroke? Did *I* just have a stroke, or did Ryan actually give me a real compliment? What the hell was happening here?

Finally, my brain stopped having a seizure long enough for me to respond with a “What?”

He nodded at me. “That dress looks nice on you.”

Quickly, the recesses of my brain struggled to piece everything together. I collected the tidbits of information I’ve gradually been collecting since stepping foot off that bus. It wasn’t adding up. I had no idea which way was up, or who this person standing in front of me was—because it certainly wasn’t the Ryan I had come to know and hate. Still not fully recovered from my initial shock, but collected enough to speak, I narrowed my eyes at him. “What’s your game here, Ryan?” I looked around. “Are you recording this or something? Trying to lower my guard before stomping me into the ground?”

I noticed Juliet make her reappearance from across the field. She started to head over this way, a few other people following behind her. We must have gotten their attention. Good. I was ready to get the hell out of here.

Ryan's usual menacing expression morphed into something I had yet to see grace his features before. My heart skipped a beat as the firm set of his eyebrows loosened, softening the appearance of his green eyes as he watched me. I found myself wanting to hear what he was going to say.

"No, I just—" Ryan started, before one of his friends made a beeline toward him and knocked his cup out of his hand. Of course, as if I were a magnet, it spilled all over the front of my pristine white dress.

I stood there dripping in red liquid, tears pricking my eyes at how foolish I was for setting myself up for this. For a moment, I had given Ryan the benefit of the doubt, and look where that got me. Ryan stood before me, not moving a muscle, observing my assessment of the now-ruined dress. My eyes eventually found their way back to his face, and I glared harder at him, hoping he could see just how unamusing I found this whole situation. His muscles tensed as he gauged my reaction.

Irritation continued to burn inside of me, and I let instincts take over. Ryan got the better of me, tricking me into letting my guard down, but it wouldn't happen again. Instead of running away in tears like I was sure he hoped, I put both hands on his chest and shoved him as hard as I could.

Ryan yelped as he fell backward, clearly not expecting me to push him. He hit the water with a satisfying splash, and I turned on my heel and stalked away, so ready to be done with this night.

I didn't stick around to witness his buddies congratulate him on the first perfectly executed prank of the summer. I heard him cough as he came to the surface, and Juliet screeched at him, "Ryan Miller, you asshole, that dress cost me seventy dollars!"

RYAN

ONCE I DRAGGED myself out of the lake, I shot Todd a dark glare. “What the fuck?”

He was too busy laughing his ass off to really notice I was legitimately pissed. Liam watched our other friend with a wary expression, his eyes darting between me and Todd. My irritation continued to rise as my idiot friend laughed harder.

“Todd!” I shouted at him, finally pulling the bastard from his laughter.

“What?” he fired back.

“What the *fuck?*” I repeated. “What was that for?”

At last, Todd sobered, realizing that I wasn’t playing around anymore. “What do you mean?”

“Why did you do that?” I asked, trying not to growl.

He shrugged noncommittally. “I thought it would be funny. Sorry, Ryan, I didn’t realize she was going to push you into the lake.”

I scowled at him. Of course he didn’t, because he had no idea that Izabel was slowly warming to me. I could see it in her eyes—she wanted to hear what I had to say. And secretly, with that small surrender of hers, I had hoped that maybe that would be the turning point and we could overcome the last few years.

Then Todd had to go and be a shithead.

I saw the moment she thought she had pieced it all together, and I couldn't lie—it stung a bit. It was written clear as day all across her face. She had thought I tricked her. She thought I was pretending to be genuine, only to have one of my henchmen come out of nowhere and take advantage of her lowering her walls for a moment.

Honestly, I couldn't care less about Izabel pushing me into the lake. To be fair, I probably deserved a whole lot worse. I was now soaking wet, but truly, I didn't care.

It ended up being the excuse I needed to get out of being at the bonfire. After I yelled at Todd a little more, I was able to go back to the dorms under the guise of needing to shower and get new clothes. I did do all of that, but I didn't go back to the bonfire, instead choosing to hole up in my bunk for the rest of the night.

Izabel's expression of betrayal and anger burned into my brain as I replayed the incident over and over in my head. The feeling of remorse was not something I had often contributed to the shenanigans surrounding Izabel, but that was where I was at this moment. My chest ached with the realization that I had met every expectation Izabel had of me, in the worst way possible.

I was thoroughly pissed, and I wished my friends would mind their own damn business instead of feeling the need to get involved with mine. Maybe tomorrow would be a better day. Maybe I would get a chance to apologize to her for ruining her dress.

Fuck, that dress.

She really did look nice. I don't think I'd ever been affected by a girl in a simple dress the way I was when I laid eyes on her. There was something about the way it hugged her curves so perfectly that had my mouth drying and my stomach clenching. I had given her the compliment hoping that maybe she'd believe me, that she'd know she was beautiful. I knew she didn't trust me, but maybe someday I could convince her that I wasn't the terrible person she thought I was.

Still picturing Izabel's look of fury, I was able to fall asleep before my friends made it back to the dorm.

The following day was solely focused on icebreaker games as if we hadn't already spent years together at this point. They broke us into groups to play a few, and then we were instructed to get into our group and play 'Two Truths and a Lie.'

Much to my amusement, that afternoon, I got put in a group with Liam, Todd, Nahla, and Izabel herself. Izabel looked incredibly uncomfortable with this setup. Her face was twisted up as though she just drank a glass of sour milk. And though I wished she didn't have such a strong, negative reaction to me, a sick side of me liked that she had a reaction to me at all. The minute she became indifferent to me, I'd know it was all over, but until then, I'd take anything I could get, even if that meant that she had to hate me. We'd been in that same boat for pretty much the entirety of our acquaintance, so if that's all I got, then so be it.

Even though, these days, I wasn't sure her hatred toward me would be my first choice. But I didn't know what to do to change the direction of her feelings.

She watched me warily as our small group settled into a circle on the floor, making an effort to sit as far away from me as possible, as if I might bite her.

We were given the instructions for the game, though I was sure we all knew how to play it. It was pretty self-explanatory. Todd decided that he would go first and made a big show of tapping his chin with his finger as he thought about his two truths and a lie.

"Okay, let's see. I got straight As this semester, my dad flies fighter jets, and I have a pet snake," he said as he eyed us all with a straight poker face.

I rolled my eyes as everyone in our group started calling out what they thought the lie was. I stayed silent. I knew Todd way too well. There was no doubt in my mind that he did *not* get straight As this semester.

With a Cheshire Cat grin, he announced his lies—he ended up with two Bs in two classes.

Izabel took a deep breath, realizing she was up next. I watched her intently as her cheeks warmed under everyone’s scrutinizing gaze. My chest felt tight as I realized just how cute she looked with that rosy blush. She fiddled with her fingers as she said, “I love to read biographies and non-fiction. I went to Bali last summer after camp. And I really hate to swim, ’cause I don’t like water.”

My eyebrows furrowed as soon as she finished. The group started shouting off what they thought the lie was. Most people thought that she had never been to Bali before, but I wasn’t convinced.

“You don’t like to swim?” I asked, still watching her thoughtfully.

She pressed her lips together and looked at me. Though she appeared unsure, she slowly nodded her head.

“Ryan, you’re supposed to guess the *lie*,” one of the other girls teased and shoved my shoulder playfully. My attention was still stuck on Izabel, though.

Her lips twitched sideways, and finally, she dropped her gaze from mine. “I’ve never been to Bali, though I really want to go someday.”

My stomach sank as realization flooded through me. She didn’t like to swim or like the water. Was that because of me? My memory flashed back to just last summer when I shoved her into the lake. I can still remember the sound she made when she broke the surface and struggled to the shore.

Izabel’s eyes darted up to me once more, but she quickly looked away when she noticed my attention was still on her. She cleared her throat and clasped her hands together. “Okay, who’s next?”

I was still pondering this new revelation as the next person went in our group. We finished the game and moved on to the next.

This one was called ‘Question Jenga,’ where we used regular Jenga blocks that had icebreaker questions scrawled on them. Whichever block we pulled from the tower, we had to answer.

I decided to go first this time. I tenderly pulled out my block without knocking over the whole tower. Holding it up, I read off the question, “What is your best scar story?” I glanced around the circle and gave an uncomfortable laugh. “Well, that’s a little personal.” Everyone laughed with me except Izabel.

Thinking about the question for a second, I then lifted my leg and pointed at the large gash down the side of my calf. “I got this while playing street hockey in a parking lot. I wasn’t paying attention and flipped over a curb. Not that badass of a story, but it’s a cool scar.”

I dropped my block into the pile and looked expectantly at the group. Nahla went next and pulled the block right off the top. “The zombie apocalypse is coming; who are the three people you’d want on your team? That’s easy. I’ll take Todd ’cause he’s got the brawn, Brianna ’cause she’s got the brains, and Ryan ’cause he’s sexy.”

I tried to keep my face expressionless. I had zero interest in Nahla. In fact, I found her persistence to be a major turn-off, but that never stopped her. She would likely be fawning over me the entire few weeks we’d be there, no matter how apparent I made my disinterest.

Izabel rolled her eyes at her classmate and leaned over to grab her block. The tower wobbled but didn’t fall, and she breathed out a relieved sigh. Settling back in her seat, she read the question on her block. “If you were on a deserted island with either your worst enemy or no one, which would you choose?” Todd snickered right as Izabel looked up and locked eyes with me.

I leaned forward on my elbows, waiting with bated breath to hear her answer.

As if taking my challenge, she held my gaze steady with her striking blue eyes. Not once breaking eye contact, she

leaned forward and threw her block into the pile, maybe a little too forcefully. “No one. I’d rather be alone for the rest of my life than be stuck anywhere with him.”

A deathly silence fell over our small group until Nahla snorted and looked between Izabel and me. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, would you two please just hook up already so we can all move on from whatever this is?”

I glanced at Nahla, wishing she wouldn’t continuously choose to put salt in a fresh wound. That was just her MO, though; she loved to stir the pot whenever possible. I turned to Izabel to gauge her reaction. I wouldn’t be terribly opposed to the suggestion—in fact, maybe it would be exactly what we both needed to end this summer off on a high note.

Izabel crossed her arms and continued to glare daggers back at me. “No, thank you.”

I couldn’t fight the smirk that threatened to form on my lips. She made this too easy. I, too, leaned back but kept staring at her. “If you say so.”

Izabel narrowed her eyes on mine. “What does that mean?”

I shot her a grin and shrugged my shoulders. “Whatever you want it to mean. We both know you’ve been harboring a secret crush on me all these years. But it’s fine. It can be our little secret.”

I didn’t know what possessed me to say that, but the flare of fire in Izabel’s eyes was almost worth it if not for the sick feeling that flooded my stomach right after. She stood up with a huff and stormed away from our little group. I watched after her, feeling a wave of regret roll over me. What the fuck was the matter with me? Why did I always have to push her too far?

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Nahla felt the need to add. I tore my eyes from Izabel’s retreating form and looked over to the girl who was examining her manicure. “She’s probably been in love with you this whole time.”

Todd laughed, and I reached over and punched his arm, though Nahla's words caused an unusual fluttering in my stomach. I wondered if I was hungry, or maybe my breakfast wasn't settling. "Enough. Nahla, mind your own fucking business."

She shrugged, completely unbothered by my tone. I stood up, too, and left the game. I could hear Liam trailing after me, calling my name, but I didn't stop.

Once I was outside, he caught up to me. With a hand on my shoulder, he pulled me to a halt. I turned to face him with a blank expression.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

I rubbed my hands over my face and groaned. "Nothing. It's nothing."

He fell silent for a moment, but then said, "Look, man, no one's expecting you to keep playing this game if you don't want to, you know? I think it's run its course. Maybe it's time to drop the vendetta."

With a sigh, I dropped my hands and looked at my best friend. "I don't hate her."

"Okay, well, she sure does hate you."

Liam was right. Izabel hated my damn guts, and I had no one to blame but myself. It didn't really bother me that she didn't like me—tons of people didn't like me. But what bothered me was that this was all by my own doing.

"Probably well deserved," I muttered and turned away from my friend. I found a basketball stationed in the grass and grabbed it, lined up to the net, and took the shot. The basketball swished through the net and fell to the concrete before bouncing away.

"Hey! You guys playing without me?" Todd shouted from the building. I turned to look at him and sighed. He came trotting over and grabbed the ball, taking a shot himself.

As the ball fell through the net, Todd turned to me and echoed Liam's earlier question. "What was that back there?"

“Nothing,” I repeated my earlier answer.

“You’ve been in a mood ever since we got here,” Todd observed, watching me with a scrutinous eye.

“I’m not in a mood. I just don’t really want to be here. I’ve got some shit going on at home, okay?” I told him.

Todd paused, and his suspicions gave way to concern. For as big of an idiot Todd was, he was still my friend too. “Anything I can help with?”

I shook my head and grabbed the basketball again, bouncing it a few times before taking a free throw. “Nah. I think my mom’s gonna tell me she got engaged to her boyfriend.” My friends fell silent, both aware that that was a *big deal*. “So if it feels like I’m a little uncommitted to whatever game this is with Izabel, maybe that’s why. Because it doesn’t really matter.”

Also, it was just dumb.

I wanted to say that out loud, but I didn’t. Even still, I was holding up the front that my friends expected of me. Maybe not Liam, but definitely Todd. And the rest of my classmates, for sure.

Maybe if I continued to be nonchalant about it all, they’d finally get the hint that I wasn’t invested anymore. I figured the chances of that were slim, but still, I held out hope.

IZABEL

SO FAR, camp was living up to its unfortunate expectations. After the embarrassment of yesterday during the icebreaker games, I was feeling defeated. I tried my hardest to rally my spirits and come off as enthusiastic as possible, but it was a struggle. I wanted to go home and be finished with this damn camp forever.

But as much as I dreaded it, today marked a new day. The camp had their capture-the-flag game later this afternoon, and everyone was buzzing about it. Though I despised being here, even I couldn't deny that I enjoyed the annual capture-the-flag showdown.

The event occurred in a giant field with a playground on one side and a creek and woods on the other. The field was divided down the middle by red scarves so we would know where the boundary was.

Counselors randomly picked the two teams out of a giant bowl to prevent the jocks from teaming up. There was a 50/50 chance that I would end up with Ryan, but I resolved to avoid him either way. After yesterday, I aimed even more to keep our interactions to a minimum for the remaining weeks of camp.

Juliet and I ventured out with the crowd toward the large field. Between the two schools, Bennett and Hawthorne, there were just over a hundred seniors. The schools made it a point to keep the classes at a manageable number. Students from all over the country applied for acceptance, but only a few made the cut.

I was forever thankful that Juliet and I had made it in at the same time. Before Hawthorne, Juliet had been my best friend throughout all of elementary school. It just so happened that we grew up in the same neighborhood in Cedar Ridge. We became friends early on and somehow were destined to stay friends throughout the rest of our schooling career.

It was only Juliet, myself, and one other student at the schools who were from Cedar Ridge. Unfortunately, that other student happened to be a green-eyed, tousled-haired menace. Ryan's family only moved to Cedar Ridge when he got accepted into Bennett. Now, I only had the pleasure of occasionally running into him on school breaks.

I shuddered to think what life would have been like if Ryan and I had actually attended the same school at any point in our lives. Even now, my only required interactions were with Ryan at Camp Wildwood.

After these few weeks, I would leave for college and hopefully never have to see his annoyingly attractive face again.

As we walked closer to some of our friends from school, my anticipation started to build. The capture-the-flag game was one of the highlights each year. The winning team didn't get prizes other than simple bragging rights, but the competition rolled over each year. Needless to say, the game became intense and highly competitive.

In the many years that I had been coming to this camp, I had only been on the winning team a handful of times. I just had bad luck.

Two of the camp counselors were standing near the edge of the opposite side of the field on a small stool so they could see everyone. They held the bowl full of our names, ready to be drawn and assigned to the correct team. Red or Blue. Each counselor wore a bandana around their head corresponding with their team color. The counselors wouldn't play with us, but they would act as "team captains" per se. Assigning different positions and making sure we worked well together.

Jules and I found our way to the middle of the mass of seniors, and we all huddled together. The sun was shining bright today, confirming the day would be warm. I stood on my tiptoes to try to see over my classmates' heads in an attempt to get a better view.

"Do you want to switch spots with me?" a deep voice addressed me. I turned to the side, not recognizing who it was. A guy stood just before me with dark brown hair and rich chocolate eyes. He gave me an unconfident smile as he waited for my response.

It was a Bennett Boy. But not *the* Bennett Boy.

"Oh, sure, that would be great," I responded with a smile, turning to look at Juliet, who was watching me like a hawk, an amused expression lingering on her face.

The guy shuffled sideways, letting me into the space he had created. He grinned at me, and my heart fluttered. This boy was cute. I couldn't believe I had never interacted with him before. Maybe he was newer to the class. He looked like he was an athlete, too, with strong forearms and broad shoulders. He wasn't as tall as Ryan, but he still seemed to tower over me.

He held out his hand once I shifted into my new spot. "I'm Mark."

"Izabel Sanders." I took his hand, looking up into his warm eyes.

Mark's eyebrows lifted in surprise at the sound of my name. "You're Izabel Sanders? I've heard a lot about you."

My smile melted off my face, and I rolled my eyes as I swiped my hand back. "I bet you have."

"Not all bad things, though!" he added quickly.

"Somehow, I don't see how that's possible," I told him begrudgingly. "I've got a kind of rivalry with your top dog."

As if I had summoned him from Hell, Ryan Miller chose that moment to swoop in out of nowhere and drape his arm around my shoulders. His quick approach and the weight of

his arm over my shoulders sent my heart into overdrive. I looked up at him, speechless for a moment as I processed what was going on.

“Yep, me and Bells here go way back,” he said with a smirk. I noticed there was a slight glint in his eyes that I had never noticed before. He looked displeased to catch Mark talking to me, to say the least. “Probably don’t want to get in the middle of the crossfire, Marky Mark. Best to keep your distance.”

I took that opportunity to jam my elbow into Ryan’s side in an attempt to get him off of me. The bastard didn’t even flinch.

Mark looked between the two of us. Ryan with his arm around me, and me glaring daggers in his general direction. He raised his hands up in surrender. “Sorry, man, didn’t realize she was yours.”

“I don’t belong to him!” I snapped, as Ryan simultaneously announced maybe a little too defensively, “She’s not!” I tried my best to wiggle out of Ryan’s death grip, but he was too strong. Mark gave me a pitying look and walked away to join some of his other friends.

Ryan used his free hand to give Mark a little wave as he walked away. Once he was out of sight—sucked in by the crowd of seniors—Ryan let out a whoosh of air and his arm fell from my shoulders.

“Geez, I thought he would never leave.” He ran his hand through his messy blond hair and gave me a smirk. “You can do much better than him, Bells.”

I shoved him away from me with both hands. He only stumbled back a few inches. The guy was a brick wall. “Why would you do that?” Then, as if remembering, I added, “And for the millionth time, it’s Izabel!”

Ryan made big puppy dog eyes and stared at me helplessly. “If this was a movie, Izabel,” he said as he stepped closer to me again, “this would be when I tell you I’ve been madly in love with you since the first time I saw you step off that bus in

the sixth grade. We are destined for each other, Bells, you and me. I couldn't stand to see you with anyone else."

At his words, my heart stopped beating, and I stared at him without saying anything for a moment too long. My brain went into overdrive, working through the implications of what he could mean.

Ryan laughed hilariously and rubbed his eyes, pretending to wipe away tears. "Woo, I really got you there."

I shoved him again, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Aw, come on, Bells. I was only teasing," he said to me, still laughing.

"Leave me alone, Ryan. I hate you." Turning away from him, I hoped he didn't see the evident flush of my cheeks. I didn't want him to know I was embarrassed by falling for his words yet again. I cursed myself for being so gullible this summer—what had come over me? Typically, I was sharp, and aware of any and all moves Ryan could make. But for whatever reason, he switched up the playbook, and I was shooting blindly.

"I'm just saying, Bells. I think you could do a whole lot better than him," he said again, pointing his thumb in the direction Mark walked away in.

I spun back around to face him. "How so? With someone like you?"

Ryan shrugged and made a face. "He's in the band."

"I have lots of friends who are in the band." I roll my eyes. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"What's going on over here?" Juliet questioned, stepping up to my side.

"I just saved Bells from making a huge mistake with her life," Ryan said proudly. "She was trying to hook up with one of the guys in the band."

I threw my hands up in frustration. "I was not trying to hook up with him! He was just being nice!" I pointed my

finger at Ryan's smug face. "Something that *you* wouldn't know anything about."

Ryan clutched a hand over his heart and staggered back as if I had shot him. I wish I had. "Oh, you wound me!"

Juliet rolled her eyes and grabbed my hand. "Whatever. Let's move up there so he'll leave you alone."

"Sounds great to me. Lead the way," I announced, still glaring at Ryan. He watched me go with a smug look on his face, and I fought down the urge to hit him.

Once the teams were selected, we were divided into two groups. I was on the blue team this year. Thankfully, Juliet had been assigned to blue too. As I looked around my group, I tried to memorize the faces of everyone on my team. I noticed with glee that a certain blond-haired Bennett boy was nowhere to be found. This was the best news I had received all day.

Our counselor gathered us all around and assigned roles. Juliet got appointed as a front-runner. She would go back and forth to the other team's side as needed to find their flag. I got the assignment as a tagger. I would stand just behind our line and catch anyone crossing over onto our territory. If all of our front runners got tagged out and stuck in jail, I would be next to try to find the opposing team's flag.

We all got set up for the game, the whistle blew, and everyone charged. Juliet flew over the line, jumped, and swerved every time one of the other team members tried to lunge at her. She disappeared into the enemy lines as she went for the flag.

I jabbed my arm out at those who ran across our line, tagging left and right. Once I tapped someone, they would stop running, sigh dejectedly, and walk over to the sidelines. In jail, they would wait until someone was valiant enough to get past me and tag them out. Then they would walk hand in hand back to their home side and do it all over again.

My eyes darted this way and that as I tried to tag my opponents. In my peripheral vision, I saw someone dart over

the line and run straight into the woods where we had hidden our flag.

Not today! I said to myself as I took off after them.

I wasn't nearly as athletic as Juliet, but I could hold my own. Taking a deep breath, I paced myself as I ran after the enemy. My feet pounded on the ground with every step. I took great care of watching for divots in the grass. With my luck, my toes would get stuck in one, and I would go flying across the field, snapping an ankle in the process. I didn't need that kind of attention today.

I ran into the woods, breathing harder, trying to see the brave soul who was in search of our flag. Honestly, I didn't even know where they had hidden the flag. Usually, it was back in the woods, hidden in some bush or under a rock. Typically, the teams had a few members stationed close to the actual hiding place of the flag, so that it could always be protected.

That meant a good strategy—if it could be pulled off—was to have a bunch of people charge the area where the flag was kept so that the guys protecting the flag would have to go chase them. Then a scout could be sent in to snatch the flag while it was unprotected.

I lost track of the person I was chasing, so I slowed down to walk instead. No reason to wear myself out when I didn't even know who I was running after. Placing my hands on my hips, I kept walking, trying to catch my breath.

“Heya, Bells!” someone said to me, nearly scaring me shitless. I must've jumped a mile in the sky as I whipped around to look at him.

“What do you want?” I groaned.

Ryan was leaning against a tree with his arms crossed, looking at me, amused. Slowly, like an animal stalking his prey, he walked toward me. Whatever he was up to, I suspected it wouldn't be good, so I braced myself for the worst.

RYAN

I THOUGHT I was going to lose my ever-loving shit when I saw Izabel hanging around with that loser, Mark Snyder. It took everything in me to keep myself from grabbing his collar and yanking him away from her.

I hadn't outright staked any kind of claim over Izabel—officially—but there was just something *off* about Mark, and I didn't like the idea of him sniffing around her. I would've given an arm and a leg to know what Izabel was thinking through that whole encounter.

She was so hard for me to read sometimes. Sure, I knew she was annoyed at me for interrupting, but was she interested in Mark?

I had no idea. But the way her blue eyes widened and lit up in interest when he approached her made me see red. For whatever reason, the thought of the two of them together was enough to push me over the edge. I knew I was being irrational; I had no reason to feel jealous, yet here we were.

After the capture-the-flag game set off, I went searching for her again, feeling a desperate need to see her. She unintentionally found me before I had the chance to locate her.

I watched her run into the clearing I was stationed at. Then she slowed, trying to catch her breath. She took a few steps closer to me when I announced myself.

“Heya, Bells.”

Her head whipped around to face me, and she gave me a scowl worthy of no one but her. “What do you want?”

I pushed myself off the tree trunk I was leaning against and walked toward her, making a big show of circling her. She watched me warily, as if afraid I was going to jump and attack her.

“Just letting my presence be known. Gotta say, I’m impressed. You’re not in too bad of shape, you know?”

“Ha, right,” she fired back. “That’s why I feel like I’m about to throw up a lung.”

I shrugged. “Still, not too bad.” I watched her for another second as she tried to get better control of her breathing. Finally, I grinned at her. “Aren’t you going to tag me?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Can you read minds?”

I laughed. “No, I wish. I can see your thought process clear as day. You get sloppy when you’re tired.”

Izabel scowled, but she didn’t try to defend herself. She really was tired. “Aren’t you going to go after the flag?” she asked.

“Nah, I’ll let someone else get it. Maybe your new little boyfriend.”

Izabel reared back, raising her hands. “Let me stop you right there. Mark is *not* my boyfriend. I’ve honestly never even seen him before today.”

I looked down at my hands and picked at the dirt underneath a fingernail. “Well, he sure was looking at you like he wanted to worship the ground you walk on.”

“I’m not doing this with you again,” she said, flustered. Her fingers toyed with the ends of her ponytail, and she looked away, rolling her lips into a thin line. “You really have no say in anything I do.”

“What if I want to change that?” I asked her before I realized what I was saying.

Izabel went suspiciously still as her eyes found mine again. I could see the gears in her brain working hard to decipher what I just suggested. “What does that mean?”

“Maybe I’m tired of playing this game,” I said with a shrug.

“You mean, capture-the-flag? It’s almost over.” She looked around right as cheering sounded somewhere in the distance. “Actually, I think someone just won.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “No, I’m not talking about capture-the-flag. I’m talking about this.” I motioned between the two of us. “Maybe I want to be done.”

“What’s your angle here, Ryan?” she asked, exasperation dripping from her tone. “Are you trying to trick me into thinking you want to be friends? Or are you hoping I’ll just let my guard down again so you can swoop in and make a fool of me like you have all the other times we’ve danced around this topic?”

I frowned at her defensive stance. I hated that I was the only one to blame for her developing this aggression toward me. And she was right. Previously, every time I had brought up the possibility of us moving past our grievances, somehow, I found a way to make everything exponentially worse.

“Would that be so terrible?” I replied. Anticipation built in my chest. What if she was open to it? Maybe we could just move past the last few years and pretend they never happened.

“Yes. Hell would have to freeze over before I would even *consider* giving you the time of day, much less be your *friend*.”

Without another word, she spun on her heel and started stalking toward the main field. A sharp sensation struck my chest and disappointment flooded me for a second, but I squashed it. She couldn’t dismiss me that easily. Chasing after her, I caught up and matched her stride. I could feel the anger and irritation radiating off her in waves, but I ignored it.

As we walked, my arm would brush hers, which caused an intriguing sensation. My skin was hyper-aware of every minuscule brush of her arm against mine. The same thing happened when I approached her and her new buddy, Mark. She had felt so small pressed up next to me, and something deep and protective had welled in my chest.

But now, as if she was experiencing the same reaction, each time our arms would touch, she would suck in a breath through her teeth. I wonder if she knew I noticed.

I wondered if she felt this way toward anyone else, experiencing a little jealousy at the possibility. I replayed Mark making his move on her earlier. What had he said?

Sorry, man, didn't realize she was yours.

At first, I had outright denied it out of reflex. But now, thinking it over, maybe I should've gone along with it. Something was urging me to make sure old Marky Mark knew to keep his greedy paws off of her.

We were both quiet as we made our way out of the woods, as if trying to work through whatever was happening as we walked side by side. It made me uneasy. I wasn't sure what was happening here, but I needed to make amends, put an end to all this nonsense. Yet at the same time, my defenses reared up.

She clearly expected me to fit the version of me that I had shown her all these years. Change was not an option here. Izabel was dead set on our dynamic staying exactly how it was. So if that's what she wanted, then that's what she'd get. I was nothing if not committed.

Once we made it to the edges of the main field, I sped up and turned on her, so I faced her. I walked backward, as she never slowed her stride. When I glared at her, she glared right back. She apparently meant what she said, that she'd never give me the time of day.

“Alright, Bells, you get your wish. I'll leave you alone. I just thought it would be nice for a change, maybe extend an

olive branch. But if you don't want that, that's on you. Don't say I didn't warn you."

I shot her a wink, and then turned and took off.

Todd and Liam were hanging out near the far edge of the field. Todd was waving the other team's flag around in the air like some kind of trophy. When both of my friends spotted me, they charged.

"Hey, man! We won!" Todd shouted, waving the flag in my face as if I wasn't able to see it.

I pushed him back, but gave him a grin. "Happy for you. Hey, I have an idea I need to run by you."

As I was crossing the field, away from Izabel, my mind had been furiously working to come up with a plan. She had flat-out refused to accept my treaty. I couldn't allow myself to show any more weakness when it came to her. And I had finally thought of the perfect prank for this year's trip.

This would be the penultimate prank, and after this, we could both move on with our lives.

I quickly relayed my idea to Todd and Liam. Todd was enthusiastic, immediately volunteering to do most of the dirty work. Liam appeared to be amused, but I also noted he wasn't quite on board as much as he had been in the past.

Whatever, we would pull off this prank, and that would be it.

After this, I'd shut down anything else that the guys tried to talk me into.

As Todd and I set to work perfecting this prank, all I could think about was how she'd respond.

Her reactions to my pranks were always so spot on. This one was pretty harmless, but I knew she would throw a fit. Honestly, I was looking forward to it.

As I stared up at the flagpole, I only felt a little hint of regret. But I quickly squashed that feeling. We only had a few more weeks together before we'd go our separate ways.

Might as well make the most of them.

IZABEL

AFTER THE CAPTURE-THE-FLAG GAME ENDED, Juliet and I went to get some ice cream from the shop at camp. Juliet was a bit bitter that Todd had found our team's flag before she had gotten to theirs, so we needed a pick-me-up.

As per usual, she got her favorite flavor, rocky road, and I got mint chip. We settled on one of the picnic tables to eat and then decided to go back to our dorm rooms.

"I think there's a movie night tonight," Juliet mentioned as we walked toward the dorms. "Probably some kid movie, but do you want to go?"

I shrugged. "Sure, that sounds good to me. I have no other plans."

"Uh, Izabel?" she asked as soon as the dorms were in our sightline. I looked up to see her pointing at something.

Following her finger, my stomach dropped. Right there, hanging loud and proud on the flagpole in front of the girls' dorms, was all my underwear. Bras, socks, and panties. And right in the middle of the parade of clothing was a white cloth with *Izabel's Secret* scratched onto it with a black marker.

"Oh. My. God," I whispered.

"I'm going to kill him," Juliet said under her breath.

"Not if I get to him first," I grumbled back.

I stomped as quickly as I could toward the dorms. I couldn't go too fast. Otherwise, I was worried I would burn

holes where my feet hit the ground as I fumed with red-hot anger. I'm unsure if I had ever been madder in my entire life.

He had warned me. He sure did. But holy shit, I hadn't expected him to do that. I kind of felt bad for the ass-whooping Liam was going to be getting from Juliet later for his likely role in the stunt.

"Are you kidding me?" I yelled at the boys standing underneath the flagpole. They watched me approach with mirthful eyes, looking awfully proud of themselves.

Ryan leaned against the flagpole, grinning. Todd stood off to his side with his arms crossed, a smirk plastered on his face as well. Liam watched Juliet warily, with an expression of pure sheepishness, as she glared at him.

"Heya, Bells," Ryan said lazily. "You've been a naughty girl. Thongs? Honestly, I was expecting you to be more of a boy short or granny-panty type of girl."

"I *hate* you!" I screamed as I marched right up to him. We were starting to attract a crowd. The underwear acted as a beacon to all my classmates, and they were drawn to the scene. I'm sure they were ready to see the long-awaited showdown between Ryan and me.

"Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual," Ryan argued back as I got closer.

I gave a dark chuckle as my mind flashed back to the interaction we had during the capture-the-flag game. "Oh, really?"

It must be something in the way that I'm baiting him that has his eyebrow twitching, and he raises his chin expectantly, waiting for me to continue.

"Cause that's not really what you said earlier, is it?" I smiled cruelly at him and changed the octave of my voice, mimicking his deep timbre. "*Oh please, Bells, can we be friends? I'm dying to make amends with you.*"

Ryan's expression grew thunderous, and his eyes narrowed venomously. His friends looked back and forth between me and him, as if trying to piece together what I was referencing.

I was on a roll, though, and I continued, “So what is this, retaliation because I said no? I bet you’re really not used to people refusing you for anything. What, did I hurt your feelings?”

Ryan glowered at me and crossed his arms over his chest defensively. “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really? ’Cause I specifically remember you trying to find common ground.”

His eyebrows raised, and my stomach dropped as I saw that vindictive mask slide right back onto his face. “You sure you’re not getting me confused with someone else? Maybe your new buddy, Mark? He’s been trying to get into your pants since we got here.” He spared a glance at Todd and a wry grin formed on his face. “Don’t know why, though. He must be pretty desperate to go after you.”

That did it. Before I could even stop myself, my arm drew back and thrust forward. I clobbered him square in the face with my fist, and an audible sound echoed out as my punch landed. The crowd that had gathered gave an *oooooh*. A shock of pain shot up my hand and into my shoulder, and I bit my tongue to keep myself from crying out.

“Jesus Christ!” Ryan yelled as he hit the ground, his hand clutching his nose. When he drew back his hand, there was blood on it. Despite my throbbing wrist, a sense of accomplishment bloomed in my chest.

I stood over him triumphantly. “Screw you.”

“You’re gonna pay for that!” Ryan growled as he lunged up and tackled me down to the ground. I yelped as his shoulder made contact with my stomach, rolling us around until he pinned me to the dirt, his hands clasp my wrists.

“Get off me, you son of a bitch!” I screamed as he held me in place. He was too strong for me, but I wouldn’t go down without a fight. “You’re bleeding on me!”

“Well, you shouldn’t have punched me, you psychopath!” he shouted back.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” I chanted as I thrashed. It was true. I had resorted to childish antics, but I would have done it all over again. My emotions were all over the place, but anger and rage still shone through. I was embarrassed that all of the senior class had seen my unmentionables, yet I was ecstatic that I had punched Ryan and made him bleed. Rage coursed through my body, though, at the realization that he could pin me down and neutralize my threat so easily.

Tears pricked my eyes as everything came down on me at once. Ryan watched me with wary eyes as I stopped flailing, blood dripping down his chin. I couldn't help the sob that escaped. I pinched my eyes together tightly to try to keep the tears in. I wouldn't let him see me cry. That would give him too much ammunition in the future. But without much prompting, Ryan released me and crawled off of me. I pushed him the rest of the way off and stood up, dusting my clothes off. Trying not to make a scene of myself wiping my eyes.

“Bells,” he said softly. If my head had been clearer, I might have mulled over the way his voice had taken on a delicate tone. But I was seething.

Ryan reached his hand out to me, palm facing up in a non-threatening gesture. I still swatted his hand away and gave him a sharp look. “Don't. You're dead to me. And for the last fucking time, it's Izabel!”

The crowd around us had gone silent, waiting for the next round. Slowly, they started to part, and an angry-looking counselor walked into the makeshift ring they all had formed around us.

The counselor looked back and forth between Ryan and me for only a brief second before pointing at the two of us. “You two. Follow me. Now.”

I shot Ryan a glare, but I did as instructed. I could hear him grumbling under his breath as we followed the counselor in silence. Only the sound of our feet crunching in the gravel filled the void. My arms were crossed over my chest, my fists clenched into tight balls. I didn't even glance Ryan with a

glance as we did our walk of shame. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw him swipe at his nose, which must have still been bleeding. He had pulled the hem of his gray t-shirt up and held it to his face, applying pressure to his wound. The action caused a hint of his abs to peek through, and I quickly looked away, not wanting to be accused of ogling his body.

What a mess. This was all Ryan's fault. None of this would be happening if it weren't for him and his stupid pranks.

"This is your fault, you know," I finally grumbled as we walked down the road to the counselor's cabin.

Ryan looked at me. Something indescribable flashed across his face, and the softness that might have been there before was instantly shadowed by the usual mischievous glint. "How is this my fault? You damn near broke my nose."

I shook my head. "Are you kidding? Did you forget the part where you hung up all my underwear for everyone to see?"

"It was a joke, Bells. You're the one who punched me."

"Don't even try to put this on me, you stupid son of a—"

"Enough!" the counselor interrupted me. "I don't want to hear another word from you two until we're there."

I scowled at Ryan, who scowled right back at me. But we walked without another word until we stood in the counselor's office. Inside was the head counselor of the camp and both headmasters of the schools, sporting looks of disappointment.

The part of me that liked to please slowly died inside as we took our places and suffered the wrath of the utter disapproval radiating from the adults present. My throat felt tight as I looked around the room, trying to hold back the tears threatening to make an appearance. To distract myself, I observed every corner of the office, focusing on the little things and not the grimace of my headmistress.

The room was small, with memorabilia hanging on every paneled oak wall. At the far end of the room sat the counselor and the headmasters. Their hands folded on top of the table,

they watched us offenders come to stand in front of them, waiting for the story to unfold.

I took a deep breath as I finally leveled my gaze on the headmistress of Hawthorne Academy. With eyebrows were drawn in, the wrinkles near her eyes more pronounced. She was an older woman in her seventies. Her hair, which had once been a warm brown, was now gray. She was frail and thin, except for her gray eyes. They held the strength of forged metal as she glared down at Ryan and me. Those eyes had seen it all. It was clear she wasn't amused by the situation before her.

"Miss Sanders," the headmistress began with her stern voice. I solemnly looked at her, preparing to receive the tongue-lashing I knew was coming. "I never expected this kind of behavior from you." She looked between the two of us. "Would you two like to explain yourselves?"

I nodded, and she motioned for me to go ahead. "Ma'am, Ryan has always given me trouble since our freshman year. Today, he snuck into the girls' dorms, stole all my underwear, and hung it up on the flagpole in the quad. So, I punched him." I chose to be blunt and to the point.

"Always the victim," Ryan mumbled from beside me. I snapped my head over to look at him.

"Easy for you to say, because you're always the villain," I snarled at him. I was seconds away from baring my teeth like a feral animal.

The headmistress held up her hand, effectively shutting us both up. "That's enough, please." She looked over to the headmaster of Bennett. "What do you make of all this, Martin?"

The old man beside her, her husband, was rubbing his hand over his jaw as he observed Ryan and me, pondering his options. It was clear that the wheels were turning in his head. Here was his prodigy, the 'King of Bennett,' in his office after getting decked by a girl. I wouldn't be surprised if he let Ryan off scot-free. That's just how it worked when you were king.

Or how it worked when your parents shelled out lots of money to sponsor the new science wing.

“Are you telling me that you two have been fighting like this for all these years?” he finally asked us in a raspy voice.

“Yes.”

“No.”

Ryan and I both responded at the exact time, earning him another solid stink eye from me.

“Yes,” I repeated, trying to ignore the look Ryan was firing in my direction. “We’re arch nemeses, sir. It has been like this every summer.”

It had been some miracle that the headmasters had not been notified of this rivalry between us. I chalked it up to the events not eliciting as severe a reaction as this one. Typically, Ryan’s games were tame or could be handled by the counselors instead of getting the higher-ups involved.

The headmaster nodded and sighed. “It’s a shame that it would come to this,” he said as he looked at his wife. “Our goal with the camp and the two schools was to allow making lifelong relationships. The school year devoted to academics, the summers devoted to fun and making memories.” The headmistress nodded along with what he was saying.

“This unfortunate turn of events doesn’t change my mind. Learning how to get along and work with people you may not like is important. Your lives will change dramatically at the end of the summer as you leave here and go off to your respective universities. You both are off to do bigger, better, and braver things.” Ryan stiffened up next to me as he prepared for the drop that the headmaster was obviously leading up to.

“In the real world, you cannot turn to childish antics or throw punches whenever you don’t get along with someone. As much as there are times when you may want to do so, that type of behavior is simply unacceptable. Because of that, I can think of only one option to address this dispute.”

My heart raced as he trailed off to look at his wife for a fraction of a second. I kept waiting for him to say that we were both suspended, forced to stay for the whole summer, then redo our senior year—or maybe they would send me home. That wouldn't be a terrible option.

But no. Of course, it didn't work out that way.

“In addition to a phone call to each of your families, Miss Sanders and Mr. Miller will spend the remaining time at the camp learning to work together despite their differences. They will be paired together for all remaining partner activities.”

My jaw dropped. That was not what I was expecting at all. On the surface, it seemed like a tame chastisement. But this forced me into close proximity with Ryan Miller for the next two-plus torturous weeks. Ryan stood beside me, arms crossed over his chest, a smile slowly spreading across his face as if he was pleased with this outcome. Only making me glare even harder at him.

“You can't be serious,” I snapped. “This isn't going to fix anything. I punched Ryan! Send me home!” If I could convince them to crack the whip, maybe they wouldn't make us go through with this. I would much rather suffer the wrath of two old headmasters than be forced to spend quality time with Ryan, who would continue his practical jokes as if nothing had happened.

The headmasters looked at each other, silently communicating with their eyes. “Our decision is final,” the headmistress told me with a nod. “I think this will be the best way for you to set aside your differences and learn how to work with others.”

“This is outrageous,” I announced as I turned on my heel and walked out of the office.

I stomped down the hall and back outside, smacking the door and causing it to slam against the wall. Juliet was waiting for me just outside the cabin.

She hopped up from the bench she was sitting on. “What was the verdict? Are they sending you home?”

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. “No! They’re pairing Ryan and me up for the rest of camp activities.”

“That’s it?” Juliet asked, puzzled.

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s it. Some bullshit about ‘learning to work with others’ or something like that. As if I am incapable of working with other people—I am, just not with him!”

Juliet rolled her eyes, probably thinking that I was being dramatic. Behind me, I heard the office door swing open and shut.

“Phew, well, that’s a relief!” Ryan let out as he stretched and walked over to us. “I was worried we’d be in actual trouble.” He draped his arm over my shoulders, causing me to wiggle as far away from him as I could. “Had me nervous there for a second, Bells.”

“Get away from me.”

Ryan’s hand tightened on my arm, and he tugged me in closer to the side of his body. His strength had me stumbling into him, and I pressed my hand against his chest to steady myself. He sucked in a quick breath, but then cleared his throat to cover it. Tightening his hold, he made my struggle pointless. “Can’t. Didn’t you hear what they said in there? We’re battle buddies now. We get to do everything together.”

Ryan finally relaxed his arm over my shoulders, allowing me to pull away. I immediately put a few feet of distance between us and crossed my arms over my chest protectively. “Not everything, just activities.”

He smirked and shook his head. “Nope. See, you shouldn’t have left before we were done.” Reaching over, he ruffled my hair. “We get to do everything except sleep together.” He paused, thinking about it. “But if down the road you’d be game for that, count me in.”

“Ugh,” I scoffed, disgusted. “I’d rather die.”

“Never say never, Bells!” Ryan said with a wink as he started walking away. “I’ll see you at dinner!”

Juliet came to stand right next to me as I watched him go. She shook her head and exhaled. “I’ll get him back for you, Izabel, don’t worry.”

I mimicked her and sighed too. “This isn’t your problem, but thanks anyway.”

“The hell it isn’t,” she shot back right away. “No one messes with my friends without having to deal with me. I’m going to chop off his—”

“Juliet!” I interrupted her. She stopped and turned her sapphire blue eyes back to me. “Calm down. It’s not that bad. I’ll just be Ryan’s partner for the next two weeks, and then we’ll go home, graduate, and I’ll never have to see his face again.”

“Fine.” She narrowed her eyes. “Do whatever. But just know I’ll be here if you need me to castrate him for you.”

“Thanks. I should go shower off all this dust,” I said as I motioned to my shirt. I was covered in sweat from the games, and dust and gravel from rolling around with Ryan earlier. I seemed to always be getting dirty recently.

The two of us headed back toward the dorms. When we got closer, I saw my underwear still hanging proudly on the flagpole. I walked up to it and grabbed the strings, trying to find the one that would allow me to pull my clothes down.

“This is so annoying,” I muttered as Juliet came to help me.

“Yeah, it is. But at least you have cute underwear. Imagine if you *did* wear granny panties. That would be a lot worse,” Jules said, chuckling.

I couldn’t help but laugh with her. “I guess it’s good you talked me into buying them then.”

“You know I’m always looking out!” she announced proudly. “Do you still want to go to movie night tonight? Or do you have to start serving your sentence right away?”

I shrugged. “I think it starts tomorrow. I’m still down for movie night. Did you find out what they’re showing?”

“No, I didn’t. I still bet it’s something dumb,” Juliet said, making us laugh again.

“Well, hopefully, it’s something good for my last night of freedom,” I said as we finally pulled off the last pair of panties. “Okay, good. Now let’s go hit the showers so I can wash this disaster of a day away.”

RYAN

“SHE REALLY GOT YOU GOOD,” Liam muttered when I stepped out of the dorm building. He and Todd were waiting for me, so we could go to this stupid movie night. He watched me in amusement as I prodded at the tender bridge of my nose. I shot him a glare, and he laughed. “I’m just saying, man.”

“Well, don’t.”

“I guess you finally pushed her to the breaking point. I gotta say, I was impressed. I didn’t know she had that kind of fight in her.”

I scowled at my friend, ignoring him even though he was completely right. I was also impressed. Izabel’s inner fire came blazing out of her like a volcano, and unfortunately for me, I was in the warpath, through no one’s fault but my own.

I definitely pushed her past the breaking point this time. And I’d be lying if I said I felt good about it.

Quite the opposite, actually. I couldn’t seem to help myself from being a massive dick to her right after—blame it on the adrenaline coursing through my body—but now that I had time to cool off and replay the events, I could fully accept that I deserved her wrath. Even with her punching me, I probably deserved worse.

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I just let it lie? I had come here this year thinking that I wanted to find a way to move past the years of jokes and tomfoolery, yet I fell right back into the same old routine, desperate to have her blue eyes on me. No matter how badly I wanted to get past messing

with her, I couldn't deny that it was fun. Izabel was a firecracker, and I seemed to be addicted to the way she lost control of herself when she was angry at me.

For a moment, I wondered if I would ever get to experience that fiery personality in a way other than her anger at me. But I wouldn't. Not at this rate, that was for damn sure.

I was pissed at myself. And I was pissed at the way my friends were laughing about it.

"I think that might've been the best prank yet," Todd said, sounding annoyingly gleeful. "I can't believe you never thought of doing something like that before.

"I wish I had never thought of it. It's a miracle they didn't expel us or suspend our diplomas," I grumbled.

"Oh yeah? What was your punishment?" Liam asked.

I rubbed at my sore jaw once more as we walked down the gravel road. "They're calling our families. And I have to partner up with Izabel for the rest of the activities over the next few weeks."

"Could be worse," Liam said.

"Yeah, except she wants to *murder* me," I snapped, though I knew he was right.

My friend gave me a blank look and voiced the thoughts running through my mind, "Well, it's not like you don't deserve it."

I wished I would have been strong enough to take her rejection and walk away rather than resorting to hurting her back.

Still, the way her eyes teared up after our tussle stayed present in the back of my mind. I had made her *cry*. That wasn't at all what I was going for. And I felt shitty about it. Really, really shitty.

"Whatever. What movie are they even playing at this thing?"

“I think it’s some superhero movie,” Todd said with a shrug. “But I’m just interested in the popcorn. They always have the best popcorn.”

I grumbled under my breath again as we made our way to the big field. Already, most of our classmates were set up on the grass with lawn chairs and blankets. Surprisingly, the Bennett and Hawthorne classes were fairly intermingled throughout the field. Groups of students were clustered here and there, laughing and stuffing their faces with popcorn.

Todd, Liam, and I made our way closer to the front, but over to one side. We, of course, had to stop at the refreshment table to get Todd his popcorn. Begrudgingly, I grabbed a bag, too, and an ice-cold soda. Liam had been looking around for his girlfriend, and finally, he spotted her.

As we walked closer to Juliet and Izabel, I found myself growing wary. When was the last time I ever felt unconfident about talking to a girl? Probably never.

But Izabel was now a different story.

This girl had me twisted up in knots ever since she stepped off the bus this year. I had no clue why, all of a sudden, I was itching for her to grace me with her attention—good or bad, though I always seemed to veer toward the bad. No matter how hard I tried, it seemed that I blundered when it came to talking with her, making everything so much worse.

Juliet stood up, planting a big kiss on Liam’s lips as soon as he was within reaching distance. Todd made some side joke that had Juliet pulling away from her boyfriend to sock Todd in the arm. He laughed and cowered away from her.

I stood off to the sidelines, feeling Izabel’s hateful glare on me from where she was sitting a few feet away. I avoided eye contact as best as I could, trying to stay out of her way. I figured it wouldn’t be a terrible idea to give her some space this evening after what happened earlier.

After the headmasters had doled out their punishment, I couldn’t help myself from taunting her a little more—it was irresistible. But now, Izabel still looked like she wouldn’t

hesitate to throttle me at the first chance, and I didn't feel like experiencing her right hook twice.

"I think they're going to start the movie soon," Juliet said. She glanced at me, and then back to Liam quickly. "Are you guys sitting somewhere else or...?"

I laughed under my breath. I could take a hint. "Liam said he wanted to sit with you. Todd and I have a place across the field."

"We do? But—" Todd began, but I nudged his shoulder.

"Yeah, *remember?*"

Todd gave me a look like he couldn't believe what a pussy I was being, but I didn't care. He could shove it. I could feel Izabel bristling already, though she didn't say anything.

"You sure, man?" Liam asked. He looked at Juliet, but then gave me a sheepish shrug. "I can go sit with you guys."

"Nah." I waved him off. "It's fine. I'll just slum it with Todd tonight. You have fun."

"What the fuck, man?" Todd protested.

"It's fine, shut up," I said, risking another glance at Izabel. She was glaring daggers at me. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said to her, trying to sound upbeat, though I wanted to wince with the hateful expression she was giving me. "For the kayak trip."

Izabel narrowed her eyes. "I swear, Ryan, if you pull any funny business, I'll actually break your nose this time."

I laughed uneasily and covered my tender nose. She was kidding, right? Maybe not.

All I knew was that these last few weeks of camp were probably going to be the longest weeks of my life.

IZABEL

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, we all dressed in our bathing suits to prepare for the kayak trip. I had a cute one-piece swimsuit that was blue with white polka dots. Juliet wore a flattering pink bikini. I reached into my suitcase to pull on a pair of athletic shorts and a t-shirt.

Before I could even get the t-shirt over my head, Juliet swiped it out of my hands. “You don’t need that,” she said to me, scolding me as though I were a child. She threw it back in the suitcase against my protests. “You’re so pale, you could use some sun.”

“We’ll be out there all day. I don’t want to fry,” I pleaded with her. She was right; I had fair skin, so yes, theoretically, I could use some color. Realistically, though, I would burn and come back from this trip looking like a lobster.

She shrugged. “Take sunscreen.”

I rolled my eyes but let it go. I supposed I could go with just the swimsuit for a few hours. I would be fine. If worse came to worst, I was hopeful that one of the girls had packed some aloe vera that I could borrow. In the days leading up to our departure for camp, I had misplaced the list I had so painstakingly prepared. Because of that, I spaced out and forgot the soothing green gel that was likely still sitting on my dresser back in my dorm at school.

After gathering everything else I would need for the day, I looked longingly at my shirt one last time. Against better

judgment, I left it sitting on my bed, and we headed out to breakfast.

As we were eating, I tried my hardest not to dwell on the fact that I would be stuck with Ryan all day in a small boat. If I thought about it, I would surely worry myself sick, imagining all the horrible things he could do to me on a river. Instead, I tried to focus on whatever Juliet was rambling about and ate my oatmeal in silence, my stomach churning the entire time. I couldn't shake the feeling of trepidation, so I drank more coffee, hoping the caffeine would help.

Spoiler alert, it didn't.

By the time we all were ready to load up onto the bus to take us to the let-in point, I was a frazzled mess. Ryan found me right away with minimal effort—again, I wondered if he had planted a homing device somewhere on my person. He shouldn't have been able to find me so easily amongst all of our classmates. Wearing a pair of blue plaid swim trunks and a gray t-shirt, he let his sunglasses slip a little down his nose so he could peer at me over the rims.

“Cute suit,” he patronized me. I sighed and pushed past him, not deigning to respond. He followed behind me as I climbed onto the bus, then plopped down next to me in my chosen seat, scooting until we were pressed up close to each other.

“What are you doing?” I asked him sharply once he settled. I tried my best to wiggle away from him, but he was crowding me into the window. His shoulders were so broad that I barely had any room left. Jerk.

He pushed his sunglasses up onto his head and looked over at me, his head dipping a bit so he could look directly into my eyes. I could probably count on one hand the number of times I had been this close to Ryan. I tried my hardest not to get lost in those bright green eyes. His cologne filled my nose, too, the spicy blend burning my sinuses just a little, but in the best way. As I stared at him, I noticed that he had a few light freckles dotted over his forehead and his nose, likely from lots of time spent in the sun.

“I’m sitting,” Ryan responded, deadpan, bringing me back to the present.

“I know that. What are you doing sitting next to me?” I asked, my tone snarky. “Go sit next to Todd or someone who actually likes you.”

He leaned back and gave me an amused grin. “We’re partners, Bells. I’m supposed to sit next to you.”

I sighed and looked out the window, concluding that I wouldn’t win this battle. This was going to be such a long day. I spent the remainder of our ride with my eyes glued to the trees we passed. Ryan hummed next to me like he didn’t have a care in the world. Every note that came out of his throat pushed me closer and closer to the edge. I tried to focus on my breathing, fighting the urge to reach over and strangle him.

The bus ride from the camp to the loading dock was about fifteen minutes, which felt like an eternity plastered next to Ryan. As soon as we arrived, we were shuffled off to the side so that a counselor could give us the details about what we were supposed to do today. He went through the rules and safety measures, meticulously checking off boxes on his list as he rattled off instructions. Ryan groaned beside me. When I didn’t respond immediately, he groaned again, making it obvious he wanted my attention.

“God, what?” I whisper-shouted.

“I’m bored,” he whined, leaning toward me.

“I don’t care. We’re supposed to be listening.”

“We’ve heard it a thousand times already. This isn’t our first kayak trip,” he said. I ignored him again.

“It’s important that we all stay together,” the counselor said. “The route is easy until the river splits about a mile from the let-out point. Whoever is steering needs to make sure that they stay to the—”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Ryan whispered in my ear, distracting me again.

I looked over at him, exasperated. “Why are you so annoying?”

He shrugged. “It’s my calling.”

“The weather is pretty clear for the next few hours, but we are due for some scattered thunderstorms later in the day,” the counselor went on. “Our itinerary looks good, so we shouldn’t run into any issues. Make sure that we’re keeping an eye and not dawdling around. If we all follow these guidelines, we should have a great day for some kayaking. Now let’s get on that river!”

Ryan and I were the last to get our kayak. Everyone was already loaded up and out on the river before the counselor got to us. Ryan took the back position since he was stronger and could paddle a lot easier than I could. I donned my lifejacket and took my seat up front, ignoring the way my neck felt exposed with Ryan—my sworn enemy—sitting right behind me. The counselor gave us our paddles and then pushed us into the water.

The two of us made our way out into the river, trying to get caught up by the current so we could get moving. Ryan pushed us forward with his paddling. It was rough at first, trying to get used to the feel of the kayak and how each other paddled. But eventually, we got it figured out without any issues.

The river stretched out in front of us for about half a mile. It was calm water. After we had made it a decent way, Ryan stopped paddling and situated himself in his seat so he could relax a little. He had taken off the lifejacket we were supposed to wear at all times and placed it on his seat. Then he sat down and leaned back against it, using it like a pillow.

I grimly watched all of our classmates continue down the river. They all looked like they were having a great time. A few of them waved as they passed us. I wished I could shoot out a signal SOS flare to get rescued from this boat with Ryan, but I knew I was stuck with him for the day. I couldn’t wait until we made it back and we could go our separate ways for the evening.

After a while, he sighed. “This is the life.”

Murmuring an agreement, I reached down into the little bag I had brought to fish out my book. We would be out here for a few hours, and I wasn't about to spend that time chit-chatting with Ryan. The headmasters could partner us together to prove whatever point they wanted, but it would be a cold day in hell before I was singing kumbaya with this guy.

"Only you, Bells. Only you would bring a paperback book onto a river," he snickered, mostly to himself. "What are you even reading?"

I flipped back the cover so I could show him. "It's an autobiography of Thomas Jefferson."

"Yuck, that sounds boring," he said, sitting up a little to look at the cover.

I shook my head. "It's really not." I paused and then looked over my shoulder at him. "But I like this kind of stuff. I read books like this all the time. They give you an insight into these people we hear about in history books. These stories make those people seem more real. They lived lives just like us, even though they were off doing world-changing things. It's fascinating."

Ryan watched me quietly as I talked about the book. "Okay, tell me something I don't know."

"About Thomas Jefferson?" I clarified, surprised that he would have any interest in this whatsoever. He nodded. "Well..." I trailed off, thinking back to what I had read so far about him. "Did you know Thomas Jefferson invented the swivel chair?"

Ryan laughed out loud. "What?"

I nodded, excitement blooming in my belly. I loved getting to talk about the things I learned from my books, even if it was with Ryan. "Yes! He invented the swivel chair. And it's said that's what he sat on when he wrote the Declaration of Independence!"

He shook his head. "That's crazy. I never would have known that."

I smiled, genuinely. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized that I had never been this comfortable being in Ryan's presence. "That's why I like reading stuff like this."

"Tell me something else, about anyone."

"Abraham Lincoln is in the Wrestling Hall of Fame." Ryan just looked at me, waiting for me to go on. "He wrestled in 300 matches and only lost one. So they put him in the hall of fame."

Ryan laughed again. "I feel like my life is enriched now. Go back to your book, Bells. I won't bother you anymore."

Giving him another look over my shoulder, I studied him. He was being weird again, just like he was yesterday after capture-the-flag. I still had no idea what it was, but something about him was different this year. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

I decided not to dwell on it too much, not wanting to give myself a headache pondering over Ryan Miller. Instead, I got lost in a few chapters of my book, reading about Thomas Jefferson. The day was quickly warming up, the sun beating down on us and reflecting against the surface of the water.

When I got too hot, I pulled off my lifejacket and threw my leg over the edge of the kayak, sticking my toes in the water. I watched the edges of the river go past us as we floated. I was lost in myself until I felt something touch my shoulders. I whipped around to find Ryan's fingers tracing the sensitive skin there by the straps of my bathing suit.

"What are you doing?" I asked, breathless from the startle.

His green eyes fluttered up to mine as a sheepish expression crossed his face. "Your shoulders are getting red."

When I looked down, sure enough, the hot sun was leaving a mark on my pink shoulders. "Shoot." I reached down to go through my bag and groaned. "I forgot my sunscreen. I knew I should have brought my shirt."

Our kayak rocked back and forth. When I looked behind me, Ryan had pulled off his light gray shirt and was now holding it out for me to take.

“I can’t take that. You’ll get sunburned,” I protested.

“I’ll be fine, Bells. I’ve already got a base tan, see?” He pointed to his chest and held out the shirt again.

I tried not to stare at him because, shit, Ryan was ripped. The sinewy muscles of his broad shoulders tapered down into firm pectorals. I let my eyes linger for just a second, glancing down at his abdomen and then shooting back up to his face. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Of course, he had full-on abs. I knew he was a soccer player and did well on the team.

Gingerly, feeling embarrassed at the knowledge that I just checked Ryan out, I reached over and grabbed his gray shirt. It had the word ARMY in black letters on the front of it.

“Thanks,” I mumbled quietly as I pulled the shirt over my head, instantly feeling a bit of relief from the sun. When I didn’t get a snarky response, I turned around again. Ryan was sitting there, his green eyes wide, not saying a thing.

I felt exposed under his scrutinizing stare, my cheeks heating up again. I suspected the new blush on my face wasn’t from the sun. When butterflies erupted in my stomach, I had to take a mental step back and really evaluate—what was happening here?

RYAN

HOLY SHIT.

Who knew that seeing Bells in my old gray army shirt would have this kind of effect on me. The damn thing almost swallowed her whole. I was that much bigger than her. For the second time in the last few days, I felt a warmth start deep in my belly, and my dick twitched in my swim trunks at the sight of her wearing my clothes.

“Ryan?” she asked, wringing her hands together in front of her. She was looking at me with concern. “Are you okay?”

“What?” I responded, snapping out of it. “Oh yeah, I’m fine. You’re welcome.” I cleared my throat awkwardly. “Now you won’t get sunburned.”

She nodded and turned around to her book again. Damn. Smooth, Ryan. What the hell was that? It was just Izabel. Wearing my t-shirt. Sitting in the sun looking like an angel. I was the one who offered it to her in the first place, so why did my brain decide to shut down after that?

I knew why. But I wasn’t ready to admit to myself that I might be somewhat attracted to Izabel. Attracted to the way her blue eyes lit up with every emotion she was feeling, or how she would purse those full lips off to the side when she was annoyed with me. Even now, she nibbled on her lower lip as her eyes flew across the page, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away from her. I got caught up in the pranks and the games too often, and I forgot about how pretty she could be.

But now, here I was, trapped in a kayak with her wearing my t-shirt, and it was staring me right in the face. I couldn't ignore the hormones raging in my body forever. I readjusted myself and leaned back again to try to relax and not think about the beautiful girl in front of me.

Wearing my t-shirt.

Looking sexy as hell.

The river was quiet except for the sound of the currents and birds chirping in the woods surrounding us on either side. The trees were gently swaying with a nice breeze. Being out in nature like this reminded me of the times my father would take me camping during summer breaks in elementary school before I was a student at Bennett.

Dad would always find a secluded camping ground, no matter where we were living at the time. We would spend two weeks with no electricity and no contact with the real world. Just dad and son, roughing it old school.

We did that every year until he was deployed again. When he was overseas, I would sit on the windowsill at my mom's house, waiting, making plans for our summer camping trip. I waited and planned. Until the officers came and informed me that I was never going camping with my dad again.

The sadness emanating from my chest started to get a little painful. Rubbing my hand across my sternum, I tried to redirect my thoughts in a more cheerful manner before I got sucked away, thinking about my morbid past.

I thought of everything that had happened yesterday. The plan went without a hitch. Once the capture-the-flag game had finished, Todd, Liam, and I quickly ran over to the girls' dorms so I could find what I was looking for.

Liam kept watch outside for the girls while Todd and I searched through suitcase after suitcase. I knew which one was hers by the loads of history books she brought. No one in their right mind would bring garbage like that to a summer camp.

No one but Bells.

As I dug through her suitcase yesterday, I tried not to dwell on the fact that I was digging through her actual underwear. My poor teenage hormones were not prepared for that revelation. She had some sexy stuff, which pretty much floored me. I felt my shorts tighten as I pulled out a hot pink lacy number.

Who was she buying that for? The jealousy had hit me like a stack of bricks, quickly diminishing the tightness in my crotch. I swallowed it down, not ready to deal with that thought process either. I stayed focused on the task.

We got everything we were after and set about hanging it up. I was looking forward to seeing her reaction. Never in a million years had I thought she would have such a visceral response and punch the shit out of me. That hadn't even been a scenario I considered.

I could have thought of a lot better punishments than sticking us as partners. Old Man Bennett was getting weak in his old age, yet even still, I would take it. She was amusing to me, at the very least, and way too much fun to pick on.

I must have fallen asleep, because I was jolted away by Izabel's panicked call. "Ryan!" My eyes startled open, and I looked around. Her eyes were wide and worried. "Ryan, it's starting to rain, and I can't see anyone else's kayaks around. I think we should get out of the river."

Sitting up, I looked at the sky. Sure enough, dark clouds had rolled in and taken away the sun's bright rays. It was just starting to rain, and I could feel the drops landing on my chest.

"Jesus, how long was I asleep?" I asked as I ran my hand over my face, trying to shake off the sleepy feeling from my eyes.

Izabel shrugged. "I don't know, I got lost in my book." She looked sheepish and played with the hemming on my shirt. "Maybe an hour, maybe longer?"

Well, damn, I was really out. I picked up my paddle, and we started working together. We paddled furiously for about fifteen minutes before the sky totally opened up and dropped

buckets of rain on us. My hair was soaked, getting stuck on my face, and the shirt I had loaned Bells now clung to her like a second skin. When she turned around to give me a concerned glance, I could see her pert little nipples sticking through, pressing their way through her bathing suit and my t-shirt. My blood heated, and I averted my gaze. I did not need this distraction right now. I shook my head to clear it.

“Come on, Bells, keep paddling,” I encouraged her. My heart was racing in growing panic. I knew that with this type of heavy rain, we were in deep shit if it caused flash flooding. “We’re almost there!”

We weren’t almost there. If I had to guess, we had about another mile and a half to get through before we made it to the let-out docks. I was kicking myself the whole way. How did I let myself fall asleep? I should’ve been keeping better track of time.

Bells was paddling the best she could, but I knew she was getting tired. I could see how her arms weren’t digging into the motion as vigorously as before. I worked harder, trying to pick up her slack.

The rain was unrelenting. It kept coming down in large sheets, blurring my visibility. The river waters were getting higher and higher, and the rapids becoming more aggressive. Up ahead, I noticed we were coming up to the split-off. Which one was it? Was I supposed to go right or left?

Shit. I should have paid attention to that counselor. True, I had kayaked on this river every year since sixth grade. But with the given circumstances, my long-term memory was shot. I was focused on paddling right now.

I made an educated guess and steered our kayak over to the right river fork. Izabel followed my lead and still made a valiant effort to help me paddle. Thunder and lightning cracked across the sky, and we both flinched. The clouds were a dark gray, making it even more difficult to see.

We paddled and paddled. *This was the wrong way*, I thought with a sinking feeling. I took us the wrong way. Who

knew where we would end up now. I looked up to Bells, whose hair was a mess and soaked to the bone.

The kayak lurched as it got stuck on something underwater, probably a tree. Izabel screamed as the little boat tipped over to the side, dumping us into the water and the heavy current. I was immediately shocked by the cold water. I kicked and scrambled to the surface, gasping for air. The water was moving too quickly as I struggled to swim to the river's banks, where I could pull myself out. I landed on the solid ground and coughed as I fell back onto the sand, breathing heavily.

"Ryan!" I sat up straight as I heard my name being called. I looked on either side of me. Where was Izabel?

Hopping up, I rushed over to the edge of the bank I was standing on, my eyes straining through the rain to find her. There. I saw the bright orange corner of her life jacket just barely sticking out above the currents. She was stuck in the middle of the river, holding on to a branch for dear life, the water raging around her.

Shit. She said she wasn't a good swimmer.

The thought came and went, and before I really knew what was happening, I was running farther up the bank to jump into the river and work my way down to her. I dove in, the cold water sliding over me. When I surfaced, she was only a few feet away. I swam as hard as I could to get to her, fighting against the current threatening to drag me in the other direction.

"Bells, put your arms around my neck," I instructed her when I reached the branch she was clutching.

"I can't." She was crying, scared out of her mind. "I'm too heavy. I'll sink you."

"You won't," I assured her. "Bells, just trust me, please. We have to get out of this water."

She whimpered, but finally, let go of her branch and wrapped her arms around me. I gripped her waist to situate her how I needed her. A small part of my brain noticed how she

felt pressed against me. *Not the time, Ryan.* I took a deep breath, refocusing on my task, and started swimming as best as possible, my arms working overtime, carrying the two of us to safety.

Izabel pressed her face into the side of my head. She was gasping, trying not to get water in her lungs. I held my breath, swearing I wouldn't breathe until we hit the bank.

After what seemed like hours, I felt the land beneath my toes. We were still in the water, but I allowed myself to breathe, knowing I was close. I kept going, holding Izabel tightly to me. She had a death grip on my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin. I wouldn't be surprised if she drew blood.

I flopped down onto the bank for the second time, catching my breath. As I sat there with Izabel in my lap, both of us tried to steady our heart rates. The river raged behind us. I knew that it still wasn't safe here.

My eyes traveled up the bluff that was in front of us. We could get up there. I didn't know how high the river would rise with all of this rain, so we had to get up somehow. Then I saw a makeshift path. There were a few trees that we could grab onto that would easily hold our weight.

I stood up, putting Izabel on her feet. She was shivering, cold, and wet. I placed my hands on either side of her face, forcing her to look at me. The wind and the rain were loud around us, but her blue eyes finally met mine.

"Hey, hey, hey, I've got you. You're going to be okay. We're going to be okay," I told her, trying to be as sincere as I possibly could. Her wide blue eyes tracked mine as she held on to each word I said.

"We have to get up that bluff." I nodded behind me. "I don't know how much the river will rise, so we need to get up somewhere high." She nodded.

I grabbed her hand and dragged her to where I saw a possible pathway. "Bells, I'm going to have you go first." I

turned around and met her eyes again. “I’ll be behind you. I need you to trust that I will not let anything happen to you.”

She was still shaking. The poor girl must have been in shock. But she nodded again, went ahead to where I directed her, and started climbing. I stood below her and watched, ensuring her hands grabbed onto sturdy things, not anything that would cause her to fall. Once I felt sure she had a handle on it, I started climbing behind her.

Izabel had reached the top, quickly scrambling to more solid ground. The ground was slick, and the dirt soon turned to mud right before my eyes. My hands worked to find a firm grip, and I struggled up to the top. I was almost there. I strategically placed my foot on a sturdy-looking rock and pressed my weight into it.

As luck would have it, the minute I put my weight on it, I felt the rock give way underneath me. I shouted as it tumbled down the bluff, leaving me holding on for dear life to the branch I had a grip on. I slipped down the hill a bit, getting muddy on my way down. I felt something sharp dig into my side, tearing the skin as I dropped.

“Shit!” I hollered as I felt it tear into my flesh. “Fuck.”

My hands and arms were burning as I tried my hardest to hold on. The branch was slippery enough as it was from the mossy bark growing on it, but the rain made it more challenging. I grunted out in frustration. Using all of my upper body strength, I pulled myself upward.

Izabel’s face appeared over the side of the bluff. Her hair was stuck to her forehead, making her eyes a startling blue that I could see clearly despite the darkness from the storm. “Ryan, are you okay?” she called to me, looking worried. She extended a hand. “Let me help you!”

As I did another pull-up, I groaned again, grabbing onto the next available support. My feet scraped against the side of the bluff, trying to find a firm footing. “No, I’ll pull you back down,” I told her in a strained voice. “I’m too heavy.”

“What can I do?” she pleaded with me.

“Just—” I paused as I pulled myself up to the next spot. The rain was growing even heavier, if that was possible. “Move!” I yelled.

I had one more section that I had to get over. I could feel something dripping down my leg; it could’ve been rain or blood, but I didn’t want to look to confirm. I would deal with it later. All that mattered was that I got up onto the solid ground. Taking a deep breath, I swallowed the throbbing pain and heaved myself up and over the bluff.

My heart felt like it was beating out of my chest as I flopped down flat onto the mess of leaves up at the top. I did my best to take deep breaths, feeling the rise and fall of my chest when I placed my hand over my heart. Izabel rushed over to me, her hands hovering over my side, which I’m sure was a bloody mess. I still hadn’t looked at it. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t about to have a heart attack.

“Oh my god, Ryan!” she breathed out as she examined my side. “You’re hurt.”

I groaned again. “How bad does it look, Bells?” She stayed silent, which affirmed my fears that it was pretty damn bad.

I finally mustered the courage to sit up and look at it. Just as I had expected, there was a massive gash in my side, right above my left hipbone. The skin was mangled and torn. Blood gushed from the wound down my leg and over my flank.

“Well damn,” I muttered, feeling a wave of nausea hit as the world swayed around me. I swallowed thickly, forcing down the bile threatening to rise up my throat. “So much for a fun, uneventful kayak trip.”

IZABEL

“WHAT CAN I DO?” I asked Ryan again. He looked like a gory mess. The wound traveled from his belly button down to his hipbone. It looked pretty deep, but not deep enough to hit any vital organs. Blood dripped everywhere, mixing with the rain and covering the skin all down his torso and his leg from the gaping gash in his side. We were both soaking wet. I was shivering, and Ryan was shaking uncontrollably, likely from the adrenaline rush his body was going through at the moment.

And, just to make matters worse, it was still raining. The wind howled around us and sent a chill deep into our bones. Each time thunder crashed through the sky, I winced.

Ryan groaned as he leaned back again so he was lying down flat on the earth beneath him. “We need to find shelter,” he wheezed. Lightning cracked above us, streaking through the sky just to emphasize his point. He draped his arm over his eyes, still trying to catch his breath. “I just need a minute.”

I sat down on my knees and watched him, uncertainty starting to settle low in my gut. Ryan needed more than a minute. He needed a hospital. He was clearly trying to regain composure enough to get control of the situation, but his wound was still bleeding, with no signs of stopping any time soon. We needed to do something about that so he wouldn’t bleed out before we had a chance to find shelter. I searched my brain to think of anything I knew about wound triage. I must have read something about battlefield wound care in one of my books.

Deciding that sitting around wasn't helping anyone, I snapped into action and pulled off the t-shirt Ryan had loaned me earlier in the day. I laid it on my lap and gave it a firm tug near the bottom hem. There was the sound of ripping fabric as it came apart more effortlessly than I would have expected it to. I pulled it apart all the way around, leaving only about half the shirt left over. Then I tore off another scrap from the sleeve and wadded it up.

“Ryan, I need you to sit up,” I said gently. He pulled his arm off his face and looked at me. Weariness covered his expression, his green eyes glazed as he stared at me in question. I held up a scrap of t-shirt and saw recognition flash across his eyes.

He groaned as he pushed himself to a sitting position and let me put the wadded-up piece right over his wound. He hissed in pain as I pressed it into his side and then wrapped the strip of fabric tightly around his waist.

“Ow, Bells, stop! It hurts!” Ryan cried as he tried to push my hands away.

I huffed in frustration. “I know it hurts, you big baby, but I need to stop the bleeding. Let me help you. Please.”

Once Ryan settled down again, I tied the fabric tighter, ignoring his grunt of pain at the added pressure against his wound. I needed the bandage tight enough to hold the makeshift gauze in place. It was awful enough that if we were back in civilization, he would have probably needed stitches. We had to find help quickly.

When I finished, he fell flat on his back again, his arm going to its place over his eyes. A few minutes passed, and he finally started to breathe a little easier. And I was, too, now that I couldn't see the mangled skin by his hipbone.

The rain kept falling. The thunder kept rolling. Ryan lay there for what felt like forever before he moaned and moved his arm off his face.

“We have to go somewhere else, Bells,” he said weakly. I nodded and stood up, waiting for him to follow my lead. His

green eyes met mine sheepishly. “I don’t think I can get up. My abs are shot right now; even breathing hurts.”

My eyes darted down to his abdomen again. I saw a speck of blood already trying to soak through the shirt. Sighing, I reached out and offered my hand, which he took without any type of protest. He really must have been feeling weak because I had to use a lot of my upper body strength to get him standing up straight. He wobbled on his two feet and swayed to the left.

I lurched toward him, knowing exactly what was about to happen. Carefully, but firmly, I draped his arm around my shoulders and let him lean on me. I looked around. There was nothing but trees and more trees ahead of us. A few rocks here and there. But other than that, nothing.

“Where are we going to go?” I asked, afraid of the answer.

Ryan grunted with each step we took. I didn’t want to push him to move faster than he was capable of, so we took our time. “I don’t know, just follow the river line. I have no idea where we even are.”

Great. That was the answer I was afraid of.

We kept walking, soaked to the bone. Worry for Ryan bloomed until it took control of every thought I had. He was putting more and more weight on me the farther we walked. He had lost a lot of blood from his wound, and every time I looked up at him, he seemed to be paler and paler. We had to find somewhere to rest soon. I narrowed my eyes against the rain and weathered on.

It felt like an eternity, but finally, I saw it.

Up ahead was a cave. A small cave tucked into another bluff, but it was shelter nonetheless. Relief flooded my system, and I squinted my eyes, trying to get a better look. From what I could tell, it was big enough to hold the two of us, and it would keep us from the rain. It would do. At the very least, it was better than nothing.

I gently got Ryan’s attention, who was walking next to me like a zombie fresh from the dead, and pointed ahead. He must

have been too worn out to say anything, but he nodded drunkenly, encouraging us to move forward. This would be good enough for now.

It took us forever to get there, even though it was only a few hundred feet in front of us. Ryan was fading fast. He dragged his feet now rather than taking steps. As soon as we crossed the mouth of the cave, I helped him sit down against a wall.

“Shit, ow, motherfucker,” he swore as he fell back against the cave wall. I didn’t know if the moisture beading against his forehead was raindrops or sweat. Carefully, I placed the back of my hand against his cheek and felt the heat radiating off of him. That couldn’t be a good sign, right?

I bit my lip and bent down to be on his level. “Ryan, what can I do?” I asked him. I hardly knew him, aside from the arrogant, self-absorbed bully he made himself out to be.

But this boy in front of me was anything but that. His face was pale, and his hands were clenched at his sides. His head lolled against the wall as he turned to look at me, giving me a weak smile, which looked more like a grimace through the pain.

“I’ll be fine, Bells,” he tried to assure me. Ryan reached his hand up and pulled my bottom lip out from between my teeth with his thumb. I hadn’t even realized I had been gnawing on it. “Stop worrying so much. Just need to rest and shake it off.”

I sat frozen there with his hand on my cheek. What was he doing? He must be delusional. I think this was the most prolonged period of time Ryan and I had ever been together without trying to murder each other. And here he was, rubbing his thumb against my face.

Despite everything, I couldn’t help but lean into the warmth of his hand. I took a deep breath, letting the touch of the only other person going through this hell with me soothe some of the stress for just a moment.

He watched me with studious eyes. I found myself getting lost in his emerald gaze, tracing every little fleck of color and wondering how I never noticed just how nice it felt to have him staring at me like this.

And then I remembered myself. I jolted away from him, narrowing my eyes and wrinkling my nose. What was the matter with me? This was Ryan.

Yeah, no thanks.

“Rest sounds like a good idea,” I murmured to him, backing up and then moving over to sit next to him on the wall. I brought my knees up to my chest and hugged them tightly, trying to conserve as much heat as I could. “Hopefully, that will heal miraculously overnight, and we can figure out how to get back to camp.”

He chuckled, though it was weak, but then he went silent. I gave him a few minutes before peeking over at the blond bane of my existence. He was already passed out cold, his head tilted to the side, mouth wide open as he snored.

What a day we had experienced. I couldn't place the blame on either of us, really. I wasn't paying attention just as much as he hadn't been. Maybe if he hadn't distracted me from listening to the counselor earlier today...but no. I could've ignored him then too.

I looked out the mouth of the cave at the storm raging on. The winds were still in full force, bending the trees and bushes to their will. A shiver crept up my spine, and I tried to dampen down the panic that was growing in my belly.

This was bad. Really bad. What were we going to do? We had no food, no water, no way to call for help. I was still in my soaking wet swimming suit and shorts. Oh, and the remaining t-shirt, which had survived the shredding into bandages. And to add insult to injury, I was missing a shoe. It must have slipped off in the river, but I only noticed it now. How could I possibly have missed that? I must be under even more stress than I thought.

I tilted my foot this way and that, examining the sole without disturbing Ryan too much. The bottom of my foot was covered in dirt, but otherwise unscathed. It was a miracle that I hadn't impaled it on something sharp while climbing up that bluff. Maybe once Ryan wakes up tomorrow, we could go back down to the river and see if we could salvage anything.

My eyes drifted past the cave's opening and back to the storm outside. I quickly squashed the hope of finding any leftovers from our kayak. The amount of rain falling and the ferocity of the wind ensured that nothing would be left this far upstream.

I looked back at Ryan, watching him sleep peacefully. I felt conflicted, like my worldviews were contradicting themselves. For so long, I had known Ryan to be exactly who he was—a menace. Yet he jumped right back into that river to save me, hurting himself in the process.

Sitting here, curled up next to him in this cave, I couldn't deny that I felt safe. He was injured, and probably in pain, but I had a feeling that if something else terrible were to happen to us, Ryan would rally and defend me, showing the same level of bravery as he did by jumping into that river.

Something was nagging at my chest, and I rubbed it away, trying to place the feeling. Finally, after pondering it for far too long, I realized what it was. His words from back in the river reverberated in my mind.

Bells, just trust me, please.

Trust.

My eyes went wide as it all came together. It was true, I had trusted him. Despite having an intimate knowledge of how awful he had been to me in the past, I trusted him. Even though neither of us knew what was coming next or what we would have to do to stay safe, I knew, without any doubts, that I could trust him.

I sat with that for a while, getting used to how it felt as the rain powered on. The rest of the day passed, and soon, the sun went down. Even though the rain hadn't let up, it had settled

into a gentle shower. The sky was dark now, but I could still hear the rhythmic fall of the raindrops against the forest floor.

I shivered against the cold stone wall, the chill now fully seeped through my body. Carefully, so I wouldn't jostle him awake, I shimmied closer to Ryan so we were flush side-to-side. As soon as I was next to him, warmth flooded through me. I frowned at the realization that he was likely running a fever. The man was a furnace. Biting the inside of my cheek, I attempted to quell my rising panic at his condition. After a few moments, I finally managed enough deep breaths to steady my breathing. We would worry about that in the morning, but for now, we would get some rest.

Even sitting slouched against a wall, Ryan still towered over me. My head barely leveled above his shoulder. Praying that he wouldn't wake up and see me in such a precarious situation where I needed him, I leaned my head against him and closed my eyes.

Just like earlier, I relished the closeness of my companion. I tried my hardest not to think too much about it, knowing that we were going through extenuating circumstances. As soon as we were back home, I'm sure everything would go back to normal, just the way it always had been. Once I was settled against him, I willed the night to pass just as quickly as the afternoon had.

In the morning, I was awoken by Ryan groaning and shifting underneath my cheek. My eyes fluttered open to see him messing with the bandage wrapped around his middle.

"Stop that!" I swatted at his hands. He startled and looked over at me. Small droplets of sweat had beaded together on his forehead. His eyes were rimmed red, his face still pale and clammy. He definitely had a fever; he looked like death warmed over.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, confused. His eyes trailed down to the bandage. "What happened to me? Where am I?"

What in the world? I sat up straight immediately, evaluating the situation. Ryan was looking around the cave as

if he had no recollection of how we got here. That fever must have been really raging hard to leave him this out of it. Carefully, I told him what had happened. Realization dawned in his eyes as it all came back to him.

The kayak. The storm. The bluff.

He placed a hand on his forehead. "Shit."

I leaned back with a sigh. "Agreed."

Luckily, the sun was shining brightly this morning. I could hear birds chirping outside the cave, giving me an inkling of hope. Now that we could see, we could better understand where we were. My eyes darted down to Ryan's bandage. It was soaked completely through.

I hopped up to my feet and offered him my hand. He looked at it, puzzled. "What are you doing?"

"We need to find a creek or at least a trickle of fresh water so I can wash that out," I said, pointing to his side. He looked down and grimaced but didn't protest, taking my hand and letting me help him into a standing position.

I grabbed his arm and wrapped it around my shoulders. He continued to stare at me in disbelief, but leaned his weight into me for support without much more than a grumble. As his feet dragged unconfidently with each step, his free arm wrapped around his middle, trying to support his injured side. We moved silently, aside from the occasional hiss of pain from him when we'd stumble along our path.

We didn't have to walk far from the cave before I heard the sound of a stream. Thank God; something was going in our favor for once. When we came upon it, I had Ryan sit down against a fallen log as I untied the makeshift bandage. I nearly threw up when I pulled it away, bile roiling in my stomach. Covering my mouth, I tried to breathe heavily through my nose to fight the urge.

The skin surrounding the cut was bright red. The cut had somewhat clotted, leaving the skin with a jumbled dark maroon tint. Around the angry wound, bruises had formed, purple and blue mixing in with the nastiness of the injury. I

gently put my hand on the side of the wound. It was hot to the touch, which made my already sour stomach churn even more.

I sat back and let fear take over for a second. Ryan was really hurt. My eyes steadily grew wider. I couldn't peel them away from the atrocity that was his side. I had no idea how to get myself out of this situation. I was not a survival expert, nor was I even that outdoorsy. I was not prepared for this and most definitely not equipped. What were we going to do? If I did something wrong, Ryan could die. And it would be my fault.

Come on, Izabel. Think!

Straightening my spine and squaring my shoulders, my resolve kicked in. First thing's first, I needed to wash the blood out of the bandage as best as possible, then clean out as much dirt as I could see inside the wound, and lastly, rewrap the wound to prevent anything else from getting in there. It would be a Hail Mary that additional malicious bacteria wouldn't get into the wound from the stream water, but at this point, we had no other options. I sat up and headed over to the stream, determined that I could nurse Ryan back to health.

Because the alternative was unacceptable, even for someone I couldn't stand.

I could feel his eyes watching me as I worked, but he didn't say anything. He was probably still a little out of it from the stress and high fever.

That was fine with me. I didn't want his opinion right now, anyway. I was fairly confident that my plan was the best course of action and didn't want to hear what I was doing wrong. He'd probably have tons to say about what I was doing if he was his usual self. But I feigned composure and continued working in hopes of keeping him quiet a little longer.

Once satisfied with the cleanliness of the cloth, I turned back to Ryan, who was still slumped against the log, his hand gently cupping the gash to protect it. It had to be hurting pretty badly based on the way his face was twisted up. I bent down and looked up at him from under my eyelashes.

“Okay, this is probably going to hurt. I need to try to clean out whatever you got in it yesterday.” He dipped his chin at me to go ahead. I could tell the motion was forced by his awkward and sloppy movements. He was in bad shape.

He yelled, screamed, and swore the entire time I cleaned out the wound. But he didn’t fight me once. I managed to get the wound as clean as I could, re-washed the cloth, and re-bandaged his side fairly quickly. By the time I finished, he was sweating profusely, and his skin had taken on a pale appearance again. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were slightly sunken in as he glared at me, but he didn’t say anything negative. I helped him up and back to the cave, our steps even slower than before. As soon as we were back in our makeshift shelter, he slumped down against the wall. His shoulders rose and fell with labored breaths.

I put my hands on my hips and looked at him for a second. “I’m going to go look around,” I announced. “Don’t move.”

His eyes lolled up to me in a lethargic way. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Bells.” I rolled my eyes at him and went to head out. “Don’t get lost!” he called after me and weakly added, “I won’t be able to save you.”

I didn’t have it in me to respond. Typically, I would have said I didn’t need him to save me. Ever. But I wasn’t about to let my pride get the best of me, given that I would have drowned yesterday if Ryan hadn’t been there. All of a sudden, I was grateful that he discovered that I wasn’t the best swimmer during Question Jenga, even if the moment itself was mortifying. He easily could’ve left me for dead, thinking that I was being dramatic.

My mind flashed back to the image of Ryan running up the beach and diving back into the water, coming back for me. The look of determination on his face and the sheer willpower he had to jump back in to rescue me was something I would never forget, that was for sure. I had never been so happy to see that boy’s face pop up in front of me. And the fact that he didn’t even hesitate made my heart flip.

But I didn't have time to dwell on that. I had to figure out the food situation. I figured my best bet, for now, would be to find something to hold us over until Ryan started feeling better or until someone found us.

I finally found a bush full of purple berries not far from our cave. Cautiously, I walked up to it and plucked one off its branch, examining it closely. They looked just like the elderberries my mom always kept on hand. I had never seen them actually on a bush, but I was confident that's what they were.

Praying that this berry was what I expected it to be, I took a deep breath and popped it into my mouth. My teeth crushed the berry, and instantly my mouth exploded with a tangy, tart flavor. My nerves settled within seconds. This was definitely an elderberry bush. Totally edible and enriched with vitamins.

What a relief. I took the remains of the gray t-shirt and maneuvered it into a makeshift basket to load up the berries to bring them back to the cave. I couldn't wait to show Ryan what I had found. Part of me hoped he would be proud. But then I hesitated—why did I care what he thought?

Oh, that's right. I didn't.

As I walked back to the cave with a t-shirt full of berries, I couldn't help but feel accomplished. I was walking a little taller, and my steps were more powerful.

Maybe we would get out of this situation alive.

RYAN

I WOKE up to the sound of thunder rattling in the sky. With a grunt, I moved my neck out of the wrenched position I had fallen asleep in. The muscles in the back of my neck down into my shoulder screamed in protest as I stretched.

Blinking a few times, I looked around, trying to reorient myself to where we were. The cold stone wall I was leaning against was the biggest clue. Izabel curled up in a little ball just a few feet away from me was another one.

I shifted into a new position and hissed in pain as the wound on my side tugged uncomfortably. The noise was enough to stir Izabel, who quickly sat up and looked around.

“What happened? Are you okay?” she asked, concern lacing her tone.

“I’m fine,” I muttered. My voice was scratchy, and my tongue felt thick in my mouth. I shifted a little and groaned again. “Fuck, this really hurts.”

Izabel scooted closer to me and tried to get a look at the gash on my side. The lighting inside the cave wasn’t ideal. I had no idea what time it was, but I would guess it was closer to dusk than not.

“How long has it been?” I ventured to ask Izabel.

She looked up at me and pursed her lips to the side. “I think just a day. You passed out pretty hard yesterday, and then early this morning, it started pouring again. I’ve been napping off and on. How are you feeling?”

“I feel like I got run over by a truck,” I told her. “But I guess, all things considered, I could be worse.”

“Things could always be worse,” Izabel muttered.

We fell silent then. The echo of the rain falling against the ground was the only noise in our little cave. Izabel brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms tightly around them. Her chin rested on the top of one of her knees as she looked out the mouth of the cave into the storm brewing outside.

I watched her for a while, counting the beats of her eyes as she blinked and noting the way her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek. My throat tightened, and guilt coursed through me.

“Bells,” I croaked. Slowly, she turned her attention toward me, and my stomach hurt when I recognized the wary expression on her face, as though she were bracing herself. “I’m sorry.”

She shifted a bit like she was uncomfortable hearing those words come out of my mouth. “For what?”

I shrugged, but then winced when the movement pulled a bit at my side. “I guess everything. For getting you stuck out here.”

“That’s not your fault,” she said softly. “You’re the reason I didn’t drown in that river. I should probably be thanking you.”

“You don’t need to,” I told her, now the one uncomfortable with this conversation. “I just feel like I should have been paying more attention, maybe not falling asleep when there was a storm rolling in.”

“Maybe,” she agreed. “But what’s done is done. All that matters now is that we get back to camp in one piece. I don’t want to die out here with you, of all people.”

“Kind of harsh there, Bells,” I grunted. My butt was hurting from sitting on the cold ground for so long.

She shot me a look. “Are you serious?”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “I mean—I did save your life and all.” I quickly rerouted when I saw the fire begin to burn in her eyes. “I was kidding.”

“It wasn’t funny.”

“Okay, sorry. I won’t tease you anymore.”

She snorted and then looked back out at the rain cascading down from the mouth of the cave. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

I didn’t respond, turning my own attention outside. The minutes ticked by until I went for a subject change. “Ideally, they’ll have sent a search party out for us, and they should find us soon,” I said, feeling uneasy. “But I don’t know how far off course we got once the rain hit.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, and her voice wavered.

“It means I don’t know how quickly they’ll be able to locate us here. I don’t have my phone, do you?” Mine had been in my pocket when we started off the trip, but now I suspected it was sitting at the bottom of the river somewhere. Izabel shook her head, and I wondered if she had even brought hers along. That didn’t really matter, though. “Didn’t think so. I think we should stick around here for a few days, and if they don’t find us by then, we should probably start walking.”

“You don’t think we should stay here?” she prodded. There was no hint of attitude in her tone, just pure curiosity.

“If we can make our way closer to where we went off course, they might have an easier time finding us. There are a lot of mountains out here, Bells. We’re like needles in a haystack.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” she whispered.

“Me either,” I agreed.

Silence fell over us again. Thunder rolled in the distance. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught her shivering. She was curled up in a ball, still gripping her legs tightly. She saw me watching her and then narrowed her eyes at me, but didn’t say

anything. I felt the great need to apologize to her again, but I suspected that wouldn't do any good.

We were stuck out here, together, for better or for worse. With our history, it would benefit me to stay out of her warpath.

As if she could sense what I was thinking about, she murmured so softly, "Honestly, if our actual lives weren't at stake now, I'd probably just off you myself."

I laughed under my breath, a little taken aback by her aggressiveness. "Damn, Bells, tell me how you really feel."

"Okay. I can't wait to get back, so I never have to see you again."

Her words were like a knife to my heart. I knew I had no validation in thinking that she should feel otherwise toward me after everything we had been through at this point, but still. I never wanted her to hate me as much as she did. I had tricked myself into thinking that maybe she had had a change of heart.

I didn't say anything back, letting myself stew. When she realized that I was going to leave her alone for the evening, she scooted a few feet away and lay down on the cold ground. Curling herself into a ball, she soon fell asleep.

Sleep wasn't coming for me, though. All I could think about was how worried she looked when I gashed my side open on that bluff. Izabel had tended to the wound as if she was a seasoned professional. And honestly, I think she was just as surprised as me that she did. I hadn't deserved her kindness, but she still cared for me like I did.

I remember her eyes, how they pinched together in the corners with worry, like she was concerned about a friend. Doing my best, I tried not to think too much into it. Surely, she was only doing what anyone else would do in that situation, faced with the roadblock we had been.

I could still imagine the feel of her delicate fingers running over my skin as she tightened the bandage. And I kept replaying her last words to me before she fell asleep, thinking about every interaction we had had over the years. Was there

even one moment when we could have changed the course of our relationship, if I had only approached it differently? Or was it a collection of poor decisions on my part that led her to these ill feelings about me?

It was probably the latter option. All I could think about was how disappointed my father would have been if he had seen me like this. He didn't raise me to be this person, but somehow, I still became this version of myself.

I made the decision right then and there that I would prove to Bells that there was more to me than just this front I had put up all these years.

Even if it took everything I had, I was going to prove to Bells that I was more than just the guy who ruined her summers. I was going to show her that I could be worthy of her friendship, and worthy of *her*.

IZABEL

“RYAN,” I said as I shook his shoulder. He was out cold, still leaning up against the cave wall. “Ryan, wake up!”

With a snort, he jerked his head up to see me. He blinked a few times as his eyes focused. “What’s wrong?”

“It finally stopped raining,” I told him. “I think maybe we should go see if we can find some help.”

He yawned before pushing himself into a standing position. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

Ryan and I had decided that once the rain stopped, we would attempt to venture out on our own. I suspected it was Saturday now, meaning we had been out here for three days already with no sign of a search party. I think we were both worried that since we had gone too far off the original route, they had too much of an area to cover to look for us, so we had to try to close that distance as much as possible.

Together, we set out of the cave. However, the humidity lingered. As soon as we started walking, my skin felt damp, and sweat beaded on my forehead. With the unrelenting heat and the lack of water, I felt a headache threatening at the base of my neck. Rubbing at the muscles to knead out some of the tension, I focused on anything else but the dismal situation we were trying to get ourselves out of.

Ryan walked with a purpose to locate the river, me in his wake. When we found it, we followed the bank as best as we could, letting the flowing water be our sense of direction. I left my other shoe behind, choosing to venture barefoot rather than

with one shoe. I suspected I would regret this, but there was no going back now. It was slow going, as each step Ryan took seemed to tug on his wound, and he needed to take routine breaks to catch his breath. The farther we walked, the more worn-out Ryan became. Eventually, he needed to use me as a sort of support. He wrapped his strong arm around my shoulders, leaning on me and using some of my strength.

I was starting to feel the effects of being stranded for a few days without food or water. As we continued to walk, my body was drenched with sweat, both from the heat and supporting most of Ryan's weight. The small headache had exploded with full force, and I was doing my best not to get dizzy the farther we went. I could feel my muscles screaming at me for rest and water, but we couldn't stop. I had to be strong and push through it.

I was more than grateful that Ryan's wound hadn't gotten infected in the few days we had been out here. I couldn't imagine what would've happened if he had caught some flesh-eating bacteria from the river. Though I had said some nasty things to Ryan in the last few days, I didn't actually want anything to happen to him. I'd be on my own then, and I don't know how well that would go.

I hoped we would find somewhere new to camp out soon. We had been going for what felt like hours. My feet were becoming red and raw on the bottom from walking on the rough terrain. Ryan was still leaning some of his weight on me, using me as a crutch. It made it difficult for me to walk in pain while also trying to hold him up.

"Tell me something I don't know," Ryan said, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I chuckled weakly at the callback to what he started before we got into this whole mess. "Did you know there is a town in Michigan called 'Hell'?"

He looked down at me. "For real?"

I nodded. "Yep, you should be the mayor."

Ryan threw back his head and laughed before groaning and clutching at his side. “You’re hilarious.”

“I’m glad you’re finally starting to notice,” I grumbled, shifting my shoulders so that his arm wasn’t crushing me as badly.

Ryan was silent for a few minutes as we kept walking. “There’s got to be something out here other than just trees.”

“What’s that?” I asked him, pointing up ahead. He followed my finger.

A few hundred feet in front of us was what looked to be a small shack.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, my eyes taking in the small house before us. My heart rate picked up at what this meant. This was a dream come true.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s home,” Ryan added as we got closer to the cabin. The stairs onto the porch were apparently really hard for Ryan. He struggled to get up the three steps, grunting with each swing of his leg on the injured side.

He finally let go of my shoulders and braced himself on the side of the cabin. He gave a few hard pounds on the door. When no one came to answer, he looked back at me, and I shrugged. Carefully, he went for the doorknob and gave it a twist. To my utter relief, the door swung open, allowing us entry.

Ryan turned back to look at me with a grin on his face. “It’s a Christmas miracle!”

I rolled my eyes and pushed past him into the little cabin. “You’re a dork.”

He snickered from behind me and followed me inside. This was by no means an all-inclusive mountain getaway. I’m not even sure this house was built for more than one person. There was a small makeshift kitchen right off the entryway, with a dated stove and a number of pots and pans stashed on top of a small mini fridge right next to it. On the other side was the bathroom—I was beyond thrilled to see it had indoor

plumbing, probably from a septic tank somewhere. There was one bedroom, off the kitchen—not even a separate room—and a tiny living space with an old box TV and a dilapidated red knit couch. In the corner was a little wood-burning fireplace, which would explain the pile of firewood we saw on the porch.

I walked around slowly, going through cabinets and peeking into the rooms. There was a bunch of canned goods, but not much else. The fridge was only stocked with ketchup, a half-full jar of strawberry jam, and a few sticks of butter. I twisted the handle of the kitchen sink's faucet, relieved to see clear water splash into the basin. I didn't know if it was sanitary or safe enough to drink, but at the very worst, we could boil it over the stove.

While I stood there staring at the water falling into the sink, my head spun and I licked my dry lips, realizing just how long it had been since I had provided my body with water. Deciding this was now a priority, I reached for a pot and filled it close to the top with the faucet water. I carefully carried it over to the stove and ignited a burner. I placed the pot of water right on top and looked at it, satisfied that we weren't going to die of dehydration. At least not today.

While waiting for the water to boil, I peeked through the rest of the cabin, seeing what we had to work with. The bathroom had a standup shower, which I couldn't have been more thrilled about, and a few bottles of what appeared to be generic soap and shampoo. Underneath the sink, I found a tube of toothpaste and one spare toothbrush. I frowned at it, realizing either Ryan and I would have to share—*gross*—or one of us would have to use our finger to run the toothpaste over our teeth to keep them clean. I rummaged through the drawers in the bathroom, praying that whoever lived here believed in first aid.

To my immense pleasure, I found a half-used tube of triple-antibiotic cream and a few gauze pads, medical tape, ibuprofen, and band-aids. I unscrewed the lid of the ibuprofen and popped two of them, swallowing them dry to help fight off the headache. Grabbing the items, I rushed out to where Ryan

had taken a seat at the small two-seater table in the kitchen area.

“Look what I found!” I dropped my bounty on the table so he could see. His eyes met mine, and he smiled. He scooted back the chair he was on so I could get to the gash on his side.

I pulled off the torn t-shirt wrapping and set it on the floor next to me. The wound was still red and inflamed. To make it worse, it was open and bleeding again from all the walking we had done today. I squeezed out a large dollop of the ointment onto my finger and gently rubbed it on Ryan’s side. He winced a little bit when I made contact with the sore, but he didn’t protest. After I was satisfied with my work, I covered it with a gauze pad still in its sterile wrapping. Then I taped the pad onto his skin to hold it in place.

Sitting back on my heels, I looked at my handiwork. Then my eyes darted up to Ryan’s, who was watching me intently, a questionable expression on his face. I didn’t feel like taking the time to decipher what that expression meant, so I swept a piece of my hair back behind my ear and looked away.

“There, now you won’t die from infection,” I told him softly. “And take these.” I held out two more red ibuprofen pills. “This will help with the pain.”

“Thanks, Bells,” he told me sincerely, taking the pills and swallowing them dry. “You’re a good nurse. I wouldn’t have made it this far if you weren’t here.”

I brushed off his comment with a wave of my hand as I went to investigate the cabinets further. “Who do you think lives here?”

Pushing himself out of his chair, he came to explore with me. “I don’t think anyone *lives* here. It’s probably a weekend getaway for hunting and fishing.” He nodded to the fridge that I was looking into again. “It would be better stocked if someone lived here full time.”

He was right. I was somewhat let down by the fact that we didn’t know when someone would come to our rescue, if at all. By the looks of things, it appeared that no one had been inside

this cabin for a hot minute. Or they just didn't care to keep it nice.

"I wonder if there's a map around here somewhere?" I thought aloud.

Ryan turned his attention back to me. "That would be useful. Then we could see how far away we are from camp and if we could walk it ourselves."

The two of us dug through everything: cabinets, a few closets, and drawers. Neither of us turned up with anything but cobwebs and dust. No map. Not even a phone book. With a sigh, I looked around the cabin—there was no landline or anything. I reached for the worn remote sitting on a small table and aimed it at the TV. Nothing.

From the looks of it, it was just the two of us still. How long would that be the case?

There was still plenty of daylight left. "We should figure out a way to catch some food for tonight," I announced.

Ryan nodded. "I think I saw a fishing pole and a net in that closet over there," he said, walking over to the door and pulling it open. Sure enough, an old red fishing pole sat there, just waiting for us to use it. "Now we just need some bait."

"Where do we get that?" I asked.

"The dirt," he responded, smirking. "I hope you like earthworms." He chuckled when I made a grossed-out face. Motioning for me to follow him outside, he showed me how to dig into the mud and grab ahold of the slimy little buggers.

We walked away from the cabin until we found a small pond. There was a rickety wooden dock that jutted out over the water. Ryan led the way until we were at the very edge of the dock, looking down over the pond. I could see a few fish directly under the water's surface, minding their own business and completely unaware of the terror about to be rained down upon them. Ryan sat himself down with only a minor expression of discomfort. I plopped myself down next to him and watched as he set up the fishing pole by getting the line all situated and then hooking the worm on the end.

Tossing the line into the water, he rolled his shoulders back. “This might take a while.” He looked over at me with a sheepish shrug. “Sometimes they like to be difficult.”

I watched him reel the line back in every few minutes and then toss it back out in a different area. “How do you know how to do all this?”

“My dad and I used to go camping a bunch,” he told me. “He taught me how to fish, make a fire, all that stuff.”

I pulled up my knees and wrapped my arms around them. “I bet he’ll be proud to hear of everything you’ve done when we get back.”

Ryan turned his head to look at me. He studied my face as if he were looking for the deeper meaning of my comment. His expression was wary, almost distrustful, as he watched me. I suddenly felt self-conscious about what I said to him. Was that too bold of me? I mean, I hardly knew Ryan, much less his father. Or did he possibly think I was testing him like he had tested me so many times already this summer?

Finally, Ryan tore his eyes away and said in a flat voice, “My dad died when I was ten.”

A sick feeling settled in my gut, and my eyebrows shot up on my forehead. *Shit, way to go, Izabel.* “God, Ryan, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay. How would you have known? It’s not like we’re *friends* or anything. Plus, it was a long time ago.” Even though he brushed me off, I could tell that it still upset him.

We slipped into silence for a bit. I was building up the courage to ask him about it. I looked over at Ryan, who was staring at the water, not blinking, probably thinking about his dad. I couldn’t even imagine. Ten years old, still a boy. A boy who probably needed his father.

“What happened?” I blurted out before biting my lip in regret.

He leaned his head back and gave a small sigh. It was obviously hard for him to talk about. “He was in the military.

His last deployment was to Afghanistan. He never came home.”

“I’m sorry, Ryan.”

“Yeah...” He looked off into the distance. “They gave my mom a folded-up flag and a 100k to help with the mourning. Nothing like losing the love of your life in service to his country and getting paid off, huh?” His voice was light and teasing, but I could hear a faint sound of pain laced in his tone.

I pressed my lips together, unsure how to respond to that. Ryan laughed humorlessly under his breath. “Mom took that money and gave it right to Bennett, thinking that my dad would have wanted it to go into my education.”

My stomach churned, making me feel nauseous, as I thought about the rumors going around about the money Ryan’s parents donated to the school. Even I was guilty of thinking the worst about it. I had thought that Ryan was treated better because of the money his parents had donated. I never would have imagined that there was such a deeper meaning behind it. “I’m sorry,” I said again, though this time, I wasn’t sure if I was apologizing for Ryan’s dad dying or if I was apologizing for me thinking the worst of him and his family.

He shrugged and looked over at me with a smile on his face. “It’s okay. I miss him, but I still have my mom. It’s just been the two of us, well—sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

He laughed under his breath. “She’s got this new boyfriend, Derek. And right before we got to camp, she called to tell me that they had something they needed to talk to me about. I’m assuming they’ll be getting married soon.”

I fell silent for a second. “How do you feel about that?”

Ryan shrugged and rubbed at his jaw. “I’m not sure. I guess I didn’t expect her to be alone forever, but it’s going to be weird if Derek moves in.”

“I’m sorry,” I said once more.

Ryan gave me another smile. “It’s okay. Just changes, you know? I just want my mom to be happy. She’s been through way too much with losing my dad.”

“Well, I think he would still be proud of you,” I told him earnestly.

Now the smirk came back with full force. “My God, Bells. I’d say that was a compliment if I didn’t know any better.”

I leaned over and shoved his shoulder with mine, some of the tension and guilt I was feeling ebbing away. “Shut up and fish.”

Ryan tossed his head back and laughed. A real one this time. I’d be lying if the action didn’t make butterflies erupt in my stomach. I’d seen Ryan laugh before, but most of the time, it had been at my expense after one of his pranks landed successfully. But this was different, more genuine. I had never seen this side of Ryan, the fun, carefree version of him. I found myself wondering what things could’ve been like if they hadn’t been the way they were for so long.

He looked over at me and shot me a wide smile before looking back out at the pond. I wrapped my arms around my knees, pulling them to my chest as I watched him. Quietly to myself, I wondered if getting stuck out here with Ryan might not be the worst thing after all.

RYAN

THE REST of the day passed slowly. There really wasn't much to do in this cabin other than lay around and hope someone would come find us. We had no TV, no internet—not like we even had a phone or a tablet to use the internet with.

Most of the remaining hours of the day were spent roaming the cabin, searching every nook and cranny to see if I could find anything interesting. After we had fished for a few hours, we came back inside to rest. Right above the kitchen, I had found a loft of sorts that had more random shit strewn everywhere. Izabel waited patiently while I explored.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of anything that could help us get found—really, all I found were trunks of clothes, a few old, tattered books, and a worn-out guitar. I supposed it wasn't a completely empty-handed exploration.

Izabel looked overjoyed when I held out a blue t-shirt and a pair of black athletic shorts. I was sure they would be way too big for her, but she was still wearing her one-piece swimsuit from the kayak trip, so anything would be more comfortable than that. She was also more than pleased that there was plenty more reading material to keep her mind busy while we sat here in solitude.

Soon the sun started to set, and Izabel took one of the books and retreated to the bed, curling up against the old pillows and getting lost in the pages. She was so immersed in the book that she didn't notice me watching her from my position at the small table near the kitchen. Her face was tilted down toward the book, and every once in a while, her eyes

would narrow, or her eyebrows would furrow as she read something that sent her mind into overdrive. Occasionally, her full lips would twitch into a quick smile that had my stomach tightening. Izabel was stunning when she smiled. I only wished she would do it more around me.

I thought about our conversation out at the lake earlier today. I hadn't meant to divulge that much information to her, but it just happened, and there was no going back now. I didn't love the look of pity I noticed in her expression when I told her about my father, but by now, I was used to that reaction.

Thankfully, once the conversation had ended, she had dropped it completely, not pushing for more details.

Before too long, the both of us started to get weary. Since the cabin only had one small full-size bed, I had let Izabel take it. Which meant I was stuck on the dingy couch. It was just a little too small for me, so I spent most of the night curled up into a ball so I would fit on the cushions. It wasn't the best night's sleep, but I'd get over it. It was better than sleeping on the hard ground in a cave, that was for sure.

I woke up before Izabel did the minute the sun rose over the horizon. Careful not to wake her, I shuffled out of the house and spent a while roaming around and doing some exploring. The cabin was surrounded by tall oak and fir trees. Their branches rustled in the wind, creating a soothing sound amidst the orchestra of birds. If this were any other situation, I might enjoy being out here. But as I walked around looking for anything, the endless trees were a vast reminder that we were a long way from camp.

When I got tired of ambling around in circles, I went back down to the pond and caught two catfish to cook up for something to eat. They weren't huge, but they'd be enough to hold us over for the afternoon.

As I made it back to the cabin, I saw she was perched up on the porch, her nose still stuck in the book. She looked up when she heard me walking closer and gave me a tight smile.

“Where have you been all day?”

I held up the fish as an answer. “Catching lunch.”

Izabel stared at the fish and slowly, her tight smile morphed into one of those real smiles I craved so much. My chest ached as my heart swelled with pride and a sense of possessiveness toward her. *Damn, my girl was beautiful.*

A sharp jolt of surprise at the train of thought crashed through me, but I blinked it away before I could look too much into it.

“Well, color me impressed,” she teased, pushing up from her position and opening the front door for me. Still a little stunned by the beaming smile I had received, it took me a minute to gather my wits, but finally, I bounded up the stairs and into the cabin.

Izabel helped a lot in preparing the fish, not even complaining about them smelling too fishy or being too slimy. Getting her hands dirty right next to me, she skinned and pulled the bones out. She was quiet the whole time, only speaking up when she had a question or if she needed to make sure she was doing things correctly. It wasn't necessarily uncomfortable, just noticeable.

When the fish were cooked up, we sat together at the small kitchen table. After taking a few bites, I wiped my mouth and then broke the silence.

“So you've heard my sad origin story with my dad? What about you? What's your family like?” I asked her.

I saw the moment she went on guard. It was as if steel walls came down over her heart and her mind, and there was no way she was going to let me in. I stayed silent as she worked through the decision on whether or not she could trust me. Finally, her blue eyes shot to mine, and she wrapped her arms around her torso.

“My parents are both still alive. My dad owns a car dealership, and my mom is the director of a daycare.”

I nodded, relieved she decided I was worth sharing with. “They sound surprisingly normal.”

A small smile played on her lips. “I have one sister named Sage. She graduated college last year with a business degree and is now working for a big company in Chicago. I don’t get to see her very much anymore.”

“Sage Sanders.” I tried out her sister’s name as I drew designs with my finger on the worn-out wood of the table. “It’s got a ring to it. Is she a lot like you?”

Izabel laughed and shook her head. “No. Sage is very enigmatic, and I can be reserved sometimes. She’s fearless, not afraid of anything.”

I looked up at her with an eyebrow raised. “You’re fearless too, Bells. Give yourself some credit.”

“I’m not brave,” she started and gave me a tight smile. “I’m not even that good of a swimmer.”

I knew she was trying to joke to lighten the heavy mood that had descended on us, but I didn’t crack a smile. “How could you not be brave? We were stranded in the middle of the woods, and I got hurt. Instead of panicking and shutting down, you took control and did what you had to do.” I shook my head, bewildered. “You’re brave. There’s not a doubt in my mind.”

She bit her lip and watched me silently as I went back to tracing patterns on the table. Her lips were pursed to the side as she pondered the sincerity of my words. She looked hesitant when I glanced back up at her, as if she wasn’t sure what to make of this new side of me she was witnessing. I let her stew over it for a few minutes.

Finally, she regained her voice and changed the topic. “What are your plans for next year? Have you been accepted to any colleges?”

I leaned back in my chair, feeling perfectly content. I enjoyed these conversations with her immensely, and I never wanted them to end. “Sort of. It’s kind of complicated.”

“Well, it’s not like we’ve got anywhere to be,” she teased. My chest tightened. I loved when Bells got playful. “Tell me.”

“It’s kind of like a dual-credit program,” I started. “I’ll be moving to Germany to work for a company called Bates Industries in Berlin. It’s an engineering firm that offers an internship program where they’ll cover the tuition for me to get my bachelor’s degree and my master’s.”

Izabel’s eyebrows rose on her forehead. “Ryan—wow. That’s huge.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. It will be weird living away from home for so long.”

“How long is the program?”

I winced a little. “Five years? Give or take a few months.”

She nodded like she understood. “That is a long time.”

“I mean, I’ll get breaks and everything to come back and visit. But, it will definitely be a bit of a change.”

“That’s really exciting, though. I’m sure it’s a great opportunity.”

I nodded. “It is. Thanks, Bells.”

“I’m going to Princeton,” she told me proudly.

I offered her a grin. “Ivy League. Figures. Good for you, Bells. I never took you as a Jersey girl.”

She shrugged. “My dad went there. It’s always been a dream of mine.”

“What are you planning on majoring in?”

“History. I’d like to teach.”

I chuckled quietly. “I can see you being a teacher.” I looked her up and down, assessing her in a joking manner. “All your male students would be hot-for-teacher, for sure. Just gotta get you some thick-rimmed glasses, a pencil skirt, and it would be every teenage boy’s fantasy.” I’d be lying if I didn’t appreciate that mental image. I could see it so vividly in my mind, and it caused my body to heat with a newfound desire for her.

“You’re disgusting,” she said with a wrinkle of her nose.

I gave her a wry grin. “Yeah, but you love it.”

She shook her head, her lips twitching, but she didn’t respond. I watched her for a moment more, trying to move past the visual of her, before scooting my chair back and standing. The wound in my side still stung a bit with certain movements, but I couldn’t give too much thought to that, still consumed with the way my body was responding to the little schoolteacher fantasy I had conjured.

I cleared my throat awkwardly and said, “Think I’ll go outside again for a bit.” I knew I had to get out of her vicinity before I did something utterly stupid like indicate the level of attraction I was currently feeling.

“Okay,” she said, eyeing me suspiciously, as if she could tell the direction of my thoughts. “I’ll probably just stay in here.”

I tossed up my hand in a wave and then exited the cabin again. As I walked out, I couldn’t ignore the way my chest hurt, thinking about how cute Izabel looked when she wrinkled her nose at me.

Throughout the following couple of days, my thoughts continued to turn to Izabel more than I would like to admit. I felt like I was experiencing my first crush all over again. Every spare second, my mind was returning to her, and I was wondering what she was doing or what she was thinking about. I had to get a grip. This was *Izabel*. We were destined to always be at each other’s throats. I knew for a fact that there wasn’t a chance in hell she would ever feel anything more than hatred toward me. I had made my bed back then without even realizing it, and all I could do now was lay in it.

Even if something did happen between us, I could only think about what my friends would say if they found out. They’d give me hell for it, I already knew. Todd especially. He wouldn’t understand. Todd was more of a ladies’ man than I was. Liam would smirk and punch my shoulder, but then he’d leave it alone. It would be the appropriate amount of razzing, but then he’d move on.

But as I sat there, casting and reeling in my fishing line, I couldn't help but imagine what it could be like after the fact. I bet Izabel was a fucking fantastic kisser. Just by looking at those rosy full lips of hers, I had no doubt in my mind. Had she ever even had a boyfriend? I knew that no one from Bennett was brave enough to ask her out. Pretty much everyone knew about our game and that she was mine.

Except for fucking Mark Snyder. The kid was newer to Bennett, so he hadn't really gotten a feel for the Ryan vs. Izabel extravaganza that took place every year.

I sighed and grabbed the fishing pole and the few unfortunate fish that fell for my tricks. I'd take these back to the cabin for Bells to start cleaning, then maybe I'd hunt for some firewood. Running up the few stairs to the cabin, I threw open the screen door.

"Bells, I got you a present!" I hollered, but stopped short when I saw the girl who had haunted my thoughts all morning. She was standing there like a deer in headlights, with a thin, raggedy, green towel wrapped around her body, clutching it like a lifeline.

Totally naked underneath.

My eyes darted to the kitchen table, where I saw her shorts and ruined oversized t-shirt draped over the chair. I instantly got tunnel vision. Every molecule in the air seemed to still. A muffled humming noise started in my ears, drowning everything else out. A tightness developed low in my abdomen, and a pleasurable chill crossed my whole body. I couldn't keep my eyes from focusing on her.

Holy mother of God. I did not need this right now.

She was the most beautiful thing I had ever laid eyes on.

Before I could process what I was doing, I tossed the pole to the side and threw the fish onto the counter. I'd deal with them later. My feet slowly took me across the room to where she was standing. She had a death grip on the towel as she watched me carefully with her blue eyes.

“Ryan?” she asked softly. Her tone caught me off guard. She sounded timid, unsure—a stark difference to the fiery version of herself I had grown so accustomed to. Something about the way she whispered my name so delicately had a type of renewed possessiveness blooming in my chest. I couldn’t ignore the need to be near her any longer. Instinct told me to go to her, and I took one large step toward her, closing some of the distance between us.

I don’t know if she saw the hunger in my expression or what, but she shifted backward, stepping into the wall behind her. I kept approaching, my eyes raking over the alluring sight of Izabel in only a towel. Her eyes tracked my every move, darkening slightly as if she knew what my goal was.

When I was right in front of her, I gently reached up to cup her cheek. “Damn,” I whispered, unable to think of anything else intelligent to say. My tongue felt heavy, and I worried if I tried to say more, I’d just make a fool of myself.

She cast her eyes downward and blushed. The sight of the rosy-pink flush on her cheeks did something to me, and I knew there was no going back after this. I pulled her chin back to look at me and studied her for a second. God, she was beautiful.

“Izabel?” I asked gently. Her eyes were watching mine, her full attention on me. “What would you do if I kissed you right now?” The urge was overwhelming. I was pretty sure I would die if I didn’t get her lips on mine immediately. As I leaned closer to her, her breath hitched before she exhaled in a rush. I caught a hint of fresh mint toothpaste. She had been diligent in using the sad excuse of a toothbrush she had found in the bathroom cabinet routinely. I had conceded the toothbrush to her, opting to be the one to use my finger.

Her pulse quickened under my fingers resting on her neck as I drew closer to her. “I uh—” she stammered, the blush in full force now seeping down from her cheeks across her neck and skirting over her collarbone.

“Good enough for me,” I muttered as I leaned in, closing the remaining distance between us and pressing my lips

against hers for the first time.

I felt the earth stop spinning on contact. And I came back to life when she kissed me back. She tilted her head up to meet mine, pressing her body closer, still holding tightly to the towel as if she was afraid to let it go. Her willingness and eagerness within the kiss took me by surprise in the best way possible, and I held back a groan in the back of my throat. This was everything I thought it would be and more. She was flawless. But I didn't dare press my luck further than I had already.

Pulling back abruptly, I examined her face and braced myself for the wrath I knew was probably coming. Izabel had never held back in the past from letting me know when I pushed the limits too far—and this may have been too far. But to my surprise, she just looked at me, too shell-shocked to say anything. Her lips were red, and her eyes glazed over, though she blinked rapidly a few times, still trying to process what had just happened between us. She looked like a dream. Like a decadent dream.

I leaned forward and rested my forehead against hers, closing my eyes. Clearing my throat, I apologized. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that, but I couldn't help it." She relaxed against me but didn't say anything back. I heard her breath catch as she tried to take control of herself once more.

After a few minutes, I pulled away and gave her a smirk once my heart rate had calmed down. "I'll leave you to it then."

She nodded and tightened her fist on her towel, knuckles turning a pale pink as her fair skin pulled over the bones. I stared at her for a few seconds longer, committing this moment to memory. Never in my life had I been so affected by such a simple kiss. But I knew that this day, this moment, was one that I would never forget.

As I said, there was no going back after this.

IZABEL

EMBARRASSMENT FILLED me from head to toe, and I suspected it wasn't going to leave for a long time. My mind was still reeling after Ryan had kissed me and then left me in the cabin to overthink everything.

Had I been a bad kisser? Did he regret it?

Did I regret it?

My gut instinct was to say *yes*, of course. How could I think that Ryan could kiss me and not expect any repercussions? The minute he walked out of that cabin, leaving me standing there in my towel, I knew I had to prepare for the worst. How could I have let him kiss me like that? I should've backed away and kept the status quo. There were so many lines that we just crossed, and I was afraid there would be no going back.

Yet, I still couldn't get the way he looked at me before the kiss out of my mind. He looked at me as if he liked what he saw—really liked it. And I wasn't sure how that made me feel. I had been with other guys before, but none of them had given me even an ounce of the attention that Ryan had in just that one moment.

It made my head spin and my chest ache, as if I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. I wanted him to look at me like that again, just to experience it one more time.

But that could never happen. Could it?

Following that initial mortifying moment, I picked some of the clothes Ryan had procured from the loft and threw them on. I had to admit they were much more comfortable than walking around in my one-piece bathing suit.

I let my hair air-dry because it's not like I had a hairdryer or any other type of tool. Unfortunately, none of those items were stashed anywhere in this cabin. I didn't even have a brush—hopefully, my shoulder-length hair wouldn't be too unruly once it dried.

Once I was fully clothed, I picked up my book again and curled up on the dingy couch. There wasn't much else for me to do other than wait for Ryan to return so we could address the uncomfortable elephant in the room.

My eyes roamed over the pages, and I tried my best to process what I was reading, but it was no use. I found myself reading sentences over and over again, still not comprehending what the words meant. With an exasperated groan, I slammed the hardcover book shut, coughing when a cloud of dust expelled from the pages. Setting it on the table, I took a deep breath and then braced myself. I walked out of the cabin and down to the dock over the small pond at the back of the cabin.

Sure enough, Ryan was perched out at the very end. His toes dangled over the edge, just barely touching the surface of the water. He was shirtless, his skin a golden bronze in the sun. The gash on his side was still pretty gnarly, though fully scabbed over at this point. I couldn't help but feel lucky that it hadn't gotten infected while we'd been out here.

Even with the slowly-healing wound, Ryan really was in good shape, with toned muscles that looked firm to the touch. His arms were sinewy, dipping into well-defined ridges that were the visual proof of hard work from being an athlete.

His messy blond hair was messier now than I'd ever seen it, a few curly strands falling over his forehead and threatening to flop into his eyes.

When my feet hit the wood panels of the dock, he turned around to face me. His features immediately took on a sheepish expression, which had my stomach sinking into a pit

of discomfort. I braced myself, raising my defenses as I approached him.

“Heya, Bells,” he said, his voice wavering slightly.

“Hey, yourself,” I said back, crossing my arms. “What are you doing out here?”

He looked back out over the pond. “Just sitting. Thought I’d give you some space.”

I bit my lip and looked out at the pond as well. My skin felt prickly, and I hated the words I was about to say, but I knew it was for the best. “It’s okay if you regret it. We can pretend that it never happened.” When Ryan looked at me with an eyebrow raised, I felt the need to clarify. Surely, he would be grateful that I was giving him an out. “The kiss.”

He frowned. “I don’t want to do that.”

My palms grew sweaty, and I wondered if I heard him correctly. Giving him another chance to back out, I said, “I think it’s probably for the best, don’t you?”

Now Ryan turned all the way around so he was facing me. He still sat on the dock while I stood over him, but even from the strength of his stare, I felt small. “What are you talking about? Why would you think that?”

I caught my breath and held his gaze, pretending that I had everything together. I couldn’t tell him that it was because ever since he kissed me earlier, I couldn’t get him out of my head. I couldn’t tell him that all I could imagine was us kissing again, but *more*. I couldn’t tell him because I didn’t know what was happening to me. There was no way he could know all the things I was fantasizing about.

“Just with everything—our past,” I started, but I knew it sounded like a weak excuse. I didn’t even believe the words coming out of my mouth. “It’s just better to keep our distance.”

“Our past,” he said, deadpan.

“You know, you belittling me all the time and making me dread going to camp?”

Ryan looked pained as he rubbed the back of his neck. Finally, he pushed himself up, so he was standing in front of me. He stepped forward, closing some of the space between us. “Would now be a bad time to tell you I’m sorry? I wish I could go back and do it all over again, truly. There’s nothing I’d want more than to go back and have a fresh start with you.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I knew he meant it. I could tell by the sincerity in his striking green eyes, the gentleness in his tone, that he meant every word.

“It might be a little late for that.” I winced as the words spilled out of my mouth. Why was I being so stubborn about this?

“Why?” he asked, taking another step back. “Don’t you think it’s time we could move past all that bullshit?”

Panic quickly rose inside of me. Ryan was being too—*real* right now. It was unnerving, and I knew that if he kept pushing, I would give in. Some part of my brain questioned whether that would be the worst thing, but the other part was still struggling to reconcile this new version of Ryan I was getting to know with the old one. My walls were crumbling, and that scared me. I didn’t know what was happening. Everything I thought I knew about Ryan and me was getting spun upside down.

“You know what? Forget it. This was a mistake,” I said before turning and briskly walking back up the dock. My body thrummed with anxiety as I took a few steps away. I needed to get some air, needed to get away from this conversation. Maybe then I could find the clarity I needed to think rationally about this whole situation.

“What is your problem? I just apologized,” he called after me. “Come on, Izabel. Just give us a chance.”

My jaw fell open, and I glared at him. “You think that *years* of you ruining my summers is going to be fixed by a simple ‘I’m sorry?’”

“What do you want from me, Bells?” he shouted, throwing his hands in the air. “Do you want me to get on my knees and beg you to forgive me? Do you want me to pledge my firstborn to you? Just fucking tell me what it takes for you to forgive me, and I’ll do it.”

“Never mind, I should’ve never even bothered,” I muttered. “I’m going back to the cabin.”

I turned away again, and I heard him scoff behind me. “You’re crazy, Bells. Call me when you’ve got your head on right.”

I rolled my eyes but kept walking. He was impossible. I didn’t think what I had suggested had been so out of bounds. We weren’t friends. We couldn’t be friends. I just had to hold true to my resolve on that.

It was better this way, I thought to myself, though I wondered if I even believed it. My stomach churned as I walked farther and farther away from him. This whole thing felt off, like I was doing the wrong thing. But deep down, I knew I needed to protect myself above anything else.

All that mattered was that we both got out of this situation alive. We didn’t need to be besties.

The rest of the day was spent expending my nervous energy. I wandered around the cabin relentlessly, straightening up things that didn’t need to be straightened. I had found a broom stashed behind the couch, so I spent a good hour sweeping the floor of the cabin—three times for just good measure.

Ryan stayed outside until the sun had started to set. He brought in three fish with him and tossed them on the counter while he grabbed the necessary items to start preparing them. Then he walked out to the porch to deal with it, not saying a word.

I glowered after him, but I didn’t make a move to follow. By that time, I was perched up on the couch, trying to read my book again.

The next time Ryan stepped inside, he had the fish fully cooked from a bonfire he had made by himself. He handed me a plate, which I took warily. It smelled good, and my stomach growled in response.

Ryan raised an amused eyebrow but still didn't say anything to me.

We ate our dinner in silence, and then proceeded to avoid each other for the rest of the evening. Ryan took a shower, then kicked me off the couch when he came out.

"I'm tired," was all he said as an explanation.

I got out of his way, went over to the bed, and curled up as best as I could against the lumpy pillows.

Soon, I heard Ryan's soft snores coming from the couch. How had he fallen asleep already? He had barely laid down a few minutes ago.

I tossed and turned for a while, unable to get comfortable. Finally, I found a decent position and did my best to settle in. Before I knew it, I felt myself slipping into a restless snooze.

It didn't last long, and I jolted awake when a loud crash of thunder shook the entire cabin. I blinked a few times and saw a flash of light outside. It was followed soon after by another roll of thunder. My shoulders tensed up once the rain started pelting against the cabin. I turned over onto my back again, trying to calm my heart rate. It was just some rain, no big deal. I had been through a million thunderstorms in my lifetime, and I had never had any problem with them.

Then why did it feel like my stomach was knotting up so bad I would throw up? I tried to reason with myself that I was just a little jumpy after everything that had happened on the river. It was normal to be shaken up after that. Apprehension was a perfectly normal response to trauma.

The rain kept coming; it was pouring now. Thunder rolled every few minutes with a crack of lightning. I was starting to shake, unable to rationalize my way through the storm. I sat up straight on the bed and looked around in the darkness to where Ryan was fast asleep, the storm not phasing him a bit. He was

still snoring lightly. I tried to use the sound as a buffer against the rain, but it didn't work. To make matters worse, I could hear a dripping sound just off to my right. There must have been a leak in the roof.

I covered my ears with my hands as I attempted to shut out the sound of the storm, but that did nothing either. The panic was setting in, and now I was having flashbacks of the raging river and getting caught in the water with nowhere to go. Fearing for my life.

That was something I never, ever wanted to experience again. I remember my hands burning from holding on to that branch for dear life. My feet flailed under the water, trying to find something firm to stand on. The fierce look on Ryan's face as he swam up to me and took me in his arms flashed in my memory. I could still hear him telling me not to let go. And to trust him.

Trust him.

I looked over at Ryan again. Regret flooded me from the way I got so defensive with him earlier. I had most definitely not trusted him then. He had barely spoken to me for the rest of the day, giving me the space I had obviously needed to process everything.

Standing up from the bed, I walked over to the couch with light steps so I wouldn't wake him. He was sleeping flat on his back, an arm tossed above his head, as if he didn't have a care in the world. I crouched down next to him and poked his shoulder. He didn't stir.

I did it again.

This time, with a snort, he sat up a bit, looking around in alarm. When he saw me, his eyes clouded with concern. "What's wrong?"

An unintentional shiver ran down my spine, remembering the way he held me as he kissed me earlier. Then I remembered how awkward things were between us today, and I twisted my fingers together. Was he still upset with me? "It's storming."

“Okay?” he asked, still blinking away the sleep from his eyes.

“It’s um—” I paused, biting my lip. “It’s frightening me. I was wondering if you’d come sleep in the bed with me.”

Ryan looked shocked for only a moment before he got up from the couch. “Yeah, okay. Come here.” He reached for me then, pulling me into his arms. I leaned against his chest, breathing in his woodsy scent. His hand rubbed up and down my back, and for the first time since it had started thundering, my body relaxed.

With me still clinging to him, Ryan shuffled us across the room to the bed. He pulled back the covers with one hand, the other still wrapped around me. I let go of him and crawled under the covers. He followed behind me.

The mattress was maybe full size at best, so it was a tight fit. Once he was settled, Ryan extended his arm, welcoming me to him. I didn’t hesitate, curling into his side and leaning my head against his chest.

The storm continued to rage outside, loud cracks of thunder releasing from the sky every few minutes. Lightning streaked through the clouds, illuminating the world outside of our little cabin. Rain ricocheted off the roof, sounding louder than I’m sure it actually was. The wind howled as it rustled against the trees.

I closed my eyes, trying my hardest to block out all the noises. Ryan’s arms tightened around me, as if he was letting me know that he was there. I nestled against his chest, soaking in his comfort and warmth.

One of his hands smoothed over my hair, and then I felt him press his lips to my forehead. My heart fluttered, and I breathed out a gentle sigh.

“Go to sleep, Bells,” he whispered against me. “I’m here. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

As his warm breath fanned over my face, an overwhelming sense of comfort blanketed over me. I felt my heart rate

lowering and my breathing growing heavier. Ryan's words kept repeating in my mind as I slowly fell into a deep sleep.

I'm here. I've got you. You're safe.

You're safe.

RYAN

I WOKE up to the sensation of something tickling my nose.

Swatting it away with my fingers, I looked down at the girl sleeping soundly against me. My heart felt full as I tightened my arm around her.

I could get used to waking up like this.

Izabel was draped all over me, her arm thrown around my torso and one of her legs tucked in between mine.

Leaning my nose into her hair, I took a deep breath, inhaling her cozy scent and closing my eyes. Izabel moaned in her sleep, and my body instantly reacted—desire flooded through me, and I tightened my hold on her. What I would give to be able to just roll her over and worship her body with kisses.

I couldn't get our kiss from yesterday out of my head now, replaying how she arched into me and kissed me back with a fervor I wasn't expecting from her.

My dick was aching as I imagined what would've happened if we were both even just a little braver. I wondered what she would've done if I had been bold enough to pull the towel away from her, to see what she was hiding underneath. Would she have been receptive to it, or would she have slapped me across the face and run away?

Izabel was slowly starting to consume every bit of me, and to be honest, I wasn't sure if I minded.

As if she could hear the direction of my thoughts, she snuggled closer, nestling her face into my chest. I pressed my face into her hair again and sighed. This was definitely not helping my morning wood. I shouldn't be indulging myself. Izabel had made it clear yesterday that she didn't think we should get closer to each other if we could help it.

I disagreed, and I couldn't help but curl into her more. She seemed to fit me perfectly. I was acutely aware of her body pressed against every inch of mine, as if she had tried to get impossibly closer as the night went on.

I could still picture the look on her face—eyebrows furrowed, lips pursed, as she put her hands on her hips and glared me down. It must have taken her a lot of courage to ask me to come to sleep with her. She was fierce, and I loved every bit of it.

Izabel moaned next to me—and Jesus, was that a glorious sound. I looked down at her and watched as her eyes fluttered open. Her blue eyes met mine for a second before she smiled and closed them again. We lay there together for about three blissful seconds before she realized who and where she was. Her eyes snapped open again, and she shoved her arms against me, trying to put as much distance between us as possible.

To my great amusement, she used too much force and threw herself over the side of the bed. I chuckled and sat up, watching her scramble on the floor. She stood up and stared at me, her blue eyes blazing and her mouth open in shock.

“Well, good morning to you too, Bells,” I said humorously.

“Uh,” she stammered, still not totally awake. “Sorry, I uh...”

I stood up and walked over to her, placing my hands on her shoulders. “It's okay,” I said gently, reassuring her. “Hey, are you okay?” She had hit the floor pretty hard.

She nodded and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. Then she looked up at me again.

I narrowed my eyes at her, and then pulled her in for a hug when she crawled back into bed. I didn't blame her for being

frightened by the storm last night. We had been through a lot together already. I would never fault her for how she felt. It only made sense that there might be some residual trauma from her damn near drowning in that river.

I tried to ignore the sense of male pride that swelled through my chest when she came to me when she was frightened. Not that there was anywhere else to go, but still. She came to *me*.

Finally, she hugged me back, resting her head on my chest again.

“I’m sorry for how I was acting yesterday,” she said.

I turned to look at her and frowned. “Why are you apologizing?”

“I just feel like I didn’t really give you a chance. I just went into panic mode and shut down.” She glanced at me and then quickly looked away. “If I’m being honest, I liked that you kissed me.”

I swallowed thickly, heart beating a little faster. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “It was nice. So I’m sorry that I jumped down your throat. I do accept your apology. And I’d like to maybe have a fresh start. You’ve already proven yourself to me. It would be unfair of me to ignore all of that.”

My shoulders lost some of their tension as her words soothed something deep inside of me. A sense of relief filled my chest. Maybe I was finally getting somewhere with her.

“Thanks, Bells,” I said. “That means a lot to me.”

“Do you think we can be friends again?” she asked, her voice small.

I laughed and hugged her tighter to me. “Yeah, I think we can do that.”

Izabel and I stayed in bed for a while longer, just talking. She had taken to tracing unidentifiable patterns on my chest, which I secretly loved. Every swoop of her fingernail had goosebumps threatening to raise on my arms.

I relished being this close to her. Even with our disagreement yesterday, I felt like I was becoming more and more transfixed with her with every minute that passed. I couldn't deny that even yesterday, after our tiff, my thoughts kept jumping to her.

I had tried my hardest to give her space, even though she hadn't outright asked for it. I understood that there had been a major shift in our dynamic after I had kissed her, and I wasn't upset that she hadn't responded the way I initially hoped. I shouldn't have rushed her, so the least I could do was let her work through it on her own. Throughout the rest of the day, Izabel and I mostly kept to ourselves, but she was around more. As evening rolled around, I picked up the guitar when she found her book, and we settled on the little couch, getting ready to wind down for the day.

But her eyes kept darting over to me as I strummed on the guitar, playing around with different keys and chords. Finally, I couldn't withstand the tension anymore.

"Like what you see, Bells?" I asked, pulling her out of her silent appraisal of me.

She jolted like I startled her. Her big blue eyes fell on mine, and her cheeks instantly heated in a blush. "What?"

"You keep staring at me," I explained with a smirk. "So I asked if you liked what you saw."

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The blush was still prominent on her cheekbones. "I just—I like listening to you play."

"Thanks," I say, feeling satisfied with myself as I reached for my glass of water on the small table next to me.

"I've had sex before," she announced, sitting up straight and squaring her shoulders as she stared at me.

I nearly spat out my water, but somehow managed to swallow it down. I looked at her, eyes wide, thrown off by the abrupt change in subject. What the hell *was* going through her mind as she watched me play? "Do you want a trophy?"

Her cheeks heated into an even darker shade of crimson and her lips twitched a little. “I’m just saying, so you know.”

“*Okaaay...*” Though I was playing it off, I honestly was a little surprised.

“And I have an IUD.”

This time when I looked at her, my jaw was slack. What the hell was she doing telling me all of this?

“My mom made me get one after she found out I had sex last summer. She was determined that I wasn’t going to get pregnant in high school.”

“That’s, uh—” I rubbed the back of my neck. “That’s great, Bells.”

She shot me an unamused look. “Yeah, I figured you’d say that.”

I snorted. “Well, what the hell do you want me to say when you drop a bomb like that on me?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just wanted to squash any rumors you heard of me being a prude or whatever. Lay all the cards out on the table. That I’ve had sex.”

I grimaced, gripping the muscles on my neck even tighter. “I feel like this is a trap.”

“No trap. I mean—” She hesitated, but then squared her shoulders. “It’s not like I’m a *professional* by any means. It was only twice. But just so you know, I do have some experience.”

Christ on a cracker, what the fuck was happening right now? “Glad to hear that, Bells.”

She nodded, and then crossed her arms over her chest like she was pleased. “I’m sure you are.”

“That’s not fair,” I said with an eye roll. “You can’t just spring something like that on me and grade me on my reaction. What even brought on this subject?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was just thinking about it.”

“What’s in that book of yours?” I teased. “You sure it’s not some smutty romance that’s getting you all hot and bothered?”

“*Nooo.*” She drew out the word. “It’s definitely not. It’s about the industrial revolution.”

“I’m sure they had sex in the industrial revolution, so it’s not so far off kilter.”

“Ryan!” she gasped, and I threw my head back with a laugh.

“You’re the one who brought it up!”

She waved her hand and spun on her chair, so she was no longer facing me. “Just—leave me alone.”

Still laughing under my breath, I did as she asked, my fingers going back to the guitar strings. Even though I tried to focus on the musical notes coming from the instrument, I couldn’t quite get Izabel’s announcement out of my head. She really had taken me by surprise. I guess she was right in my presumed assumption that she was a virgin.

I wasn’t entirely sure what I was going to do with this information, and until I figured it out, it would continue to burn a hole in my brain. I suddenly had a desire to maim whoever it was who was lucky enough to take her virginity. I questioned that darker part of me, now seriously contemplating hunting whoever this other dude was. I ran over a few potential names in my head, but I couldn’t picture any of them with her. None of them were good enough for her. None of them were *me*.

I focused more on the guitar in my hands. I had a tune stuck in my brain, and I played it over and over again, working to come up with the rest of the melody as I fiddled around with different chord progressions.

My dad played the guitar. I had vivid memories of him sitting in the living room, messing around like I was now. My mom would sit next to him with a book or a magazine, her feet pressed up against his. I would be down on the floor, playing with whatever new toy had been holding my attention.

Those were some of the best nights. I felt closer to him now, as I did the same as I had for a long, long time.

I wondered what he would think of this situation I had gotten myself into with Izabel. Would he be proud of the way we were handling things? Would he have done things differently?

What would he think about Izabel? I knew he would approve of her. She was practically perfect. He would probably laugh if I had told him about all the ways she had given me trouble while we'd been out here together. He'd give me a wry look and tell me I'd deserve it, then he'd give her a high five for keeping me on my toes.

“What are you thinking about?” Izabel asked, pulling me out of my memories.

I raised my brows at her. “Hmm?”

“Your face just got this look to it. I could tell something was on your mind.”

“Oh, just my dad,” I said, unashamed. “He used to play like this. I was just thinking about him. I think he'd like you. He'd like your spirit.”

She pressed her lips together. A few minutes passed, and then she pushed out of her chair. Slowly, she stepped closer to me, grabbing the guitar out of my hands and setting it on the table next to us.

“What are you doing?” I breathed as she came even closer, now that the guitar was out of her way.

“Just—experimenting,” she whispered back. “Stay still.”

I did what she asked, not moving a muscle as she lowered her head, running the tip of her nose against mine.

She moved even closer until she was straddling my lap and braced herself with her hands on my shoulders. I tried not to tense too much under the feeling of her dainty hands on my body. When she was seated on top of me, she arched her back, pressing our chests together. Her hands moved from my

shoulders to the nape of my neck, where she played with the strands of my scruffy hair.

Catching me off guard, Izabel undulated her hips against mine. I groaned as she rubbed herself over me, my cock twitching under my shorts at the sensation of her grinding. My eyes flashed to hers, only to see her eyes glowing with desire.

My body was heating exponentially with every second that passed. Who was this vixen dressed like Izabel? Where had she come from?

Her eyelids hooded as she ground herself against me again, her lips parting slightly as she gasped. I tried my hardest to control myself from bucking up into her.

“You feel good,” she said, her voice husky.

I chuckled. “You feel better.”

She leaned forward again until I could feel her breath dancing across my cheek. “Ryan?”

“Yeah, Bells?”

“I want you to kiss me.”

I looked at her as if waiting for the punchline. When she continued to look at me expectantly, I didn’t hesitate any longer. My hand splayed against her back, settling between her shoulder blades as I pulled her into me.

Our lips crashed together, and it was even more explosive than it was yesterday. Fireworks lit up behind my eyelids as she moaned and tilted her hips.

I traced the seam of her lips with my tongue, pleased when she opened for me. I dove right in, kissing her like this was the last time—because who knew what would happen next.

Izabel’s hand traveled from the nape of my neck into my hair, where she gripped it, holding me to her in our bruising kiss. I couldn’t hold back a groan.

When she broke away, her eyes were darkened with need. Somehow, my cock hardened even more, and she felt it. She

ground against me again, back and forth, driving me fucking wild.

“I want more,” she whispered before leaning to kiss me again. I froze, pulling away from her to look into her eyes.

“Are you sure? If we do this, there’s no going back.”

She shivered, but nodded. “I’m sure.”

Hooking my hands under her thighs, I scooped her up off of my lap. I stood and walked over to the bed, her legs wrapping around me. Before we made it to the mattress, I set her down.

She arched her back like she wanted to be closer to me, pressing the length of her body along mine. I moaned low in my throat, my arm tightening around her as I pulled her closer to me. My skin felt like it was on fire. My hands slowly went to the athletic shorts and up under the baggy t-shirt. Her skin erupted into goosebumps when my hands circled her waist.

I eased down her shorts, and then my fingers gripped the hem of the t-shirt. Slowly, torturously, I raised the shirt, finally revealing her chest. Sighing happily, my eyes roved over every inch of her perfect breasts. They were well-rounded, with pale pink nipples in the center that I couldn’t wait another second to kiss.

I lowered my head and enclosed my lips over one, and she jerked up into me, whimpering at the sensation. Her fingers clawed at my back as my tongue sucked and flicked over the sensitive peaks. I secretly wondered if whoever she had been with before had paid her enough attention. Did he learn all her secret spots like I intended to?

Her body hummed beneath me as I continued my exploration. Wrapping my arms tighter around her, I guided us to the bed. She finally lay below me, free for my eyes to appreciate.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I told her. “I can’t believe this is happening.” I leaned down to kiss her, pressing my weight onto her body.

Skin against skin. Her breasts pressed into my bare chest, her nipples hardening further as they rubbed against my skin. The feel of her bare skin against mine was enough to set every nerve ending in my body on fire in the best possible way. I wasn't sure if I had felt such intimacy with someone else before. My lips parted hers, and I dove in with my tongue, tasting her. I never wanted to stop. I wanted her taste on my lips for eternity.

"Ryan," Izabel pleaded, her hands pushing at the waistband of my shorts. "Please."

Kissing her again, I smirked. "Eager, Bells?" I trailed my hands down the length of her body, coming to rest on her pointy hipbones. "Let me take care of you."

Her eyes widened as I spread her legs, getting the full view. Her expression was one of alarm, but I pressed kisses against her thighs, trying to ease some of her nerves. Finally, she softened, her legs becoming more pliable as I kissed and nibbled against the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

She was perfect. Holding her gaze so I could see her reaction, I leaned forward and put my lips on her, running my tongue through her folds. Izabel writhed and groaned in ecstasy below me, her eyelids fluttering shut with the sensation. I added a finger, gently sliding it into her warm heat. She groaned at the first feel of me inside of her.

"Ryan," she moaned, sending a wave of primal pride through my body. Her hands traveled above her head and gripped themselves into her long brown hair. "Ryan."

"Shhh," I soothed her as I lapped away at her most sensitive parts, my tongue finding her swollen nub as my finger continued to thrust in and out of her gently. "Enjoy it, Bells."

"That feels—" Her voice cut off with a low moan as I hit the perfect spot.

"I know, just relax. I've got you," I encouraged her as I felt her inner muscles start to contract against my finger. I wanted to show her that anyone else she had been with before didn't

matter anymore. There was no going back after this. My tongue continued its assault on her clit until she was teetering over the edge. “Come on, baby, let go.”

“Oh, God!” Izabel screamed as she came all over my tongue. I kept up with my ministrations until her body slumped onto the bed. Planting one last kiss right below her belly button, I worked my way back to her mouth.

When we were face to face, I observed her mellowed-out expression. I pecked her lips and chuckled. Her blue eyes were glassy and dazed. “Hi,” I said cheekily.

“Hey,” she said back, smiling. “That was...”

“Perfect,” I filled in for her. “You’re perfect.”

I pulled away from her, and she whimpered at the distance between us. With my eyes on hers, I pushed the waistband of my swim shorts over the ridges of my hips. The whole time I gauged her reaction, watching to make sure she was still okay with what we were about to do. Izabel’s eyes went wide as soon as my shorts hit the floor. Those sapphire blues roved over every inch of me, settling on the hardness in the center of my thighs. I watched her gulp, and then her eyes flicked to mine, uncertainty flooding through them.

I closed the space between us, capturing her lips in a deep kiss. Izabel responded immediately, moving her mouth against mine and arching her back to press her breasts into my chest again. My hand was on her waist, holding her where I needed her.

Pulling away from her again, I caught her attention and held her gaze. “Are you sure you want this? If you’re not ready, we don’t have to.”

Izabel’s eyes traced my face, and she nodded. “I do. I want this. With you.”

I smiled at her and then slowly spread her legs open so I could fit between them. Holding her eyes, I moved forward, pressing us together.

Izabel’s reaction was hot. Her eyes shot open when she felt my length pressed against her warm center, and a moan

slipped out of her lips. As her hips bucked up against mine, my dick slid against her heat, causing me to moan at the sensation of her soaking my tip. God, I had to feel that again. This time, I was the one who moved my hips against her, slipping through the wetness at the apex of her thighs.

Fuck, she felt incredible. I knew I was a goner after this. Izabel would own me, body and soul, but for whatever reason, I really didn't care.

IZABEL

OH MY GOD, I thought as Ryan continued to slide his length up and down the apex of my thighs. He kept hitting my clit in a way that was slowly making me come undone all over again. I wasn't sure how much longer I was going to last.

Still, my mind started to go into overdrive. It wasn't that I didn't know what to do. It was just the knowledge of *who* I was getting ready to do this with.

The insecurities of our past came crashing down on me again. Our history, our volatile relationship, replayed like a movie reel over and over in my thoughts. It consumed me. Suddenly, I felt way too exposed, way too vulnerable. Discomfort coursed through me, and my whole body trembled. I felt like I couldn't breathe. It was too much. Too soon.

"Wait," I said, pressing against his shoulders, needing space. "Ryan, wait."

Ryan immediately stopped his movements and pulled back, his green eyes scanning my face with concern. He saw me lying there, quivering, and he frowned. "What's wrong?"

I was still pressing against his shoulders, but was unable to utter anything. Ryan got the message, rolling off of me and sitting up. He brought me up with him in one swoop and cradled me against his chest. "Hey, shh, it's okay," he whispered against my hair. "I'm sorry I got carried away."

Shaking my head, I tried to catch my breath. I pressed my cheek against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart and letting it calm me. Slowly, I started to come down from

my panic. Maybe it was the way Ryan's hand stroked up and down my back, or maybe it was the way he held me like I was the most precious thing to him. Either way, I finally was able to say, "It wasn't really that."

Ryan's eyebrows drew together as he pulled back to study me. "Then what is it?"

I wrapped my arms around myself and leaned against him again. He tightened his hold on me in response, caging me against him. "I just feel like we need to clear some things up," I whispered. "About you. About your past with girls. I told you everything about me, but I feel like I'm going in blind."

He sighed against my hair, pressing a kiss there. "What kinds of things do you want to know?"

Why was I bringing this up *now*? This was ridiculous. I tried to backpedal. "I don't know. It's nothing. Forget I said anything."

Ryan leaned back slightly and stared at me, a grave expression clouding his face. "No. Whatever it is, it is obviously bothering you. Talk to me. We can't move forward if we are stuck in the past."

"I just know you are," I paused, choosing my words, "*more experienced* than I am. I've told you I've had sex before, but it was only a few times. I don't really know what you're expecting of me, and I don't know if I'll meet your standards."

He ran one of his hands over his face and inhaled deeply. "Bells, I swear that no matter what, I'll think you're perfect. Your experience level doesn't mean anything—I'm not worried about it, and you shouldn't be either." Ryan pressed a kiss to my temple. "I promise, already, that none of the other times I've slept with someone have been like this in a good way."

"In a good way, how?"

"I mean, I never felt anything for those other girls, not like I do for you. That makes all the difference."

My chest warmed at his words, but still, I didn't feel completely at ease. "But what if I do something wrong or something you don't like?"

Arms tightening around me, he leaned back so we were lying on our sides, facing each other. His hand stroked my hair and the bottom of my jaw. "Then I'll tell you, and I hope you'll tell me too. We'll learn how to be good together. That's another difference here, Bells. This is not a one-night stand. At least, I have no intention of it being that way."

My belly fluttered at the significance of Ryan's words. I looked into his eyes, seeing nothing but sincerity as he looked down at me. I felt the sudden urge to be closer to him, to close any remaining space between us.

As if reading my mind, Ryan leaned forward to kiss me again, slower this time. He tasted and explored my mouth with his. The heat was still there, but this kiss portrayed to me all the things Ryan was trying to tell me. My lips burned where he met them, and slowly the tension started to leave my body.

"Besides," he whispered against me, "based on what we have learned together already, I don't think there will be an issue of me not being interested in you." I felt him angle his lower half against mine, and I could feel his hardness pressed against me. Heat coursed through me, and I bit back a quiet moan. "I need you to trust me, Bells. Nothing in my past matters as much as you do right now."

"I trust you," I said softly, my heart swelling with emotion.

He opened his eyes and gazed at me, smiling. It still felt strange to say those three words to Ryan, but I meant them with everything in me. In those days we spent together in the cabin, I had given a part of myself to him that I'm not sure I would ever get back. I trusted him with my life. I knew that without him, I'd probably have drowned in that river. In the last few days, I'd learned to lean on him in a way I never would have imagined. In some ways, I felt like trust wasn't strong enough a word.

I pressed my hand against his shoulder and pushed him again. This time, I directed him with a completely different

motive. He put up no fight and fell onto his back, his smoldering eyes never leaving mine. I could tell he was letting me take control here.

Ryan's eyes traveled over my body, mounted above him, lingering on the places that intrigued him the most. His palms ran up and down my thighs as his eyes explored. I pressed my hands on his pecs, my finger spanning his smooth skin, feeling his warmth. I leaned down to kiss him. My hair fell from over my shoulder and curtained us as we melded our lips together.

Pulling back slightly, I whispered. "I'm ready now."

Ryan let out a soft growl from the back of his throat. "Thank God."

He effortlessly flipped us so he was back on top, asserting his dominance, and he picked up where we left off. Seating himself between my thighs, he leaned down, pressing open-mouthed kisses on both sides of my breasts, his tongue tracing along my skin. He continued down my stomach, causing my abdominal muscles to tense up as he tickled them with the prickly stubble he had on his chin. As he worked his way back up, he bit and nibbled my breasts before sucking one of my nipples in his mouth. His tongue flicked against the sensitive bud, making me squirm.

"Ryan," I moaned as he moved on to my other breast, giving it the same loving attention.

His fingers found my slit, falling into the wetness. I moaned as he shifted his finger into me, gently thrusting it. Tongue swirling around my nipple, his finger slid inside me, sending shivers down my spine to my toes.

Continuing with this pattern, he took turns between my nipples and eventually added a second finger inside of me. Ryan kissed me hard and then pulled away, moving to my ear. "Are you gonna come again for me, Bells?" he asked in a whisper, his fingers gliding in and out at a pace that made me writhe, the pleasure building with every second.

I whimpered at his words and let the sensations overwhelm me as he took me higher and higher. "That's it, pretty girl,"

Ryan encouraged. “Let me have it.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I felt my control slipping as I released and rode out my orgasm. Ryan kissed and smoothed my hair while keeping his fingers inside me, spurring more. I cried out for him when he pressed his weight against me—his chest over mine. His warmth seeped into me, causing my nipples to harden and my skin to tingle. I could feel the weight and rigidity of his erection against me as he inched forward.

I spread my legs to give him more room and gasped when I felt him settle. Ryan moaned and slid his body up and down through my folds, copying his movements from earlier. Finally, when I was on the brink of orgasm again, he pulled back and looked at me.

“Are you ready?”

I nodded fervently. Ryan closed the distance between us, settling in between my legs. The weight of him on top of me was delicious, and I felt my body getting more and more worked up with every second that passed.

“I’ll go slow. I need you to tell me if it gets too much,” he said. His voice had a husky rasp to it, laced with emotion. I bobbed my head up and down, and he kissed me again.”

I let out a pleasurable sigh as he pushed into me slowly, gently. There was a slight sting, a little discomfort at his size, but soon the pain melted into pure bliss. He noticed my shift and moved a little faster, taking me further with each thrust.

He kissed my nose, eyelids, and cheeks as he moved. Grabbing my leg, he adjusted, entering me at a different angle, which altered the sensation. I cried out as he hit the deepest part of me, now driving hard. I couldn’t hold it in anymore, and I let the wave wash over me as I came around him.

“Jesus, Bells, you feel so good,” Ryan grunted. “You’re perfect.”

“Don’t stop,” I whimpered. “Ryan, *please*.”

He didn’t.

My fingers had found their way into his hair, and I gripped him to me. My legs were wrapped around his waist, causing him to grind harder. His thrusts started getting erratic, not entirely as controlled as they were initially. I could tell he was close.

Ryan groaned, his eyes closing and brows furrowing as he gave his last few thrusts before thrusting deep into me and stilling. Burying his face in my neck, I felt him shudder and collapse. His breathing was shaky as he worked to steady his heart rate. I wrapped my arms around his back and slowly traced the ridges of his spine.

We stayed that way for a few minutes as we both came down from our highs. My mind was nothing but Ryan, replaying what had just happened over and over in my mind. The way he looked before he climaxed. The expression on his face as he kissed me and mumbled against my lips how beautiful I was. I was afraid to move, to break the enchantment.

Ryan inhaled and exhaled deeply, and then pushed himself off of me. He met my eyes with a boyish grin. “Wow,” he said.

I laughed. Wow, indeed.

He fell back against the mattress then, extending his arm and welcoming me to his side. I nestled in, resting my cheek on his chest.

This was bliss. I never wanted this moment to end.

I felt him press a kiss into my hair as I relaxed. “Was that okay?” he asked me, his voice breathy.

“Better than okay, actually.”

He chuckled and held me close to him. I smiled as I nuzzled into his chest. Tonight was perfection. I couldn't have imagined ever being in an intimate moment like this with Ryan. In fact, if someone had told me this was where we'd end up, I probably would've laughed in their face. But now, everything made sense. I was grateful Ryan was so gentle and accommodating. A few weeks ago, I never would have pegged

him for that kind of guy, but I had never been so glad to be proven wrong.

I breathed a deep sigh of contentment, letting my body relax fully into his. We didn't say much else to each other as we snuggled together in our happy little bubble. I never wanted this feeling to end.

IZABEL

THE SUNLIGHT STREAMING in through the windows was even brighter now and gently tugged me from the realm of unconsciousness. I blinked a few times, realizing as I became more aware of my surroundings that I must have dozed off. Ryan's hand stroked up and down my back. I fought off a yawn and then looked at him. He was still lying on his back, holding me close against his side as he stared up at the ceiling.

When he felt me stirring, he looked over at me, and his lips pulled into a crooked grin. "Good afternoon." His voice was husky, and it made my stomach flutter.

I stretched against him languidly and yawned with a big goofy grin spread across my face.

"Good nap?" he asked, his eyes tracing my face.

"Never better," I responded. "What were you thinking about?"

He smiled again, this one not reaching his eyes as much. "Oh, a lot of things. You being the majority."

"Good things, I hope."

"Of course," he whispered, leaning his face toward me and pressing his lips against mine. I arched into him, my body instantly responding to his. He pulled away way too soon and looked at me with concern. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

“I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t too rough on you earlier,” he said.

“No, I feel fine. You were perfect.”

“No regrets?” he asked, and I could tell he was hesitant.

I leaned impossibly closer to him and breathed him in. “Absolutely no regrets.”

He let out a relieved sigh and rested his cheek against my hair again, his arms tightening around me possessively. For the first time in, maybe *ever*, I felt like I was exactly where I belonged.

We lounged in bed together for a while longer before nature called, and I had to get up to use the restroom. By the time I had finished, Ryan was also up and dressed. He had his fishing pole in hand and was giving me a wry smirk.

“What?” I asked, amused, as I padded out of the bathroom to find my own clothes.

“You ready to learn how to fish?”

It was a miracle, but somehow, I managed to catch two fish by myself. Ryan was grateful enough to help me put the bait on the hook as I wasn’t entirely keen on sticking the earthworms he collected on the hook myself. But after that, it was all me.

Ryan and I had spent a few hours out on the dock, waiting for bites. When I had collected my two fish, we went back into the cabin to cook them up.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Ryan and I curled up for a nap in the late afternoon, only waking right when the sun was starting to set. He had suggested we make another bonfire tonight, and I readily agreed.

From my estimations, we had been out here for at least a week, and our time at the cabin was most of those days. Our day-to-day was quickly becoming routine. There wasn’t much else for us to do other than just exist out here as we waited for something to happen or for someone to find us. If we were at home or even at camp, I might’ve felt unproductive. But out

here? I wouldn't call it a vacation. We were making the most of it in whatever ways we could.

By the time the sun set, Ryan had already started a bonfire down in front of the stairs leading to the porch so we could sit. The wood crackled as the flames seeped in through the cracks, heating each log through.

I sat on the lowest stair I could so I could feel the warmth of the fire on my shins. Ryan sat next to me, tending to the logs to keep the fire going.

As night fell over the woods around us, the sounds of the forest changed. Gone were the birds that had seemed to keep us company in the day, replaced by cicadas and crickets, letting us know they were around. Though it was a different noise, it was noise nonetheless, filling the void of quietness between Ryan and myself.

"You look bored, Bells," Ryan said to me after a while of silence. "Tell me something I don't know."

I chuckled at this new game Ryan had invented. "One out of every eight Americans has worked at McDonald's at some point in their life."

He shook his head. "Nope, try again. I feel like that wasn't bizarre enough."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "What do you mean *bizarre* enough?"

"I want to know something I *don't* know. I feel like I already knew that everybody works at McDonald's."

"Do you know who Marie Curie is?" I asked him, resorting to the last autobiography I read.

"Yeah, she was the scientist lady, right?"

I rolled my eyes, not bothering to correct him on the "scientist lady" bit—he wasn't wrong, just uninformed. "Yes. Did you know that her notebooks are still radioactive from all her studies on radioactivity?"

"See, now that's what I'm talking about. And, no, I didn't know that." He looked over at me and grinned. "You're so

smart.”

I shifted in my seat from the compliment. “I just like to know things.”

“I can tell.” Ryan got up from his position and stretched his back out with a grunt. He muttered something about needing to go inside to pee, and I rolled my eyes.

When he came back outside, he had his guitar in hand and a devilish gleam in his eye. I was thankful there had at least been a few things we found inside this little cabin to keep us busy. I had a stack of dusty old books, and Ryan had the guitar he could fiddle with.

I wasn’t too proud to admit that I loved Ryan playing the guitar. He got this adorable look of concentration on his face when he started putting together different notes and chords. He had been playing this one melody over and over that I would catch myself humming throughout the day. It wasn’t a familiar song that was popular on the radio, and it made me think that Ryan wrote it himself.

As he started strumming on the strings, I let myself daze out, listening to the music and watching the flames from the fire dance into the night sky. Every once in a while, a log would crackle, shooting sparks up. I loved watching the sparks flutter around and eventually disappear.

“What are you thinking about over there?” Ryan asked me, snapping me out of my thoughts. I glanced over at the green-eyed devil and smiled.

“How do you know I was even thinking of anything?” I teased him.

He motioned to his face. “You get this little crease between your eyebrows.”

I reached over and shoved him. “Whatever! I do not!”

Ryan laughed loudly. I gave him a good look over again. How had I never seen this side of him before? The fun, easy-going boy who would throw his head back in laughter. His amusement was infectious, and I found myself laughing along with him more times than I could count.

“What are we going to do when we get back?” I asked him. My fingers twisted together in nervousness. Ever since we had slept together, my mind kept darting to what Ryan told me about his plans for college. What were we even doing together, knowing that was the outcome in the next few weeks?

I wasn't going to delude myself into thinking that we would be out here for the rest of our lives. We would get found and go back home to our regular lives. Would that mean that Ryan and I would go back to the way things were before? Or would we try to keep whatever this newfound relationship was going?

Even now, Ryan was beginning to mean more to me than I was willing to admit. It was daunting knowing we had a countdown to whatever we were starting to build with each other.

“You mean...with Princeton?”

“And Germany,” I added. I bit my bottom lip, curious as to how he would answer.

Ryan shrugged and gave me a wry grin. “I don't know, Bells. I guess we'll just figure it out when we get there.”

“How can you be so nonchalant about it?” I ask him. I couldn't believe he was being so dismissive of something so significant looming in the near future. Meanwhile, I was strung up in knots, trying to figure out how we were going to move forward.

“Cause it doesn't change anything right now,” he said, putting down his guitar so he could face me. “Does what we're doing next year change the fact that we're out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I guess not,” I said, frowning.

“Does it change how we act with each other, how we like to spend time together?” he pressed further.

“No,” I admitted, realizing where he was going with this.

He smiled again. “Okay, then. So that’s what I mean when I say we’ll figure it out when we get there. As far as we know, we’re never even leaving this god-forsaken cabin anyway.”

I grimaced. “I really hope you’re wrong on that one.”

He laughed. “Yeah, me too. Gotta admit, I’m getting pretty tired of eating catfish and canned peaches for every meal. I could go for a thick, juicy cheeseburger right about now. How about you?”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not much of a burger person. I like fried chicken sandwiches, though.”

“Those are good, too,” he said, pointing at me. “Can’t go wrong.”

I laughed under my breath and watched as he returned his guitar to his lap and plucked a few of the strings.

“Do you think they’re still looking for us?” I asked after a beat of silence.

Ryan glanced at me, and then took a deep breath. “I sure hope so.”

“I want to go home,” I whispered into the darkness. I knew he heard me because his shoulders slumped.

“Yeah, me too.”

He went back to strumming on his guitar, playing a slower, sadder tune now than the one he had been working on before. The song was melancholy personified, and it made my eyes burn. I tried my hardest to fight off the emotion welling deep inside of me, but I couldn’t keep a few tears from escaping down my cheeks.

My mind was rapidly running through scenarios, wondering how much longer we were going to be out here—a few days, a few weeks? Heaven forbid anything longer than that.

“Come here, Bells,” Ryan said.

I should’ve known he would notice. He held out his arm for me, and I shuffled over, accepting his warm embrace as

comfort. Resting my head against his shoulder, I breathed him in.

“Sorry.”

Ryan shifted underneath me, and I knew he was moving his head to look at me better. “Sorry for what?”

“Being so emotional.”

He barked a laugh. “I’d honestly be more worried if you weren’t emotional. We’ve kind of been put through the wringer.”

“Now we’ll never run out of stories to tell at parties,” I tried to joke, but another few tears slipped out of the corner of my eye.

We sat together for a while, watching as our fire began to dwindle. Ryan had thrown our last log of the evening on, and it was quickly dissolving into fiery red embers. His hand continued to run up and down my back as we sat contently with each other.

Ryan tilted his head toward our little bonfire. “Our fire’s going out. Want to head inside?”

“Okay,” I agreed, standing up from my seat on the stairs.

Before I had the chance to walk up onto the porch, Ryan grabbed my hand, halting my movements. His fingers threaded through mine as he pulled me back. I turned to face him, stopping short when I registered the way he was looking at me.

My breath caught in my throat, and my chest felt tight. “What?”

“You’re beautiful, Bells,” he said to me quietly after hesitating only a moment. Carefully, his other hand rose to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. Before I could say another word, he leaned forward and kissed me. His lips parted against mine, and he devoured me, his tongue exploring, tasting. I moved with him, following his lead.

My confidence grew as each second passed, and I started to take from him just as much as he took from me. I arched my

back, pressing my body against his as much as possible. Ryan's fingers traced over my hipbones before gripping me and pulling me into him, diminishing any space that was left between us.

Time seemed to melt away. I'm not sure how long we stood there mauling each other, but eventually, he pulled back. My body was tingling from the stimulation, and my chest rose and fell as I tried to level my breathing. Slowly, his eyes met mine once he, too, had centered himself again.

Something about the way he kissed me tonight felt—different.

I wasn't sure in what capacity, but it was different than when he kissed me the first time or even all of the other times that followed. Maybe it was just being more comfortable around each other, based on our situation or on the fact that we only had each other out here. Whatever it was, though, had something twisting tightly in my stomach and uneasiness settling over me.

As if Ryan could sense this feeling within me, he placed his finger under my chin, drawing my gaze up to him as he traced my face with his eyes. A small worry line formed in between his eyebrows as he studied me. "What's wrong?" he finally asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing," I said, maybe too quickly. "I think I'm just tired." The worry line deepened, but he didn't press it.

Together, we walked into the cabin. We both took turns showering, washing away the lingering smoke from our fire before crawling into bed. Ryan opened his arms for me, and I cuddled against him, wondering if that tight feeling in my chest would ever subside.

I felt Ryan tilt his head to press a kiss into my hair. I closed my eyes and leaned into him, relaxing against his body as his arms tightened around me.

My question about what would happen once we made it back slammed back into my brain, but I did my best to quiet it

just for tonight. Even if Ryan and I became complete strangers after we graduated and moved on to college, at least I would have these quiet moments to look back on.

I didn't know what would happen next, but I knew I was happy right here, right now, with his arms around me.

RYAN

THE DAYS STARTED to pass even slower than they had before. I was close to losing track of the number of days we had been out here, away from camp. If I had to guess, I'd say it's been the better part of a week and a half. It had been a monotonous schedule of waking up together and then passing the hours of the day out at the dock or lounging on the cabin porch. A part of me was starting to worry that we hadn't been found yet. I suspected that when we veered off the kayak course, we had gotten pushed farther away than we had initially thought.

I knew there was an infinite number of miles within these mountains that the search parties would have to scour to find us, which is why, originally, we thought being close to the river would help. But still, no one had come.

Deep down, I was starting to get worried. We had done a decent job of staying fed and hydrated—thank goodness the cabin had clean running water. The canned goods in the pantry were starting to wane as the days passed. We still had a number of cans of baked beans, peaches, and green beans, though, which could hold us over if we rationed them. If we had to stay out here longer, we definitely could, but that wasn't the ideal situation.

My side was healing up nicely. Though it still looked gruesome, it was barely hurting me anymore, unless I put it under a lot of strain. Each night I would lay in bed and try to come up with some kind of plan to help speed up this process of getting us out of there.

“God, it is so hot,” she said, fanning herself with her hand. We were sitting out on the dilapidated porch, lounging in the heat of the summer sun.

I looked over at her. She was sprawled out on the wooden planks. The hem of her t-shirt was rolled up just under her breasts, so most of her abdomen was showing. It really was hotter than Hades out today.

“I have an idea,” I said, my voice taking on a conspiratorial tone.

Izabel looked at me warily, like she didn't trust where I was taking this conversation. “What is it?”

I held out my hand for her. To my immense pleasure, she took it, following my lead. Together, we walked out of the cabin and down to the dock. Izabel looked at me in confusion. “What are we doing out here? I thought we decided it was too hot out today.”

“Yeah, to just sit around in the sun,” I said. I reached for the waistband of my shorts and started pushing them down my hips.

Izabel's eyebrows shot up, and she backed away. “Ryan, what are you doing?”

I laughed at the panic in her voice. “What? It's not like you haven't seen me naked already.”

“Yeah, but not in the light of day, geez,” she said, making a big show of covering her eyes with her hand.

“Come on, Bells. I thought it would be fun to do a little skinny dipping,” I said, still laughing. I didn't waste any more time traumatizing her with my nudity, choosing to jump off the dock into the water.

Perfect. It felt so good. No better way to beat the heat of the day.

When she heard the splash, Izabel dropped her hands and looked out at the pond. She walked to the end of the dock and put her hands on her hips. Whipping my wet hair out of my eyes, I grinned at her.

“Come on, scaredy cat. The water is perfect.”

“You know I’m not that good of a swimmer,” she protested.

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I got in first. Come on, I’ll catch you. It’s not even that deep.”

“It only takes one inch of water to drown, you know.”

“You’re being dramatic,” I said to her as I swam through the water a bit. “Just take your clothes off and get in.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. I held her stare as I continued to swim around. I could see the sweat beading on her forehead. Finally, she gave in and lifted her shirt off of her torso, followed quickly by her shorts.

My mouth went dry when she stood at the edge of the dock, stark naked. “Now what?”

“Jump in,” I instructed her.

She laughed humorlessly. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay, here, I’ll jump in with you.”

“No, I don’t think—” she started to protest again, but I didn’t give her a chance to finish. I propelled myself out of the pond and onto the dock. Izabel’s face turned bright red, and she made a massive effort to not look at my naked body. I tried to give her the same courtesy, but her body was beautiful, and I couldn’t help but appreciate her delicate curves.

“Here, take my hand. We’ll do it together,” I said, holding my hand out for her.

Begrudgingly, she took it as she grumbled, “I hate you.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” I teased.

“Yes, yes, I do. I hate you so very much,” she said between gritted teeth. I held her hand and led her over to the dock.

“How much?” I asked, playing along.

“So much I can’t even put it into words!” she huffed at me. “It’s not even hate that I feel toward you. It’s loathing. I loathe you, Ryan Miller!”

I laughed full-on now. “Really? That’s a shame, ’cause I definitely don’t loathe you.”

I didn’t give her a chance to process what the hell that meant because I pulled on her hand. “On the count of three: one, two...three!”

Hand in hand, we jumped into the water. Izabel popped up first, sputtering and wiping at her eyes. She looked around for me, relief flooding her features when her gaze landed on me. My heart skipped a beat at the way she looked at me. I’m not sure if she even realized the intimacy that existed now between us, the camaraderie, but I sure did.

“So, now what?”

I grinned at her. “Now, we learn how to swim.” I took her hands and carefully pulled her out farther into the pond. It wasn’t deep by any means, only coming halfway up my chest.

“I know how to swim. I’m just not good at it,” she argued.

I rolled my eyes. “Same thing. I’m not gonna have you ever feel like you’re not capable of getting yourself out of a dangerous situation again. So we’re gonna make sure you know how to swim.”

Izabel tried to keep herself from panicking as the water inched higher on her torso. I instructed her to focus on my hands. She had her eyes glued to mine the whole time as I led her out.

“Okay, first thing’s first. Do you know how to float on your back?” I asked her. She shook her head. “Well, then I think that’s where we’ll start. Here, let me hold you.”

Wrapping my hands around her waist, I lifted her until her feet were no longer touching the bottom. I leaned her back so the back of her head barely brushed the water’s surface.

“Okay, now I’m going to lean you back all the way. You’ll feel it over your ears, but you’re going to be fine.”

“Alright,” she responded, her voice shaky.

I gave her an encouraging smile. “Don’t worry, Bells. I got you. Just relax.”

I helped her lean back even more into the water. Her eyes were wide as she stared up at the sky. My hand stayed rooted firmly on her lower back, ensuring she didn't sink, while my other hand moved her arms out so they were extended against the surface of the water.

As she floated by herself, I couldn't stop appreciating how beautiful she looked. Her warm brunette hair spread out through the water, looking like silk. Her eyes reflected against the blue of the sky, somehow making them look even more striking. Her breasts were only half covered by the water, peeking out of the surface, and her nipples pebbled in a way that made my mouth water.

She was breathtaking.

I let her float, supporting her until she felt secure enough to do it herself. Finally, I could see the confidence returning to her shoulders. I loved seeing her strength in action.

After she had mastered floating, we touched base on the technique of treading water. That was a little more complicated, so I eventually agreed we could return to it when she continued to protest. Izabel showed me that she was capable of doing the doggy paddle, which helped put my mind at ease. I decided that we would come back to learn more advanced swimming strokes later. She was having fun now, and I didn't want to ruin that with more homework.

Izabel had started a splashing war, but I had ended it when I sent a massive tidal wave her way. Even though I knew I'd face her wrath for doing such a thing, it was worth it. The expression on her face made me laugh, and soon she followed my lead. We swam around the lake for a good part of the afternoon, enjoying each other's company and the cooling effect of the water.

Finally, I called it a day when we were both tired, and our fingers were wrinkled like prunes. We climbed back up onto the dock to spread out against the warm wood and let the sun dry off the remaining water over our bodies.

I sprawled out flat against the boards, tucking my arms behind my head and closing my eyes. Izabel shuffled around

in her position, but then finally settled. I turned my head and peeked at her. She was sitting cross-legged but leaning back with her arms braced against the docks, her face turned up toward the sun.

As if she could feel my eyes on her, she looked over and smiled. “What are you doing over there?”

I smirked. “Oh, nothing, just thinking about how you look like a Picasso painting sitting in the sun.”

She sat a little straighter and couldn’t help the laugh that slipped through her lips. “A Picasso painting? Do you know how Picasso painted people?”

“No,” I lied. Of course, I knew, but I committed to the bit. “But I assume they weren’t as pretty as you.”

She rolled her eyes and lay down on her back. “You make me laugh, Ryan Miller.”

I rolled over on my side, propping my head in my hand, now right beside her. She watched me as I studied her face for a minute before I tilted my head forward and captured her lips in a kiss. Instantly reciprocating, she kissed me back fervently.

“I thought you loathed me,” I murmured between kisses. I pulled away slightly and nuzzled my nose with hers. “Thought you cursed the ground I walked on.”

She rolled onto her side until we faced each other and then hooked her leg over my hip. I responded by placing my hand on her lower back, urging her closer to me so our bodies were pressed together. Her eyes were sincere when they met mine. They had a softness I hadn’t seen since we were tangled together in the cabin.

My lips found hers again. She met me halfway with the same intensity that I brought. I moaned low in my chest, a raspy sound that had her pressing into me even more, desperate for me. She let out her own breathy sigh. I *loved* it when Bells moaned against me. My hands explored the length of her body, caressing her smooth legs, then up to cup the side of her jawbone.

My other hand splayed across her back, gently applying pressure to bring her closer. Izabel's breasts pressed against my chest, her firm nipples rubbing my skin and driving me mad. Her fingers trailed over my back and around my ribs. I traced the small of her back, and she arched into me.

I groaned again but pulled away from her, resting my forehead on hers. Her eyes were squeezed shut as she focused on my breathing. Giving a big sigh, I kissed her one more time.

“Come on, let's head inside.”

Her eyes snapped open, and she gave me a questioning look. “Why?”

“I'm all for skinny dipping, but I'm not about to fuck you out here and make you get splinters all over from this dock,” I told her honestly. Her cheeks turned a bright red, and I knew it wasn't from the heat of the sun. “So let's go inside.” I held out my hand, and she took it without protest.

We grabbed our clothes, and I led her back to the cabin. As soon as we were inside, I shut the door behind us and gave her a hungry look. She squirmed under my gaze. Her lips twitched, and her eyelids hooded.

“Now,” I said as I prowled toward her. “Where were we?”

IZABEL

LATE THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Ryan strolled into the cabin and gave me a knowing smile, and I blushed. This morning I woke up to him on top of me, peppering light kisses on my face, trying to rouse me. When my eyes finally fluttered open, they met his smoldering green ones. There was a heat in Ryan's eyes that I hadn't seen before as he looked down at me, which made my belly feel like Jell-O.

He made sure to give me a proper good morning as he pressed his weight into me and kissed me feverishly. The feel of Ryan's body against mine had me thinking all kinds of dirty thoughts as I got lost in him. I knew he knew what I thought as he kissed me because he moaned into my mouth when my body instinctively arched up into his. The sound ignited something deep within me, and I pressed myself closer, unhappy with the thought of any space between us.

Eventually, we tore ourselves away. Ryan showered quickly before running out of the cabin to find food. That left me alone, imagining all the pleasurable things I wanted to do with him.

I had never been so drawn to a person before. Never in a million years would I have imagined I'd be feeling this way toward Ryan Miller, but here we were. I couldn't get him out of my head.

For the first time, I finally understood what the big deal was about being infatuated with someone. I found myself counting down the minutes—though I had no real way to tell time—until he would return.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Ryan walked in through the cabin door, shooting me a wide, boyish smile before making his way over to the table where I was sitting and pulling out a chair. Before he sat down, he kissed the top of my head, sending tingles straight down my spine. Maybe it was the way my breath hitched when he drew near or the warm flush that appeared on my cheeks the minute I saw him, but he, for sure, knew that he had been on my mind all day.

“Heya, Bells,” he murmured against my hair. Once he sat down, he grabbed one of my hands and stared at me. “So, I’ve been thinking.”

My heart stuttered. “Thinking about what?” I asked, my voice breaking.

“It’s probably time that we take matters into our own hands. It’s not looking like they’re going to find us.” He shook his head and frowned. “I don’t know if we’re just too far from the river that they haven’t been able to see the cabin or what. But I think I should try to follow the river back to see if I can find the camp.” He watched me warily as he said this, as if gauging my reaction.

“But we don’t know how far it is. What if we get lost or attacked or something?”

Ryan pressed his lips together and squeezed my hand. “That’s why I said *I* should go.”

I was quiet for a moment as I tried to understand what he was telling me. Did he want to leave me here? Panic started to set in. My heart was starting to drum a little bit faster, and I could feel the palm of my hand getting clammy. However, Ryan held on to it with a firm grip, not caring if I got sweat all over him. Even though anger was rising within me, I appreciated his hand in mine, grounding me.

“What about me?”

His eyes were serious as he measured how to deliver the blow I suspected was coming. “I think it would be better for you to stay here.”

I pushed my chair back and stood up abruptly. “Alone?” He gave a slight nod, and I scowled at him. “What makes you think that would be a good idea?”

Ryan stood up now too. He stayed where he was by the table, obviously trying not to get in my space. “Just hear me out, Bells,” he pleaded, reaching his hand out to me.

I crossed my arms and glared at him. Then a horrifying thought occurred to me. My stomach sank, and my blood turned to ice. All rational thought left my head as my fight-or-flight instincts were activated. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

He dropped his hand back to his side as he watched me with wide, alarmed eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“You were going to leave me here! Leave me under the impression that you would find help and then not come back.” I heard him snort from across the room, but I was on a roll now. “Make me start to have feelings for you,” I paused and pointed at him, “other than *hate*. And then use those feelings to get exactly what you wanted this whole time!”

I paced back and forth on the already worn wooden floor. This was *so* like Ryan. I couldn’t believe I had let my guard down with him. Now that I saw it, it was so apparent that this was his plan. He would leave me here in the cabin while he went to find help. Then, instead of bringing them back to get me, he would be lauded as a survivor and soak up the attention.

Then he wouldn’t have to worry about me anymore. I would be trapped out here forever, and slowly everyone would forget I even existed.

“Bells, don’t be ridiculous. I would never—”

“Never what?” I shot back at him. “Have you suddenly forgotten all the horrible things you’ve done to me in the past? ’Cause I haven’t. What’s one more big hurrah to add to the scorecard?”

He took a few long strides until he was right before me. “You’re being irrational, Izabel. Take a deep breath and calm

down.”

I shook my head furiously as he grabbed my shoulders to keep me in place. “Actually, I think I’m finally starting to think clearly again.”

It made sense to me. He would butter me up, finally get me to soften toward him, and let him in. Then I, thinking we had something going for us, would trust him to the point that I would agree with everything he said, and then he would leave me. Alone. In the woods. This was all my fault. I shouldn’t have fallen for his charm.

Stupid, stupid Izabel.

“You really think I would abandon you like that? After everything we’ve been through?” he asked me incredulously, and I shrugged.

“The jury’s still out on you.”

Ryan gave an exasperated sigh. “Look, you said how badly you wanted to be home the other night, and that got me thinking.”

“Thinking that you’d up and leave without inviting me?”

“You have no shoes, Izabel!” Ryan finally lost his cool and raised his voice to match mine. “Or have you forgotten that fact?”

I looked down at my feet, and then back up to him with a glare. “So?”

“So!” He groaned and dug his fingers through his hair. “So? So you can’t walk for a million miles because you’d tear up your feet. And I can’t carry you that far!”

My arms folded against my chest again. “Are you saying I’m too heavy?”

Ryan covered his face with his hands and swore. “No! Jesus, what is wrong with you today?” He took a few minutes to calm down before returning to me. “I can’t carry you because I’ll tear open my side again. And I’m no good to either you or myself if I bleed out.”

I was staring daggers at him, and I could feel the sting of tears threatening. I was so upset. “So what, you just want to leave me, and I’ll sit here like a princess in a tower waiting for your grand arrival? Should I be expecting a white horse, or...?” I trailed off.

He looked at me with an expression that screamed that he thought I was going insane. Well, the joke was on him. I wasn’t about to be made a fool of. Again. With a dramatic sigh, he fell back into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

“You know what? Forget I said anything.”

“Fine!” I fired back at him and spun on my heel.

“Fine!” he shouted back, throwing his hands in the air. “Where are you going?”

“None of your business!” I needed to get out of this cabin. Stomping to the door, I threw it open, letting it slam behind me. I bolted down the steps, noticing that Ryan wasn’t attempting to follow me. Good. I was tired of seeing his irritating, handsome face anyway.

I was fired up. What kind of stupid, idiotic idea was that? Ryan must’ve known I wouldn’t have been okay with his grand plan. He didn’t think I could do it; that must have been it. He thought I would just slow him down.

And to think I was starting to change my mind about him. This is how he repays me. Ugh!

I marched through the woods, wondering where I was headed. I went opposite the pond and toward where we initially came from all those days ago. Ten days. I had been stuck out here with my arch-nemesis for ten days. It was no wonder I was starting to go bat-shit crazy. Somehow Ryan had convinced me that he actually was a decent guy, only to turn around and pull a stunt like this. I had to get out of here. I had to go home.

My heart was still racing as I stormed toward wherever I was going. I noticed the ground was rougher out here than it was near our cabin. Ryan had cleared a path from the house to

the stream so I could join him while he fished. The ground was smooth there. Out here, it was rocky and rough, and I could feel the bottom of my feet protesting with every step.

Maybe he was right. I had only been throwing this tantrum for what, fifteen minutes? And I was already complaining about my bare feet. No way would I have been able to walk miles like this.

But that still didn't excuse his wanting to *leave* me! I thought we had become a team. I was under the impression that we did things together. I guess not.

I knew the immense feeling of betrayal I was dealing with came from the shift that had happened as Ryan and I started to grow closer. It was like once those sinful lips touched mine, I was a goner. It hurt to think he may have just been using me as a distraction. I couldn't focus on the hurt I felt, though. I had to focus on the anger.

But I couldn't. Whenever I tried to stay angry at him, I kept coming back to all the fantastic moments we had had together in the last few days—waking up with him every morning, falling asleep to his deep murmurs every night. The light kisses he would place on my nose would make me laugh. It started to become harder to think that he would do anything purposefully to hurt me. At least now.

As I sorted out my thoughts and put some space between us, I concluded that *maybe* I had overreacted. Unquestionably, Ryan would have come back. He was just thinking of me and what would be the best way to get us back home. My feet finally stopped moving, and I stood there, surrounded by the forest. The woods were silent, aside from birds chirping and squirrels rummaging in the leaves.

I spun around in a circle, trying to see anything to tell me where I was. Nothing but trees and more trees. How long had I been walking? It surely hadn't been that long. Which way was the cabin?

Maybe this way? I started walking back in the direction I was pretty sure I had come from, but it didn't look familiar.

This was bad. This was very, very bad. I kept going; if I stopped, I would be a sitting duck, which was even worse.

For the second time so far that day, I felt panic setting in. What if I couldn't find the cabin again? I would be lost out in the woods, and someone would finally see the cabin and rescue Ryan. And I would be out here, in the middle of nowhere.

I started to run, ignoring the acorns and rocks getting lodged in my foot. As adrenaline pumped through my body, every other care seemed to disappear. I had to get back to the cabin, back to Ryan. I ran as hard as I could. My lungs felt like they were going to explode, and my foot would probably have to be amputated when this was all said and done. The trees were blurring in my peripheral vision. I had no idea where I was going, but I hoped with everything in me that it was the right way.

It was getting to the point where I felt like I couldn't go any farther. My legs were on fire, and I could barely breathe. My strides were wobbly, and I swayed to either side as I ran. My foot struck a root or a rock or something, and I pitched forward toward the ground. I caught my fall with my hands, but still landed harshly.

I lay on the ground for a while, glad no one was around to see that graceful maneuver. I took stock of my body to make sure nothing was severely injured. I didn't see any blood. Pushing myself onto my hands and knees, I grabbed hold of a tree branch to my left.

I nearly collapsed again when I tried to put weight on my feet. White-hot pain shot through my right foot. Great. I was on my hands and knees again, trying to catch my breath.

But I tried again, only to be met with the same results. This was bad. There was only one thing that I could do at this point. Pride be damned.

I screamed Ryan's name.

RYAN

I WATCHED the cabin door slam behind Izabel as she stormed out. My head fell into my hands as I replayed the argument we had just had. I was a moron. Why would I ever consider that I could leave her out here? I swear my intentions were good, but I was definitely in the wrong on this one.

Where was she even going? I stood up and walked to the window, where I could see Bells stomping off into the woods. I debated going after her, but decided against it. She didn't want to be around me right now. That was fine. We would talk it out when she was ready.

Honestly, I wasn't expecting her to react that way when I initially came up with the plan. I heard the urgency in her voice when she said she wanted to go home. She wouldn't have been able to make the trip without her shoes. The ground was gravel, sharp and pointy. I couldn't carry her—not because she was *too heavy*. Jesus, I had never heard anything more ridiculous.

I tried not to think about the weight that had formed in my chest at the thought of her being angry with me. Before this mess, it would've been whatever. But now, she was my partner. She was the only one I had out here. I wanted to be everything to her, like she was quickly becoming everything to me.

As soon as we got out of there, I was determined to make sure she knew how I felt about her. This wasn't over when we got back home. I wasn't ready to let her go yet. I don't know if

I would ever be ready. I wanted to explore where this new relationship could go.

I was obsessed with everything, Izabel. I found myself searching for reasons to make her smile, just to see the way her lips curved up in the corners, or how she scrunched her nose when she laughed at something I did. I loved how she made little mouse noises when she slept or pulled me close to her when she was dreaming. Oh, I would kill to know what she dreamed about. I hoped it was me. The more time I spent with her, the more I found a million other reasons that made her even more appealing to me.

My hands drummed against the table as I waited for her to return. Where was she? I glanced at the clock. She had been gone a while. I didn't think she would have been out this long. Standing up, I went to the door, putting my hands on my hips. My eyes scanned the woods that lay outside the cabin.

Then I heard it.

A shrill scream echoed into the cabin and immediately had my heart racing. Before I even had time to think, I was bolting out the door and toward the blood-curdling sound. There was no doubt in my mind that it was Izabel. Who else could it have been? We were in the middle of goddamned nowhere.

"Izabel!" I yelled. I was desperate to hear her again, unsure of which direction to head. I scanned the area closest to the cabin quickly, but didn't see any sign of her.

I heard her scream my name, and I took off in that direction. I kept calling for her, and she kept calling back. Christ, she had gone a long way. I ran toward her, keeping my mind mostly on her but also on which way I was going so we didn't get lost going back.

And then I saw her. She was crumpled in a heap, her hand holding on to her ankle, which looked like it was swelling. I sprinted to her and crouched down low. My hand found her cheek, and I turned her face so her blue eyes met mine. I could see the tears welling in the bottom of her eyes, tearing at my heart.

“Baby, it’s okay. I’m here,” I told her, my voice sounding thick. “What hurts?”

Her eyes darted to her foot. “I think I twisted my ankle. Or it might be broken. I can’t walk on it.” I nodded. That would have to wait until we got back to the cabin. I wasn’t about to play doctor out here. Though, playing doctor with Izabel did have an exciting allure.

But once that was settled, I couldn’t help the bubble of anger and fear that rushed over me then. “Did you lose your damn mind, Izabel?” I growled. “What were you thinking?”

Her lower lip trembled, and she looked at the ground. “I’m sorry. I was just so mad and had to get out of there. I didn’t realize I went that far until it was too late.”

I took a deep breath and calmed myself. This wasn’t the time. As long as she was safe, the rest didn’t matter. But I had to *get* her safe.

“Okay, I know, it’s okay, baby,” I murmured as I scooped my arms around her, careful not to jostle her foot too much. I didn’t know how bad it was and didn’t want to make it worse. She grunted as I hoisted her up against my chest. I could feel my wound protesting, but I swallowed down my discomfort. She needed me. That’s all that mattered right now.

I carried her back in silence. She didn’t say a word to me, probably in too much pain or embarrassed for getting herself in a less-than-ideal situation. I was still trying to overcome the frustration and worry I had felt. We were a little dysfunctional.

When the cabin came back into view, I felt her body sag in my arms in relief. Being careful not to jostle her too much, I set her on the edge of our bed and bent down to get a good look at her ankle. She jumped when I wrapped my hand around it. It was swollen, but not too bad. I didn’t notice any significant bruising.

“Let me know if this hurts,” I instructed, my voice softening. My eyes met hers, and she nodded, understanding.

With gentle movements, I maneuvered her ankle through its range of motion, slowly but then more confidently, as I

noticed it wasn't restricted. She winced a little here and there with specific movements, but nothing drastic. My fingers prodded along the top and bottom of her foot, testing out the bones to ensure there was no fracture.

I was improvising. I had no idea what I was doing, and I wasn't a bone doctor. But it felt right, so I did it anyway. I think I had seen an athletic trainer do this to a fallen soccer player on TV once.

"I don't think it's broken," I told her with a sigh, letting her foot go and standing up. I walked to the bathroom sink drawer and pulled out our bottle of ibuprofen. Shaking out four, I handed them to her to take. We were blowing through this ibuprofen like no one's business. She dry swallowed them, grimacing as they went down.

I took my place on the floor again and put my chin in my hands as I watched her. She looked at me warily, no doubt bracing herself for my wrath. I was too worn out to fight.

Instead, I pushed onto my knees and got as close to her as possible. She was still sitting on the edge of the mattress, so I wedged apart her knees, being careful of her foot. I fit myself between her legs. I could feel her heat seeping into my chest. My arms wound around her waist, pulling her closer until her forehead was resting against mine.

"Don't you *ever* do that again," I nearly growled at her. "I mean it, Bells. I couldn't bear it if something happened to you."

She made a slightly strangled noise that nearly broke me. My eyes met hers, and I pushed myself up, further claiming her mouth with mine. The kiss was heated. I conveyed everything I had felt that afternoon and took everything she gave me back. She kissed me fervently, her arms finding their way around my neck as she pressed closer.

I pulled away from her mouth and kissed down her neck, noticing that her breath hitched as I got to the divot of her collarbone. She gasped as my lips explored, her fingers pulling at the back of my neck on the short hair.

“Ryan,” she sighed. “I’m sorry. I guess I just panicked.”

I leaned away and frowned at her. “About what?” She wouldn’t meet my eyes, as if she was ashamed of how she was feeling. I wasn’t having that, so I placed my fingers under her chin and drew her gaze to mine. “Tell me.”

Izabel let out a resigned sigh. “I felt like we were going back to how things were before. Like everything that has happened out here between us didn’t matter anymore because you wanted to leave me out here.” I opened my mouth to protest, but she cut me off. “I know it’s irrational and that I should trust you like you asked me to, but my doubts got the best of me.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. “I would *never* abandon you like that. It doesn’t matter if we’re friends or enemies. We’re a team now. I would have come back for you. I will *always* come back for you. Do you understand?”

She nodded slowly, and her eyelids fluttered closed. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

I exhaled through my nose and then leaned in to kiss her beautiful lips again. “Shh, I know. I’m sorry too.” Izabel leaned into me, arching her back as I kissed her.

I stood up, not breaking our contact, and wrapped my arm around her back, shifting her so she was lying flat on the bed. Her head rested on our pillow, and I positioned myself on top of her as I kissed her senselessly. She felt so good pressed against me; I could hardly take it. Her hands were roaming my back, my chest, and my arms. I shivered as her fingers danced over my skin. My shorts were becoming unbearably tight. I needed to be inside of her. The overwhelming urge to be as close to her as possible was consuming me.

“Mmm,” I hummed against her neck. “I want you so bad, Bells.”

Izabel shivered at my words. Her hands paused only briefly before she whispered, “Then take me.”

I leaned my head back until we were face to face again. My heart had jump-started, and I felt my crotch tighten even

more as pressure built low in my stomach at the prospect of what she was offering.

Ever since we started having sex, she was about all I could think about. I felt like I could never get enough of her, and every time we finished, I was ready to go again. I'm sure it didn't help that there wasn't much else to occupy our time out here. But every time she cuddled up next to me, all I could imagine was the way my body would feel against hers.

I didn't waste any more time, closing the distance between us and kissing her as though my life depended on it. It didn't matter what happened as long as we were together. Before we started this stupid camp this summer, I was counting the days until it was over, and we never had to bother with each other again, but now?

Now, I couldn't imagine life without her.

Our next steps were still so undecided, knowing that we both had different plans for after graduation. But I did know that I was willing to try to make it work with her. I didn't want to risk losing her now that I knew what it was like to have her.

Izabel's hands roamed over my body, tugging at my shorts and pushing them down my hips. I followed her lead, working to get rid of the clothes between us. She moaned when my hands cupped her breasts, gently playing with her nipples and strumming them until they were stiff.

Her hand covered my cock, stroking it firmly, knowing exactly how I liked it. Even though we had only been together this short time, I couldn't imagine doing this with anyone else.

"Fuck, Bells," I groaned when she stroked me harder. "You drive me fucking crazy."

I pushed her back on the mattress, and she spread her legs wide, letting me know she wanted more. Capturing her lips again, I ground my body against hers, making sure she was ready.

I was just about to enter her when the cabin door swung open, hitting the side of the house and forcing our heads to

snap toward the commotion. A scraggly older man stood in the doorway. He was tall and slender, with a white beard reaching down to his chest. I would almost say he was more surprised to see us. Almost.

“Who in the Sam Hill are you two?”

IZABEL

HIS NAME WAS MAC.

Mac Stevenson.

He owned the little cabin that had become our home for the last week and a half. He used the house for weekend and hunting getaways, so it wasn't his full-time residence. We would have met him, eventually. Though we were grateful to finally have been rescued, I'm sure I spoke for Ryan, too, when I said we would have preferred literally any other time.

So, instead of spending another day out in our little cabin together, we sat side by side in a worn-down pickup truck as the older man drove us back to camp. Once Ryan and I had scrambled to get our clothes on, we attempted to explain why we were in his house. Mac listened to our story with rapt attention and a solemn frown, understanding the gravity of the situation. Thankfully, he was more than willing to get us back to Camp Wildwood right away and out of his cabin under one condition.

“Now, if I send you back, you all need to learn a few things about boundaries,” he grumbled at us. “Don't go waltzing into people's vacation homes and make it some personal love shack, you hear?”

Ryan and I had both blushed furiously at that. I was sure I would be blushing about this whole encounter for the rest of my life. Despite our utter embarrassment, we mumbled apologies and agreements, and he hustled us out of his residence and into his old green Ford.

It was a classic truck cab with bench seats, so we were nice and cozy. I was smashed in the middle between Mac and Ryan. With every jostle of the truck, I had the option to fall into Mac or lean into Ryan. I chose the latter of the two for apparent reasons. Even still, every few minutes, my eyes darted over to look at Ryan, who seemed not to be paying an ounce of attention to me. His face was turned toward the window for our entire ride—his jaw clenched tight, and his hands balled into fists in his lap.

An uncomfortable sense of uncertainty settled in my stomach, and I twisted my hands in my lap, trying not to overthink it. I was sure Ryan was just upset about getting interrupted. I agreed it was pretty mortifying, but his radio silence was almost worse. I kept turning over thoughts in my brain, which I knew were all anxiety-driven and not based on rationale.

Now everything felt awkward. What if we made it back to camp and Ryan didn't want to be friends anymore? I worried that we would go back to Wildwood and our friends, and he would want things to return to what they were before. He would go back to his pranks and jokes, and I would go back to hating him. If hating him was even possible now.

I glanced at him again, watching his golden hair fly back from the breeze through the open window. I didn't think I could ever go back to hating him as I did before. I knew him too well by this point. He had become everything to me in the past week. But what if I didn't mean everything to him?

The truck ambled along the road. Almost as though Ryan could hear my inner monologue and turmoil, he finally reached over and grabbed my hand. His fingers gently smoothed out my own, allowing me to release my clenched fists. He still didn't look over at me, but his hand squeezed mine reassuringly. Even though I still had no idea what he was thinking, the small gesture helped put my mind at ease, at least a bit.

As we drove along, I concluded that it was a good thing Ryan hadn't tried to walk this road to search for help. We had already been in the car for almost an hour, and from my

occasional glances at the speedometer, we weren't going slow. Mac chattered away—apparently no longer feeling the awkwardness of finding us in the throes of passion—asking us questions here and there that Ryan didn't bother to answer. Mac tried to engage us, I'm sure to fill any of the uncomfortable silence. But it wasn't working.

After what felt like eons, the old truck finally crept up to the gates of Camp Wildwood. As soon as the car stopped, Ryan threw open the door and hopped out. He turned and offered me his hand, helping me out too.

It was almost like we were royalty making our grand appearance. Within minutes, counselors, headmasters, and our friends swarmed us. Emergency services had been called and were on their way. Our parents were notified to meet us at the hospital. Our classmates hugged us and asked for all the information about what had happened. It was chaos.

“Everyone back up! NOW!” A familiar blonde pushed through the crowd as she walked toward us. Her boyfriend followed closely behind her. “Move!”

She shoved everyone who got in her way until she was right in front of me. Juliet looked over at me once and then over to Ryan. “Damn, what the hell happened to you guys?”

Ryan and I glanced at each other and shared a small smile before I turned back to Jules. “You really don't want to know.”

“Uh,” she started as she held up her finger. “Wrong. You will tell me everything one way or the other.”

I hugged Jules, and she handed me my phone and wallet that I had left in our dorm before the kayak trip. Ryan was able to high-five and bro-hug his two best friends before we were ushered away into the counselors' offices. Ryan stayed beside me, offering me support as I hobbled in. My still-swollen ankle was proving to be a bit of an issue. Once we made it, we were instructed to wait for the paramedics to show up. We probably wouldn't see our friends again until they finished camp. They still had a few days left. It was funny; at the beginning of the summer, I would have done anything to not be at camp, and now all I wanted was to be here. With Ryan.

The counselors left us in a small room with a couch and a TV. They made sure to bring us snacks and bottles of water while we waited. Ryan flopped down on the sofa right away. His head fell against the back of the couch, his eyes closing almost immediately. I stood in the middle of the room, unsure where to go. Did I sit with him? Maybe he wanted his space after being forced to be together for so long. There were a few chairs on the other side of the room I could sit in.

“Come here, Bells,” he murmured, his eyes closed, but his arm outstretched toward me. “Stop overthinking everything.”

I took a deep breath, feeling some of my stress leaving my body at his invitation. I took his hand. It felt warm in my own, steady. Wordlessly, he dragged me onto the couch, where I nestled into his side, my head resting on his chest. He kissed my hair before laying his cheek on top of my head.

A few moments later, he broke the silence. “What’s on your mind, pretty girl?” His voice was a soft rumble against my cheek.

I sighed and leaned back to look at him. “People are going to talk. They’ll think we snuck off on purpose or something along those lines. I’m sure everyone is already gossiping about us.”

“So what?” He shrugged. “Let them. Their opinions mean nothing.” He kissed my forehead. “The only opinion I care about is yours.”

A soft smile formed on my lips as I leaned back against him, accepting his warmth. “Yeah, I guess so.”

We lay together like that for about half an hour before the commotion began again. The paramedics rushed into the room and tore us apart from each other so they could do their exams. They decided that Ryan and I would take a hospital trip for further evaluations. The paramedics assessed quickly to ensure we weren’t in any acute danger.

They hustled us both outside and into the rigs. We each got our own, meaning that Ryan was far from me. I tried calling out to him as they were putting us in the ambulance, but there

was too much going on. He didn't hear me. The door of the ambulance slammed closed behind me, and we were off.

"Alright, darlin', let's get you down on this bed. I'm going to go ahead and hook you up to an IV to get some fluids in you," the younger paramedic instructed me. I did as he asked and tried not to look as I felt the needle pierce the vein in my arm.

My team hooked me to a heart monitor and a blood pressure reader. They didn't bother me much on the drive over to the hospital. I got asked what had happened to me, and they were amazed that Ryan and I had survived so long by ourselves. But other than that, nothing. I was ignored unless it was a question about how I felt or if anything hurt. When I told them I sprained my ankle, they put it through different ranges of motion just like Ryan had, testing out the ligaments and asking me where it hurt. Though I felt the twinges occasionally, they didn't seem too concerned about the minor injury. They agreed to do some imaging just to be safe.

Once we made it to the hospital, it was the same ordeal over again. They rolled me into the emergency room on my gurney, and I was immediately put into a treatment room. Doctors and nurses hovered over me, asking questions and giving orders. My eyes darted this way and that, trying to find Ryan, but I didn't see him.

My heart started to race. I could hear the rhythm of a machine off to the side. I grabbed ahold of one of my nurse's arms. She looked at me, alarmed, as if she had forgotten I wasn't unconscious.

"Do you know where my...friend is?" I asked her. I wasn't really sure what else to call him. He was my friend, true. But usually, friends didn't put their mouths in the places Ryan's mouth had been on me.

The nurse's eyes softened, and she gave me a small smile. "He's down the hall. Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to discuss his care with anyone other than family." I nodded, and she smiled again. "If you want to reach out to him yourself, feel free."

The doctors worked and checked me over. They x-rayed my ankle, then ruled out a fracture before wrapping it in gauze. The wrap would have to stay on for a few days, and I was to ice it as soon as I got home. Until then, I was still hooked to many different IVs for fluid and vitamins. They finally determined I was stable and moved me to a patient room for overnight observation.

I had to admit, laying in a quiet room with a heated blanket and a TV was a luxury I wouldn't take for granted again, even if it was in a hospital. They had given me a package of chocolate pudding and apple juice: a weird combination but very welcome after living off canned beans and fish for a week.

Eventually, my parents showed up. My mom was hysterical, and my dad had tears in his eyes when he saw me lying in the hospital bed. I was even surprised to see my sister, Sage, in tow. She rushed in and wrapped her arms around my neck, tears streaming down her freckled face.

"Careful, Sage," my mother admonished as she pulled her away from me.

I gave a small chuckle. "It's fine, Mom. I'm not hurt that bad. Just a sprained ankle."

My mom leaned in and kissed my cheek while my dad stroked my hair. "Oh, Izzie, we were so worried about you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"We're just glad you're okay," my dad said, his voice rough with emotion. "We were so scared when they called to tell us you and that boy had gone missing."

Sage pulled away from me and wiped her face. "Speaking of that boy. I heard it was Ryan Miller that you disappeared with." The blue eyes that matched my own pierced me with an amused gleam. My sister was no stranger to the saga of Ryan and my rivalry. Aside from Juliet, my sister was my best friend. I usually told her everything.

Though, now that she was asking, I couldn't help but feel like I wanted to keep what happened between Ryan and me

private—at least for now. I sighed and shifted around on the pillow. “Yeah, it was Ryan. We kind of got into it the day before, and they assigned us as partners.”

My dad frowned. “Who is this Ryan fellow? You two have a history?” He looked between me and my sister, who wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“I guess you could say that,” I muttered. Dad didn’t like that answer; I could tell by the frown that deepened on his face, but he let it go.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now, Dan. She’s safe. That’s all that matters,” my mom redirected him. She looked over her shoulder. “I think that’s Izzie’s doctor out there. Let’s go talk to her.” Grabbing my dad’s hand, she practically dragged him out the door, leaving Sage and me alone.

I fiddled with my fingers while Sage stared me down. “So, are you gonna tell me or what?”

I turned to look at her in faux confusion. “Tell you what?”

She groaned and covered her face. “Please, Izabel, it’s written all over your face. You and Ryan?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I played dumb and bit my lip. Sage punched me in the arm. “Ow, Sage!” I protested. “I’m in a hospital bed!”

“So help me, God, Izabel. Tell me everything!”

My eyes darted to my parents outside my room, deep in conversation with my doctor. “Fine. Yes. Me and Ryan.”

Her eyes lit up. “This is fantastic. Did you kiss him?”

Looking down at my fingers, I felt my face heat up. Sage gave a girly squeal that she was too old for, then paused. “Did you more than kiss him?”

My eyes snapped to her, but then I quickly looked away. I knew a blush was forming on my cheeks, but I kept my lips sealed. My sister watched me closely, gauging every minuscule reaction, as if reading me like a book. When I couldn’t take the pressure anymore, I slowly nodded. Her eyes went wide, and she tossed her head back in a gleeful laugh.

“Izabel, you little tease!” she said, clapping her hands. “I mean, I can’t really blame you. If I had been stuck with the hottest boy in school, babies would have been running around everywhere!”

My heart pounded in my chest. Babies? Oh god, I hoped not. Ryan and I did have sex, and while I had an IUD, were we really in the clear? What were we thinking?

Oh right. We weren’t thinking. We were just going at each other like the hormonal teenagers we were.

“Have you seen him yet?” Sage asked, pulling me out of my panic.

I shook my head. “No, they split us up as soon as the paramedics arrived. I asked a nurse to see if she could find him for me, but she said I had to reach out to him myself to find out how he’s doing.”

“Don’t you have his phone number?” my sister asked. When I shook my head, she pursed her lips. “I’ll take care of it.” With that, she pushed herself out of her chair and strutted out the door. My parents gave her a brief glance as she walked past them, but they didn’t stop her.

I sat back against my pillow with a sigh. Who knew what she was up to. When Sage put her mind to anything, she was unstoppable. My sister had always been one to set both the perfect and the worst examples. Simultaneously. She was a party girl by nature, always looking for fun and trouble at the same time. Yet she never wanted to disappoint anyone. Sage worked her butt off at everything she did, which is how she landed her position in an above-entry-level job at a big corporation in Chicago.

A few minutes later, Sage came skipping back into my room, holding a crumpled piece of paper. “Who’s your favorite sister?” she asked with a Cheshire Cat smile on her face.

“What did you do?” I asked suspiciously, my fingers gripping the edge of my blanket.

She plopped down next to me again and handed me the paper. “Well, first of all, your boyfriend is *fine*,” she sighed. I

glanced sharply at her, and she held up her hands. “Not my fault. He happened to be changing when I walked in on him.”

“Oh, god,” I muttered.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Sage joked, elbowing me in the side. “Nice job, Sis! Anyway, I got his phone number for you. He said to text him whenever you miss him and to give you this...” she trailed off as she stood up and planted a big kiss on my cheek. My cheeks heated up. Even though it was Sage, I could feel the sentiment behind it from him.

Before the blush faded, my parents walked in and gave us quizzical looks. Sage brushed everything off while they said their goodbyes. Before too long, I was alone again in my hospital room. I could feel the loneliness starting to set in. Not allowing myself time to overthink this, I grabbed my phone from the side table and typed in his phone number.

Izabel: Hey...

RYAN

Ryan: I miss waking up to you in the mornings.

I LEANED back against my pillows and propped my arm under my head, waiting for Izabel to respond. It had only been a few days since I'd seen her, yet at the same time, it felt like an eternity.

Izabel: Stop, you're making me blush.

Ryan: Good, you're never prettier than when you're blushing. Can I call you?

Izabel: I'd be sad if you didn't.

I BIT MY CHEEK, smiling to myself. We had seemed to be texting non-stop ever since we got back to civilization. After we were given the all-clear and checked out of the hospital, my mom whisked me back home and held me hostage, here in the house. It was as if she was worried that I'd disappear again if I left her sight.

Even now, I could hear her rummaging around in the kitchen downstairs. Derek's deep voice rumbled every few minutes as they talked.

I had been correct in my assumption that her phone call right before camp was about her and Derek getting engaged.

She had waited until the third night after I got home to break the news to me. They both sat me down at the dining room table and told me that they were engaged and Derek would be moving into the house.

I played it cool, trying not to freak out about the fact that my mom was going to be marrying a man who was not my dad. But inside, I was definitely freaking out. It took everything in me to keep a straight face and put on an excited front. I really was excited for her, but at the same time, it was going to take some getting used to.

I felt like I had it under control, but then, to make matters worse, she *also* dropped the bomb that she was pregnant, and I would be getting a little sibling in addition to a new stepfather.

Needless to say, that extra piece of information threw me over the edge. She was three months along already. I tried not to let that knowledge bother me that she must have known for a while now and had chosen not to tell me, but it still stung a bit. I had politely excused myself after muttering a quick congratulations, and ran upstairs to call Izabel.

Even the sound of her voice had my nerves settling.

Though our time stranded out in the woods together was short in the grand scheme of things, she had become my lifeline. I missed having her around all the time. I missed her getting mad at me over nothing and her sarcastic attitude.

“Heya, Bells,” I said when she answered.

I heard her breathy laugh and instantly relaxed. “Hey, yourself. What are you up to?”

I ran my hand through my hair and leaned back against my pillows with a loud sigh. “Missing you. You free?”

There was rustling on the other line, and then the sound of a door closing. “Sure, what did you have in mind?”

I was already up and off my bed, grabbing the keys to my car off my dresser. “I’ll pick you up. Text me your address?” I bounded down the stairs, hollering a quick goodbye to my mom and my future stepfather, and then slid out of the house.

Izabel and I said a few more words to each other before hanging up. Within a minute, my phone was chiming with a text containing her address. I plugged it in and peeled out of the driveway, heading toward the one person who I knew could cheer me up.

When I pulled into her driveway, I texted her and let her know I was here. A few minutes later, she peeked out of the front door and gave me a sheepish wave. I rolled down my window when she came up to it. Her cheeks were flushed bright red, and her eyes a little glazed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked right away.

Her fingers were knotted together as she leaned through the window into the car. “My parents want to meet you. Or well—” she hesitated. “My dad does.”

I couldn’t help the grimace that formed on my face, but I didn’t argue, rather pulling the keys out of the ignition and hopping out of the car. Izabel’s eyes were wide, as if she was expecting me to not be okay with this. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into me. “Come on, Bells. Let’s go introduce me to your dad.”

Her arm wrapped around my back, and she placed her other on my stomach as we walked inside. “I am so sorry about this, in advance,” she mumbled.

I chuckled and kissed the crown of her head. “All part of the deal, babe.”

I released her as soon as we stepped foot inside the house. Her father was seemingly waiting for us in the foyer, his arms crossed, and a stern look on his face. He was a bit taller than me, his shoulders much broader. I swallowed thickly and straightened up.

“Sir,” I said, hating how my voice cracked a bit. Holding a hand out, I did my best to be polite. “I’m Ryan. Nice to meet you.”

Her father eyed my hand suspiciously before he finally took it, giving me a good shake. He raised an eyebrow and looked at me sideways. “You’re the guy, huh?”

“Most likely,” I said, unsure of what exactly I was being accused of.

“The one who saved my daughter?” he said, taking me off guard as he finally released my hand.

My eyes flashed to Izabel, who looked just as surprised as me. I cleared my throat and said, “I think saying we saved each other would be a more accurate assumption.”

At last, her father dropped whatever pretense he was putting on and then clapped me on the shoulder. A woman I could only assume was her mother peeked out of the kitchen and walked down the hall, giving me a wide smile. “Well, either way,” her father said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You may call me Dan, and this is my wife, Cara.”

“Nice to meet you both,” I offered, dipping my chin to Izabel’s mother as a greeting. She gave me another big smile, and then shared a secret look with her daughter, who pressed herself into my side.

“Where are you two off to tonight?” Dan asked me, eyes lasering in on where Izabel leaned into me.

“Just the park, sir,” I said. “Nothing too exciting.”

“Alright. Well, home by eleven, Izzie, okay?”

“Okay,” Bells said to her dad, then shot me a grin. She took my hand, yelling goodbyes to her parents as she dragged me out of the house.

When we made it to the Jeep, she crawled into the passenger seat, and then covered her face with her hands. “Gosh, I’m so sorry about that. I’m so embarrassed.”

I laughed as I pulled out of her driveway. “Why? He was just being a good dad.”

“Still, it was *mortifying*,” she muttered.

“Nah,” I said with a grin. “I thought it was cute.”

She made a strangled noise from her seat, and then reached over to turn my music up. I chuckled again, steering the car in the direction of the park. As we drove, my hand slid over the

console to rest on her thigh. I glanced over to see her beaming at me, her blue eyes sparkling. She leaned over and pressed a kiss to my cheek. With that, I couldn't help the smile that formed on my face.

We stopped at a fast-food restaurant on the way, ordering ourselves some burgers, French fries, and drinks. When we made it to the park, we found a picnic table to sit at and dug into our food.

Izabel unwrapped her burger, not hesitating before taking a massive bite out of it. I watched her in amusement as she nodded appreciatively at her food. As if she could sense me watching her, she looked up and gave me a tight smile.

“Better than fish, huh?” I teased her.

She swallowed her food and then nodded fervently. “A million times better. I don't think I will ever eat fish again.”

“Right with you on that one,” I agreed, grabbing a small handful of fries and stuffing them in my mouth.

She took another bite and then set her burger down. After she swallowed that bite, she gave me a quizzical look. “So, is everything okay?”

I clenched my jaw, but then nodded. I wasn't ready to talk about it yet. “Yeah, Bells. I just wanted to spend the evening with you.”

She eyed me like she knew I wasn't being entirely truthful, but she didn't press the matter. When we finished eating, we pitched our trash and decided to go for a walk around the park. As soon as we hit the pathway, I grabbed her hand, threading our fingers together. There was just something that felt right, being with Bells on a summer night like this. We had grown so accustomed to being together that spending time apart now felt like a part of me was missing.

It was a little extreme, I was aware. Even though being stuck out in the woods was a significant event for us, it was still only about a week of our lives—and yet it felt like so much more.

A knot of unease settled in my stomach when I thought about the fact that there would be far more distance than a fifteen-minute car ride between us at the end of the summer. With me going to Germany and Izabel going to Princeton, I still really wasn't sure what was going to happen.

Honestly, I wasn't ready to think about that yet, so I squashed it down deep inside of me for later. Right now, all I wanted to do was soak up as much time with her as I could.

We wandered around the park for a while until we finally stopped at the playground. I let go of her hand and jogged over to the swings. Izabel watched me in amusement as I settled in one and then kicked off.

She followed my lead, taking the one next to me and swinging up into the sky herself. We joked and teased each other for a while, even going as far as having a competition to see who could go the highest. I let her win if anyone was asking.

"Are you excited to see Jules again?" I asked after a while, rocking back and forth on the seat of my swing.

"I am," she responded. "Hopefully, she's not too upset that I bailed on her for the last few days of camp."

"Not like there was anything we could do about it," I said. We had pretty much been escorted right out of Camp Wildwood the minute we arrived back. The guys had been blowing up my phone ever since, texting and asking questions when they could in an attempt to get the full story. I had no doubt Juliet was doing the same to Izabel. Now, they'd be back in just a few days, right before graduation.

"I can't believe we graduate this weekend," Bells said, as if she could read my mind. She was rocking gently on her swing, the side of her head resting against the chain. I worried for a second she might get her hair caught in it, but she didn't seem that concerned.

"Are you sad?" I asked.

She pursed her lips to the side, but then shook her head. "No, I don't think *sad* is the right word. I guess maybe

heartsick is a better way to describe it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Like I know everything we have is about to end, and I guess I’m missing it already.”

I frowned and looked down at the gravel, kicking it with my shoe. I still wasn’t ready to have this conversation. It was too soon. If we talked about it, then that would make everything real. “Everything will be okay,” I told her instead, taking the optimistic route.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, it will. But you know what I mean? It’s like starting the last chapter of your favorite book. You know it’s going to end, and you want to know how everything works out, but it’s still a little disheartening knowing everything’s coming to a close.”

“Maybe just don’t read the last chapter then,” I teased, shooting her a wink.

She rolled her eyes even harder, if that were possible. “I could never.”

I laughed and started to swing again. I knew what she meant, though, because I could feel it too. The anticipation that everything we had just started to build might not even get to see the light of day.

“Remember when I told you that I suspected my mom was going to get engaged to her boyfriend?” I asked.

Out of my periphery, I saw Bells nod her head. “Is that what happened?”

“Yeah,” I said bluntly. “And she’s pregnant.”

Izabel stopped her swing and looked over at me. “She’s pregnant?”

“Yup,” I said, my lips popping on the end of the word. “Due end of November.”

“That’s—well, that’s exciting!” Izabel said, her voice lighting up. “I think you’ll be a great big brother.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“But?” she prodded, sensing my hesitation on the matter.

I fell silent for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts in a way to fully articulate how I was feeling. “I guess it’s just that things are never going to be the same now. You know, for the longest time, it was just the two of us. Now it’s going to be her and me, and Derek, and the new baby whenever it comes.”

“And you don’t think that sounds good?” she asked, her voice soft. I was so appreciative of the way Izabel listened to me. I never felt like she judged me for my thoughts or how I felt about certain things. She was just a sounding board, helping me work through some of the topics that bothered me.

“It just sounds different.”

“Different can be good, you know?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I guess it’s just going to take some getting used to.”

“Well, luckily for you, you have about six months to get used to that idea,” she teased me now, and I laughed lightly. “I’m sure your mom is excited.”

“She is,” I acknowledged. “Which is good; I want her to be happy.”

“You’ve got a good heart, Ryan Miller,” Izabel said. I looked over at her, and my heart stuttered when I took in her sparkling blue eyes, watching me with a fondness I couldn’t quite place.

I maneuvered my swing sideways, closing the distance between us. My hand grasped onto the chain of her swing, and I pulled her closer to me until our knees bumped together.

“Not as good as yours,” I whispered, leaning in and kissing her, as I wondered if I had ever spoken anything I meant more.

Izabel Sanders was one of the best humans I had ever had the privilege of knowing. I hoped she knew how much she meant to me and how grateful I was that she was in my life.

I resolved right then and there that even if we only had a short time left together, I would make sure that she knew it.

She might've loathed me once, but I was determined to make sure that was all in the past.

IZABEL

THE SATURDAY NIGHT FOLLOWING GRADUATION, we all gathered at Lancer Lake in Cedar Ridge for a big *Con'grad'ulations* bonfire. Most of our classmates who didn't live here were still in town from the graduation ceremony, knowing that this was a big tradition for the two schools' graduating seniors. It was the last big hurrah before we all went our separate ways into the next phase of our lives.

The party was already well underway when Juliet and I rolled up. The fire was raging. It had been built tipi-style, with the base wider and the logs coming to a point at the top, the flames flicking up and around the firewood. A spot of moisture would crack every few seconds, sending sparks flying into the air. Red Solo cups were strewn across the grass, and the music was pumping.

She parked her car near the others, and we headed toward the party. It was a similar layout to the bonfires at Camp Wildwood. This time, though, there were no counselors or chaperones, and there was a keg instead of a punch bowl. If the schools asked, there was no alcohol here—but they never asked. Some of the juniors who had already returned from camp were in attendance as well, a few of them waving when they saw Juliet.

Jules stood next to me at the edge of the field with her hands on her hips, scanning the field. "Go find Liam," I told her, laughing, knowing that's who she was searching for.

I didn't need to tell her twice. Juliet scampered off to go find her boyfriend. I shook my head in amusement as I

watched her go. Taking a page out of her book, I looked around for that familiar head of unruly blond hair. I hadn't seen Ryan yet, but I was sure he was close. Many of my classmates tossed me *hellos* and *how are yous* as they watched me walk by. I was still a bit of an enigma with the whole “stranded in the woods” thing.

“Izabel!” I stopped as a hand wrapped around my wrist and got my attention.

Spinning around, I came face to face with a familiar Bennett boy. “Oh, hi, Mark. How’s it going?”

I looked down at his hand still clasped around my wrist, and he quickly let it go before grinning at me. “I’m great. How are you? I heard about what happened.”

Honestly, I would’ve been more concerned if he *hadn’t* heard what had happened. It was common knowledge by now. For years to come, I was sure the Bennett Institute and Hawthorne Academy classes would be regaling the tale of ‘Ryan and Izabel: Shipwrecked.’

“I’m just fine. I was actually—” I began, but Mark continued.

“Hey, look, I know what you went through must’ve been really scary. Especially being stuck with Ryan, knowing your history, and how much of an asshole he can be. I just wanted to let you know I’m here if you need anyone to talk to.” Mark’s brown eyes gleamed with something I couldn’t place as he smiled at me.

“Oh...” I paused. “Well, thanks, I appreciate it.” I looked behind my shoulder in the direction I was heading. “I was actually looking for Ryan. Have you seen him?”

The sparkle in his eyes dimmed a little, and his face fell. “Um, I thought I saw him with some of the soccer team and one of your friends.”

“Juliet?” I asked, curious. If Liam was over there, I was sure she wouldn’t be too far behind.

Mark shook his head. “Ah, no. Nahla and a few others.”

I groaned internally. I was really hoping I wouldn't have to deal with her tonight. But of course, she would flock to wherever Ryan was. He was probably still on her *to-do list* for the summer. "Great. Thanks, Mark. I'll see you later."

"Oh, okay. I'll catch you later, Izabel," Mark said, dejected. I kind of felt bad; Mark was a charming boy, but I had a bigger fish to fry, namely, Nahla.

For the second time now, I continued my trek to find Ryan. This time, I wasn't interrupted, and it didn't take long. There he was, standing with his buddies with a cup in hand. I had to take a second to admire my boyfriend. He wore a white golf shirt that made his bronze skin stand out. His hair was perfectly messed up. A complete accident, I was sure, yet he looked incredible.

As I was watching him, Ryan tossed his head back, laughing at something one of the guys said. I felt the butterflies in my stomach, just as they always did whenever Ryan was around. I now found Ryan attractive all the time, but there was something special about when he could relax and laugh like he was doing now. I fought off my own smile as I walked toward him.

Just as Mark had said, Nahla was all up on Ryan, pressing herself against his side. Ryan looked exceedingly uncomfortable and tried to shrug her off more than once as he was talking with his friends. I appreciated the effort, but it wouldn't work. Nahla could be relentless. I couldn't stand this girl. I scowled as she made her move on him.

As I approached him, it was as though he could physically tell I was near. His attention snapped over to me and scoured me from head to toe. I could see relief and a flare of desire in his green eyes that I lived for.

"Hey, handsome," I said as I walked up next to him. I glared at Nahla before touching Ryan's cheek and pulling him down for a scorching kiss.

Ryan groaned appreciatively in the back of his throat and put his hand on my hip, urging me closer. His lips parted with mine, and he pressed himself into me, tangling our tongues

together. I begrudgingly pulled myself away from him and stepped against his side. Ryan wrapped an arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head again.

“Hey, Nahla,” I said. My arch-nemesis crossed her arms over her chest as she glared at me.

“Hi, Izabel. Nice show,” she snarked back.

I looked up at Ryan and bit my lip. “That was nothing. You should see us in bed.”

Ryan’s jaw went slack at my brazenness, but it didn’t look like he minded. The boys surrounding us *oohed*, and Nahla looked even more annoyed.

“That’s cute,” she sneered. “When you get tired of her, Ryan, you know where to find me.”

Ryan laughed out loud at her offer. “Thanks, but not a chance.” Nahla scowled again and stormed off, her diligent followers trailing after her. He pulled me closer and looked me over again. “Heya, Bells.”

I stepped around to face him and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Hey, yourself.”

He grinned. “That was hot, by the way. It was enlightening to see your jealous side.”

“Please,” I scoffed. “That wasn’t jealousy. Nahla’s not worth jealousy.”

“You’re right,” Ryan admitted. “You know why?”

“Why?”

“‘Cause she means nothing, and you mean everything.”

My thoughts returned to what Juliet said earlier today about Ryan being notorious for his hookups. I didn’t see him being like that anymore. This confrontation with Nahla just confirmed it.

I smiled and put my head against his shoulder. Ryan adjusted so his cheek was resting against my hair. “You are really cheesin’ it up tonight.”

“I do my best,” he said. The music changed from upbeat party music to something slower. More romantic. Ryan pulled away slightly and looked at me. “Dance with me.”

“I’m not really—”

“Please?” Ryan whispered, giving me wide puppy dog eyes that made my stomach flip.

How could I say no to that? Sighing, I wrinkled my nose. “Fine, but only one song.”

“We’ll see about that,” he chuckled.

I already had my arms around him, but he wrapped his arms tighter around my waist, pressing into me. He started swaying gently to the rhythm of the song.

“You look beautiful, Bells,” he murmured. “I like the dress.”

I met his eyes with a smile. “Thank you, I was hoping you would.”

“I really, really do.” His eyes trailed down my front as he pulled me in. I pressed my face into his neck and swayed with him. “I honestly can’t believe you’re mine.”

My cheeks warmed, and I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him again. His lips were soft against mine, but he reached his hand to tangle it in my hair, holding me hostage against him. This was a shorter kiss, but no less heated than our others.

After that song ended, another slow song came on. I had said only one song, but I was so happy here with him that I didn’t want it to end.

“Tell me something I don’t know, Bells,” Ryan said. I could hear the amusement lacing his voice. We hadn’t done this since we’d been back.

I grinned as I thought about it. “Benjamin Franklin wanted to rearrange the alphabet. He wanted to omit C, J, Q, W, and X.”

“If I were going to rearrange the alphabet, I’d put U and I together,” Ryan said cheekily as he winked.

That did it. Laughing, I leaned away from him and shoved his shoulder. “I can’t stand you.”

“Liar,” he called me out, still sniggering. Grabbing my hand, he pulled me in again. My arms wrapped around his neck on instinct. His hands spanned the length of my back before resting on my hips, just above my butt.

I felt Ryan watching me intently as we danced, a curious gleam in his eye. “What are you thinking, Bells?”

“My parents are going out of town for the weekend, and Sage left for Chicago this morning,” I said, slowly waiting for him to catch up. I saw the moment when it hit him that my house was empty, except for me.

“You want me to come over?”

I shrugged coyly and looked at him from under my lashes. “If that is something that sounds appealing to you.”

Ryan’s eyes flared with the same desire I had seen earlier in the evening. He had definitely caught on. Leaning forward, he caught me with another kiss. “That sounds perfect. When are they leaving?”

“They’re gone now.”

Ryan’s eyes closed for a second, and I heard him groan. “Let’s go.” He grabbed my hand and started pulling me toward his car.

I laughed as he dragged me in his wake, amused by his sudden intensity. He was taking quick, long strides, trying to get to the car without interruption. A man on a mission. Unfortunately for us, we walked right into our two best friends. Jules and Liam were right in front of us, walking hand-in-hand.

“Hey, guys,” Liam said as they approached us.

Juliet grinned from ear to ear as she took in the sight of Ryan and me together. “Well, don’t you two look cozy over here.”

Ryan tipped his head toward her. “Good to see you, Jules.”

She mock curtsied. “The pleasure is all mine, Ryan.” She stood up and shot him a stern look. “Although you and I need to converse about your intentions with my best friend.”

Ryan had the decency to look a little concerned. He knew Juliet was no bark and all bite. “Trust me, they’re good. Better than good.” His eyes met mine, and I saw that was indeed a promise.

I met my friend’s eyes and smiled. Juliet sighed, putting her weapons down. “Fine, but I’m serious, Ry. If you break her heart, I’ll break your face.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Ryan said confidently, his eyes brushing over to me.

“Good.” Juliet gave a million-watt smile, then clapped her hands together. “Now that that’s all cleared up, who’s up for a game of Drink, Drink, Shot?” She looked around.

Ryan cleared his throat. “That sounds great, but I’ve got to get Bells home.”

Juliet frowned at us. “Oh, lame. Why?”

Ryan looked over at me in agony, asking for help. “I’m not feeling good,” I improvised. “I think that pretzel cheese was bad or something today.”

My friend wrinkled her nose. “Gross, yeah, get out of here. I’ll text you later.” She leaned forward and gave me a hug. Then softly, so the boys wouldn’t hear, she whispered, “And girl, I expect a full report.”

My eyebrows shot up on my forehead, and she pulled away and winked at me before heading off with Liam.

Ryan watched them saunter off, then he turned to me again, eyes blazing. “Ready?”

“You have no idea. Let’s go.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek before taking his hand and beelining to his Jeep.

Ryan practically threw me into his vehicle. Then, he ripped out of the parking area and headed toward my house. He kept one of his hands on my thigh the whole time we drove. At

every stoplight, he would lean over and capture my lips with a kiss.

“Eager much?” I teased him as he pulled away from me once the light turned green.

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and groaned. “You have no idea, Bells. You’re killing me in that dress.”

The drive was quick. Before long, Ryan pulled the Jeep into my driveway. No lights were on in my house, confirming that my parents had left. He put the car into park, and then turned to look at me. I gave him a soft smile, and he returned it.

Time seemed to stand still as Ryan leaned toward me. My body hummed to life the minute his lips touched mine, and I held back a quiet moan as his tongue dipped out and traced the seam of my lips to deepen our kiss.

My back arched as Ryan’s hand crossed the center console and snaked around my waist. He rested it there for a moment before he moved it and unclicked the lock of my seatbelt. His hand found my back again, and he applied slight pressure. I knew what he was asking without him needing to verbalize it.

I crossed the console and seated myself in his lap, feeling emboldened by the intensity of his kiss. Ryan made a satisfied sound deep in his throat the minute I was sitting on top of him. His hands roamed the sides of my torso, exploring.

When his hands finally made their way up to my breasts and cupped them through my clothing, my skin erupted in tingles. I wiggled on his lap, feeling his thick hardness underneath me and growing addicted to the friction. Ryan seemed to like it too, as he groaned into my mouth and squeezed my breasts appreciatively.

The pleasure kept rising as I moved back and forth on his lap, growing desperate for some kind of release. I knew he was too by the sounds he was making.

“Bells,” Ryan gasped my name in between my feverish kisses. I hummed in response, but he finally tilted his head away from my lips, putting distance between us. Meeting his

eyes, I waited to hear his excuse for why he stopped. “We should take this inside.”

Loving the sound of his suggestion, we both got out of the Jeep on his side and walked up to the front door together. As I unlocked it, I looked over my shoulder at him with a wink. I flipped on the lights first because my house creeped me out when it was dark. Tossing my keys on the side table by the door, I glanced at my boyfriend.

He stepped up next to me, wrapped a hand around my waist, and pulled me toward him. I pressed myself against his chest, feeling his strong muscles ripple against me. Ryan took a deep breath, tightening his arms as he looked down at me. “You are *so* beautiful. I can hardly stand it.”

I blushed and leaned up to kiss him. The passion from back in the Jeep surmounted, and I needed to be closer to him. He crushed his lips against mine, and I wanted to sigh in relief. I pried his lips open with my own, and he quickly took control, our tongues mingling. Ryan’s hands ran up and down my sides, occasionally pausing to squeeze and pull me into him. His fingers left a trail of fire as they explored my curves.

“Upstairs,” I murmured against his lips. Ryan groaned and nodded. I grabbed his hand and led him up the stairs. We stumbled down the hallway and into my bedroom, pausing every few steps to kiss each other fervently.

Once we crossed the threshold of my room, Ryan placed his hands on my hips and hoisted me up. I instinctually wrapped my legs around him. He pressed my back into the door, giving himself better leverage to kiss me. I felt him grind himself into me, which intensified my feelings instantly. I wanted him. Now. I felt like I would self-combust unless we moved things along.

Ryan still held me in his arms as he walked toward my bed. He laid me down on the mattress and hit me with a smoldering stare as he swiftly reached behind him and pulled off his shirt. I bit my bottom lip as I admired his toned chest and stomach. My fingers traced the line from his clavicle down his chest. Ryan’s muscles shivered underneath my soft

touch. He climbed over me, pressed his weight against me, and kissed me ferociously.

His hand trailed against my thigh. It started at the knee and then explored higher up toward my hip, underneath the hem of my dress. When I felt his fingers toy with the lacy edge of my panties, my legs started to tremble.

Ryan's lips pulled away from my own and began exploring my jawline, neck, and sternum.

"Bells, I love this dress on you," he whispered against my skin. His warm breath fanned across me, giving me goosebumps. "But, I really need it off of you now." He kissed the swell of my breast, slightly exposed by the V-neck cut of my dress.

My heart mimicked palpitations while his fingers at my hip kept on exploring. "Ryan," I whimpered as the fingertips found the center of my panties, pressing and rubbing small circles against the wetness he had provoked.

"Yeah, Bells?" he whispered back against my breasts. His tongue had dipped underneath my dress's neckline and followed my bra's outline. Reaching the edge of my panties, his fingers snuck underneath the elastic band. They slipped against me, finding my center and then searching higher for the bundle of nerves. I shivered.

"I want you," I gasped as he rubbed at my clit over and over again, driving me absolutely crazy.

He leaned forward and kissed me deeply. I moaned into him as his fingers drove me wild. When he pulled away, he leaned me down against the bed and then leaned back.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

I preened at his praise and reached for him. Ryan moved over me, taking my lips captive again. Swiftly, all the remaining barriers between us were eliminated, and then it was just him and me once more.

He worked my body skillfully, knowing exactly where to touch and how much pressure to use to take me higher and higher. When he finally slid inside of me, it was like I could

breathe again. We found our pleasure in each other, cherishing these moments that we had together, secretly knowing that our time might be limited.

Ryan kept thrusting deep inside of me until I clenched around him, finding my release and triggering his. Fully spent, he slumped against me and pressed gentle kisses along my sweaty skin. His shoulders heaved as he caught his breath.

When he pulled back to look into my eyes, my breath caught. My heart felt so full at this moment. Even less than a month ago, I never would have imagined I could have felt anything like this for Ryan, but now, I couldn't imagine feeling anything else.

I pulled him back up to me, searching for his lips once more. I kissed Ryan like it was one of the last times, putting everything I was feeling deep inside of me into the moment. Ryan held onto me like he knew what I was saying without words.

As our breaths slowed and we came down from our highs, I settled against him. Knowing that no matter what happened, my life would forever be changed because of this amazing green-eyed boy in my bed beside me.

RYAN

THE PHONE RANG TWICE before she picked up. “Ryan?”

“Hey, what are you up to right now?”

I heard her rustle something on the other line. “Oh, nothing, really. I was just—”

“Reading?” I finished for her. She laughed, but it was confirmation enough. “Of course, you were. Anything good?”

“Not that you would think is good,” she said, humor lacing her tone.

“Think you can take a bit of a break for the evening?” I asked. “I thought it would be a nice night to get ice cream and hang out.”

“You had me at ice cream,” Bells said, her voice perking up.

“Great, I’ll be there in ten.”

We hung up, and by the time I rolled up to her house, she was waiting for me at the end of her driveway. She was wearing a pair of denim shorts and a white tank top and looking absolutely delectable. The minute she was inside my Jeep, I leaned over and pressed my lips to hers.

She smiled against me, eagerly kissing me back.

I was grinning, too, when I pulled away. “I missed you.”

She giggled. “You saw me yesterday.”

“That’s just too long, Bells,” I said with a wink before putting the car into drive and pulling out of her neighborhood.

She was chatty tonight, telling me all about the book she was reading—a biography on Harriet Tubman this time. I loved listening to her talk about things she cared about. Even though the subjects never interested me like they did for her, her enthusiasm was infectious.

We went to a small ice cream shack in the middle of town and got in line to order. We both got small cups of ice cream with different flavors of mix-ins—cookie crumbles for me, and Izabel chose hot fudge with whip cream and cherries. Ice creams in hand, we hopped back in my Jeep.

“Where are we going?” Bells asked as we drove away from the ice cream shop.

“Thought we could hang out at the park for a bit,” I said, flipping on my turn signal. I reached across the console in the car and set my hand on her thigh. Izabel dropped her hand on top of mine and rubbed her thumb over the ridges of my knuckles.

I glanced at her from my seat, and my heart skipped a beat. Fuck, she was just so perfect.

When we got to the park, I found us a spot right away.

“Here, I brought this along,” I said as I reached into the back of my Jeep for the fluffy blanket. Izabel’s eyes lit up when she saw it, and I grinned. “Thought we could do some romantic stargazing on this lovely summer evening.”

She rolled her eyes and shoved me. “You’re funny.”

I laughed. “What? I thought it was a good idea.”

She just rolled her eyes again but grabbed our ice creams and followed me out of the Jeep and over to the field. I spread out the blanket for us to sit on and then crawled right into the middle. She followed after me, sitting close as she handed over my ice cream.

Popping the top off, I took a big spoonful of my cookie crumble, and she did the same with her hot fudge sundae.

There wasn't a whole lot going on at the park this evening. Most of the families were starting to taper off now that the sun was setting, which was fine with me. The cicadas were singing, creating a nice background buzz and enunciating the summer evening. As they sang their song, it reminded me of our time back at that cabin, and I smiled to myself, reminiscing on some of the good memories I had.

I finished off my ice cream and then leaned back on the blanket with a satisfied groan. The stars were just barely poking out in the sky, and I started counting them as Bells finished her dessert. Recalling our time in the cabin, I said, "Tell me something I don't know, Bells."

This was my favorite game to play with her. The things that would come out of her mouth were unexpected and entertaining. Izabel loved her history books, and I seemed to love anything she loved. Maybe it was the way her eyes would light up whenever she shared a fact that she thought was interesting or the curve of her lips as she told me about it. All I knew was that I could spend hours picking this girl's brain just to hear her talk.

I felt her start to get excited as she thought about it. Her fingers drummed against her inner thigh, slightly drawing my mind off our game and onto more *physical* things. "Historians discovered a lot of human remains in Benjamin Franklin's basement. They think it was because he taught anatomy lessons."

"Benjamin Franklin again, huh?" I questioned.

She shrugged, giving me a sheepish grin. "I just finished a biography about him."

"Huh, well, that's creepy."

Izabel laughed and shoved me. "You're creepy." I stuck my tongue out at her.

We fell silent again. I sat up so I could be closer to her, still leaning my head back to look up at the sky. Izabel gave a small laugh.

"What's funny?" I asked her.

“Who would have ever thought that we’d be here? Just a few weeks ago, I wanted to throttle you. Now we’re sitting all cozy-like on a blanket, looking at the stars.”

I laughed too. “Do you wish things were back to the way they were?”

She shook her head. “Absolutely not. I love what we have now.”

I looked down and slid my hand against Izabel’s cheek, pulling her lips to mine and pushing my tongue against hers. She tasted like vanilla. Even still, she was intoxicating. She moaned against my lips and threaded her fingers into my hair, pulling me closer. Leaning her back against the couch, I pressed my weight into hers. I loved the way she felt against me. I was bigger than her, but somehow, when we were flush against each other like this, we fit perfectly.

I could feel myself starting to harden. I knew where this was leading. So did she. Izabel swung one of her legs around my waist, maneuvering herself until she was sitting in my lap.

“Izabel,” I whispered.

She pulled away and stared at me with a loving look in her eyes before leaning up and capturing my lips again. “Yeah?” she asked, bringing her eyes up to meet mine. They sparkled in the moonlight as she brought a spoonful of ice cream up to her lips.

My throat was tight, but I knew I had to say this. We only had a few more weeks together before we’d go our separate ways into the next chapter of our lives. “I love you.”

Those blue eyes widened. “What?”

I wrapped my arms around her hips. “I love you, Izabel Sanders. Even though you’re a little know-it-all nerd who drives me absolutely nuts sometimes.”

That got a small chuckle out of her, but still, she looked surprised. “You love me?”

I nodded and slowly leaned forward, pressing my lips to hers. My hand cupped the back of her neck, and she

whimpered into my mouth. When I pulled away from her, she licked her swollen lips and gazed up at me.

“I love you, Bells, more than I ever thought was possible.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that,” she whispered. “Nor would I have ever thought I’d want to hear them.”

“I know we only have a short time left together, but I wanted to make sure you knew that. I’m absolutely fucking crazy about you, Bells. I’ve never felt the way I do when you’re around.”

I noticed the tears starting to well in the lower lids of her eyes. She tilted her chin up, kissing me again. I threaded my fingers through her hair and held her to me as I kissed her like this was one of the last times.

When I pulled away, a single tear escaped her eye. “I love you too, Ryan.”

I brushed away the stray tear from her cheek and held her face tenderly. “Why are you crying?”

Covering her face, she shook her head. I heard her sniffle, noticing how her shoulders were shaking as she cried. I tugged at her wrists, wanting to see her face. Her eyes were red and watery when she finally let her hands drop.

“What is it?”

She shook her head. “You love me.”

I stroked my fingers down her cheek. “I do.”

“And I love you,” she sniffled. “But where do we go from here?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my stomach sinking with dread. I knew where this conversation was going. I didn’t want to talk about what was going to happen next, but I knew we needed to.

“Your internship. You leave in less than two weeks. And I’m moving to Princeton at the end of the summer.”

“Yes,” I said, my voice solemn.

“So where do we go from here?” she asked. One of her hands found mine, and she squeezed my fingers tightly.

“I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out. I’m not ready to say goodbye to you yet.”

“I’m not either,” she whispered. “I feel like we just found each other, even though we’ve known each other for years.”

“I *love* you, Bells. I am in love with you,” I told her, hoping she could hear the sincerity I was trying to convey. Her eyes widened and glistened with emotion as I continued. “It may not be easy, but I think we can manage.”

“A long-distance relationship?” Izabel asked incredulously. Her expression morphed into something that told me she didn’t believe what I was saying. “Halfway around the world? You think this will work?”

I shrugged and tugged on her hand, bringing her closer to me. With my free hand, I cupped the side of her jaw, running my thumb over the smooth skin of her cheek. “I have to. That’s all I can do.”

“How? It seems impossible.”

“We’ll just have to make it a priority, put in the effort. I’ll be coming home a few times a year anyway to see my mom and the new baby. You could maybe come to visit Berlin during a school break. We live in a world of technology, so it’s not like we won’t be able to get ahold of each other.”

“You’re right,” she conceded. I caught a hint of hopeful determination in her eyes as she looked at me. The wheels were turning, and I could see the plans starting to form.

“The scholarship program is for five years. After that, I’m done.”

It did seem like a long time, even as I said it out loud. We were still so young, and we had our whole lives ahead of us. We’d both be in our twenties by the time I finally moved home. She’d be finished with her degree a year before me, and she’d probably find a job and start working. I knew that it would ultimately be a blip on the radar, though it may seem like a lot while we were in it.

Bells and I had already been through so much together, though. I had every faith that we could face this challenge, just like we had the others. I just needed her to be on board with that sentiment too.

“How do I know you won’t find some German model you love more than me?” she asked me, and I could tell she was only slightly teasing.

I smirked. “I *promise* you, Bells. That won’t happen.”

“You can’t promise that,” she argued back. “You never know who you’ll cross paths with. Or maybe you’ll love being abroad and never want to come home.”

I shook my head and leaned forward to kiss her. When I pulled away, Izabel’s chest rose and fell, breathless.

“If I make you a promise, I will keep it,” I said firmly. “I love *you*. And now that I know what it’s like to truly love you, I couldn’t ever love anyone else.”

She wanted to tell me how ridiculous she thought this whole thing was. I suspected she didn’t believe how I could be so upbeat and positive about this situation. But I could see that my words gave her comfort. She leaned forward and hugged me, burying her face in my neck and breathing me in. I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her tightly. We clung to each other for a few minutes. I knew her brain was in overdrive, trying to think of every possible outcome of how we could make this work.

I didn’t say anything, letting her stew in her thoughts. I held her and rubbed her back, hoping it was enough to soothe some of her inner turmoil.

“Okay,” she finally whispered against my skin. Relief flooded through me. I hoped she knew the lengths I would go to for her. I would do anything to keep her. Even though this was a major hurdle we had to overcome, I was convinced we could do it together.

I pulled back and grinned. “Okay? So we’re going to do this?”

She nodded, trying to look hopeful. “I guess we are.”

It would be tough. We both knew it. But I didn't want to face these tough challenges with anyone but her.

IZABEL

“IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?” Ryan complained as I led him through the hallway.

I glanced back at my boyfriend and tried to control the giggle that wanted to escape. Ryan’s face was covered by a pink bandana, preventing him from knowing where I was leading him. He was dressed in jeans and a green polo, which I had picked out for him. I rolled my lips together, fighting the mischievous grin. He had no idea what was about to happen.

“We’re almost there,” I told him, trying not to sound too amused.

I didn’t think I had done a very good job of keeping tonight’s events a secret. Yet, Ryan hadn’t indicated that he knew what was happening. When I held out the pink bandana to him when I picked him up, he mustered a questioning raise of his eyebrow. He was a good sport, letting me tie it around his eyes before we departed from his mom’s house.

Tonight’s plans had been in the works for the last week or so. Our final two weeks together had flown by as if we were on fast-forward. Ryan’s flight to Berlin was scheduled for tomorrow morning, bright and early. All we had left was tonight. I would have liked to spend our entire last night together, alone, but I figured it was only fair to share him with his family and friends. They were saying goodbye to him, too, after all. Which is what the purpose of tonight was all about.

“Okay,” I said when we got to the door hiding the big surprise. “I’m going to take this off. But keep your eyes

closed!”

Ryan agreed eagerly, ready to be filled in on what the big mystery was all about. I reached behind his head and untied the bandana, pulling it off slowly so I could make sure that he wasn't cheating by peeking under his eyelashes. Ryan's eyes were squeezed shut, an amused smirk playing on his lips. Before I opened the door and led him in, I tipped onto my toes and kissed him. Ryan responded immediately, smiling against my lips and grabbing my hips. His fingers hooked through my belt loops, and he pulled me closer.

I kissed him fervently, knowing that kisses like these were numbered. My arms wrapped around his neck, and I arched my back into him. I breathed him in, committing his clean scent into my memory. Finally, I put a bit of distance between us and reached behind me, feeling for the doorknob to open the door. When the door clicked open, I stepped backward, bringing Ryan with me, and flipped on the lights. Ryan's eyes opened and then grew wide.

“SURPRISE!” all of our friends and family yelled simultaneously.

Balloons were tossed in the air, and noisemakers were blown. Ryan looked at me slyly, and I grinned up at him. He leaned down to kiss my forehead before stepping into the room to be welcomed by the group.

I stayed close to his side, listening as people took turns asking him if he was surprised and congratulating him on his internship. Juliet sidled up to where I stood next to him, pulling me slightly away before hugging me. She had gone all out this evening in a colorful paisley patterned romper, cute wedges, and dangly gold earrings.

“How are you doing, babes?” she asked.

I hugged her back, ignoring the sharp, burning sensation in my chest. “As good as I can be, I guess.”

Juliet confronted me right after Ryan and I had our heart-to-heart at the soccer park, blowing up my phone until I had answered. She was dying to know what the deal was. What

was the plan? Were we staying together? I told her everything, and she listened and cried with me over the unfortunate turn of events. Knowing I had my best friend supporting me through this was at least some sort of consolation.

“It will all work out,” she promised me softly, rubbing my back before letting me go. I laughed a little, swiping away the tear that had snuck out of the corner of my eye. Juliet gave me an understanding smile.

Jules had been a big help in putting the party together, though it had ultimately been Ryan’s mom’s idea. She had wanted a sending-off party, and Juliet had delivered. The rec center banquet room had been rented out for the rest of the night. Caterers were brought in with the best party food—hot wings, toasted ravioli, buffalo chicken dip, and Ryan’s favorite, jalapeño poppers. There was also a taco bar for those not feeling hor d’oeuvres.

We had a good turnout. All of Ryan’s family friends had come at his mother’s request. Juliet and I had created and vetted the guest list of our friends from school, and it seemed like everyone who got the invitation had come.

Ryan was in the middle of it all, being hugged and clapped on the back by his friends. Liam and Todd were on either side of him, arms wrapped around his shoulders. A few other guys from his soccer team were ragging on him and tossing jokes back and forth. He turned his head around to meet my eye or to make sure I was still there and shot me a wink. I grinned back and waved.

“It’s definitely going to be different without him,” I told Jules. She reached down and grabbed my hand, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

“You’ll still have him,” she assured me. “He’s not going anywhere. That boy is one hundred percent smitten with you.”

I laughed. “I know. It will just be different.”

Once Ryan was done being harassed, he found his way back over to me. “Heya, Bells!” he drawled as he yanked me to him and kissed me.

I smiled against his lips and wrapped my hand around his neck. My fingers brushed along the curly ends of his hair, feeling the coolness of a metal chain he wore.

Juliet cleared her throat from behind us. I pulled away and blushed as she sipped her drink. I had forgotten she was right there. “Aren’t you two cozy?”

Ryan and I glanced at each other. He wrapped his arm around my waist before excusing us. “We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Juliet waved her hand, brushing us off. “Whatever, I didn’t see anything. You kids have fun.”

Ryan snickered and grabbed my hand, leading me out of the party room and down the hallway. He pulled me through a door into the courtyard behind the rec center. The yard was spacious. Trees, flowers, and bushes were planted throughout the area, giving it an otherworldly feel. The taller trees had Christmas lights wrapped around their trunks. It was just barely dusk; the sun was setting below the horizon, painting the sky a mixture of pinks and oranges against the clouds. The lights twinkled against the increasing darkness.

He directed me down the small path until we reached a sitting area. There were two benches angled across from one another. Instead of sitting us down, he stopped right in front of one. He turned around and faced me, taking my hands in his.

“I can’t believe you did this for me,” he said, looking at me lovingly. “I just thought we’d hang out on one of our couches tonight.”

I shrugged as I grinned. “You deserve a better sendoff than a night on the couch.”

“You sure about that?” Ryan teased me as he clutched me, lightly tracing his lips on mine. “I think I’d be perfectly happy with a couch. There are lots of things we could do on a couch.”

“I’m aware,” I teased him right back.

Ryan and I had definitely made good use of the past two weeks. If I was going to be doing long distance with him for

the next however long, I wanted to be sure that I got my fill of him while he was here. And *boy*, did I ever.

Ryan was incredible. He was thoughtful and considerate, both in and out of the bedroom. He was never selfish and always willing to give before he got, though I was plenty eager to learn what he liked to receive. We were now experts in each other. I knew what drove Ryan crazy, and he knew exactly how to push all my right buttons.

“But speaking of things to do on a couch...” Ryan paused and glanced back at the door to the rec plex. “Do you think your parents would let you spend the night at my place?”

I pressed my lips together. “Maybe. What did you have in mind?”

Ryan smirked. “I hoped we could spend our last night together.”

I smiled at him. “I’m sure I can make it happen.”

He grinned and briefly pressed his lips to mine before pulling away. “Also, I got you something.”

“This is your party. Why are you getting me a present?” I asked, furrowing my eyebrows.

Ryan chuckled. “Well, I wanted to give you something to remember me by.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small jewelry box. It had the name of a shop I didn’t recognize. I took it from him, my eyes darting up to him in shock. He gave me an encouraging nod, and I looked down at the small box before removing the lid.

Inside was a small silver heart pendant. I pulled the necklace out and held it out in my palm, admiring it. The heart was plated in sterling silver, with a single diamond fixed in the middle. The jewel caught the light, sparkling as I tilted it to get a better view.

“It’s beautiful, Ryan,” I told him, beaming.

“Turn it over,” he instructed, and I did. On the backside was etched *R & B* in neat script. I ran my thumb over it,

feeling the engraving against my thumb.

“I love it.”

Ryan kept his eyes on me as he reached into the collar of his shirt and pulled out a chain wrapped around his neck, revealing a silver dog tag with a heart stamped out of the right corner. I stepped closer to him and lifted up my necklace. It was a perfect fit. My silver heart had been cut out of his dog tag.

My fingers grasped the tag, and I looked at it closer. Ryan’s had an engraving on it as well. *Distance means so little when someone means so much. R & B.*

Ryan took my necklace out of my hands and twirled a finger, instructing me to turn around. I did, and I felt him fist my hair, pulling it to one shoulder. He lifted his arms around me and secured the necklace clasp at the base of my neck. His fingers trailed gently over the skin of my shoulder before he pressed a kiss against me.

My eyes started to sting, tears threatening to spill over. I looked up at the sky and took a deep breath, not wanting to cry. Despite my efforts, a few slipped past my eyelids and trailed down my face. When I sniffled, Ryan turned me around to face him. His hand reached up to my cheek, and he wiped the tear away with his thumb. That just spurred on the tears even more. This time, I didn’t try to stop them. I let the tears fall freely.

Ryan wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest. He maneuvered us onto one of the stone benches. I snuggled against him, pressing my body as close to his as possible. “Don’t cry, pretty girl.”

I buried my face in his neck and let him hold me while I cried. “I don’t know how we’re going to do this,” I whimpered between sniffles.

The fears and uncertainty had been building over the last week. The ever-looming departure date sat at the back of my mind. I tried not to let it jade the time we had left together, but it was impossible. I’m sure, to some degree, it did. I had

distracted myself with planning the party and making sure that everything was perfect, but now that we were here, on the eve of his leaving, all the emotions I had been suppressing boiled over.

Ryan sighed and kissed the side of my hair. “We’ll just have to take it one day at a time.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

I pulled away slightly and bit my lip, looking at him apologetically. Those words had been on the tip of my tongue all week. It was selfish of me to say that, but it was true. I knew saying them out loud wouldn’t change anything. Nor would I let it. If I begged Ryan to stay, he would. I believed with all my heart that he would drop everything and stay here with me. But I couldn’t ask that of him. I couldn’t take away this opportunity.

That didn’t mean I had to like it.

He exhaled sadly and ran the back of his fingers down my cheek. “I don’t want to go either.”

“But, you have to.”

Ryan nodded. “It’s probably for the best.”

It was true. This Norwin Bates Internship would set him up for the rest of his life, without a doubt.

Now having better control of my emotions, I sat up straighter and wiped my eyes. I gave him a sad smile. “Sorry for getting all blubbery.”

He leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine, closing his eyes. “I don’t mind. I hate seeing you cry, but it makes me feel a little better knowing I’m not the only one hurting.”

“We’ll get through this,” I said, hoping I came across as confident. I had to redirect this conversation before I completely lost control again. “We should probably get back to the party.”

Ryan watched me, his eyes studying my face. I couldn’t make out whatever thought process was going through his

mind, but finally, the corners of his lips were tipped up. His eyes gleamed as he asked playfully, “Think they’re missing the guest of honor?”

I rolled my eyes and stood up. “I don’t know why they would. He’s obnoxious.”

“Yeah,” he drawled, following my lead and taking my hand. “But you love me.”

“You don’t know that,” I teased him. “Maybe I’m just a good actress. I might still loathe your existence.”

“You don’t.” He looked at me from the corner of his eye and gave me a heart-stopping grin.

My fingers fumbled with the small silver heart now resting over my chest. I got Ryan’s message: his heart belonged to me, and mine to him. We had overcome and learned so much in so little time. Though this next chapter of our lives might be difficult, we at least had that to fall back on. If Ryan and I could survive being stranded out in the middle of the woods together, we could survive the distance.

If I had learned anything in the past few months, I learned there was so much more to this King of Bennett than just the crown. Ryan was reliable. He had proven that to me over and over again. The cruel, arrogant boy I had pegged him as before turned out to be more loving and gentle. His confidence gave me hope that we could pull this off.

More than anything, I had to believe that.

And Ryan was right, of course. My days of loathing him were over.

RYAN

THE HORRIBLE SOUND of my alarm pulled me out of my dream. I groaned and reached over to my nightstand to shut it off. Izabel sighed against my chest as I shifted to get my phone. Her cheek stuck to my skin, both of us a little sweaty from our proximity.

I was shocked when her father said it was okay for her to spend the night. Mr. Sanders and I had had a few good talks once it was clear to him that Bells and I were serious and not just a summer fling.

He had called me out on the back porch one evening when I was over there for dinner. Handing me a beer, he said, “Sit down, son.”

Not going to lie, I considered running. Izabel’s dad looked at me seriously and addressed me sincerely. But I didn’t run. Instead, I squared my shoulders and listened to what he had to say. I had never done the boyfriend thing before, so I hadn’t known what to expect with the “Dad-Talk.”

We talked, he asked my intentions, and I answered him honestly. I divulged more to him about how I felt than I had outwardly to Bells.

She meant everything to me, and I was going to marry her. Not now, of course. But someday. I knew without a doubt that we would spend the rest of our lives together.

Mr. Sanders, or Dan, as he told me to call him, nodded at my answers and took a deep swig of his beer. “We’ll see,” was

all he said. Still, he patted me on the shoulder approvingly as he walked inside.

Once my alarm had been shut off, I turned back to my girlfriend, rubbing my nose against the top of her head and breathing in her sleepy scent.

Three hours to go.

I tightened my arm around Izabel's waist and moved her onto her back, with me hovering above her. Her eyes closed as I peppered kisses across her cheek, neck, and chest. I kissed the swells of her breasts and traced my tongue around her nipple.

She sucked in a deep breath, letting me know she was awake. I watched her face until she fluttered her eyes open, flashing me with the blue that I loved so much.

I shifted back up until we were nose to nose. "Morning, sleepyhead."

She blinked her eyes a few times as she got her bearings. Then awareness dawned on her, and her blue eyes dimmed, sadness blooming on her features. Izabel said nothing, but arched her breasts against me and captured my lips with hers. I immediately picked up on her need and shifted her legs open with my knee before settling myself inside her.

Izabel threw her head back with a gasp as I moved. "Fuck," I moaned, too, feeling her around me. We had done this all night, but I don't think I would ever get over how she and I felt together.

I moved deep and slow until both of us reached our climaxes. As she was coming down from the high of her orgasm, she hit me with earnest eyes. "I love you, Ryan."

Nuzzling her nose with mine, I kissed her passionately. "I love you, Bells. More than you know."

When we were both stable enough to move, we got up. We didn't say much to each other as we showered and dressed. My eyes darted to the packed and ready suitcases by my bedroom door.

Two hours.

As soon as we walked downstairs, I was hit with the smell of bacon. My mom looked up once we entered the kitchen.

“Morning!” she chirped as she spooned the rest of the scrambled eggs from the pan onto different plates.

I took in my surroundings, noting the coffee pot was full and everything was done up on the dining room table. My stomach growled as I observed the spread. My mom had gone all out with bacon, eggs, pancakes, and fresh fruit.

We sat and ate and talked about the party last night. Izabel had done a fantastic job of getting everything set up. I ate my breakfast, but kept in mind that I’d be on a plane for the rest of the day. I didn’t overstuff myself, knowing that would be a recipe for disaster.

Once we all finished, we loaded my stuff into the car and set off.

One and a half hours left.

My mom and Derek drove us to the airport. Mom was chattering the whole way, despite it being outrageously early. I’d blame it on her pregnancy hormones, but I knew it was how she coped. Mom didn’t do well with silence. I understood. I was all she had. Derek kept glancing at her out of concern. For the first time, I found myself glad that Derek was around. He would keep her company and watch out for her while I was halfway across the world. I’d be coming home around Christmas once the baby was born. But until then, Derek would be there for her.

Izabel and I sat in the back seat of my mom’s SUV, our hands locked together. Bells kept her eyes trained out the window, even though it was still dark. My thumb gently stroked over hers. I felt like my heart was going to jump out of my chest. The farther and farther we drove from home, the more panic and nerves set in.

I was trying to control myself, but I could tell I was getting overwhelmed.

One hour.

Mom pulled into the drop-off terminal of the airport. Derek helped me grab my bags from the car's trunk while Izabel and Mom held each other. Setting the bags on the curb, he turned to face me.

We'd had a rough start. It was uncomfortable when he first moved in, getting used to our family of two becoming a family of three. Over the past few weeks, though, I had tried to get to know him better. Derek was going to be a constant in my life, moving forward. He had assured me he was here to stay, and I believed him.

He pressed his lips together and offered me a handshake. I gripped it and was surprised when he pulled me in for a hug. His arm wrapped around my shoulder, clapping me on the back twice.

"You take care of yourself, Ryan," he said. His words were tight. "I'll take care of your mom."

I felt my eyes sting, which took me off guard, and I hugged him back.

Mom came next, and she didn't try to hide her tears. She wrapped her arms around me as best as she could. It was harder now due to the baby slightly bumping out of her belly. She told me she loved me and hugged me tightly. I let a few tears sneak out of my eyes as I held her.

We were no strangers to being apart, since I spent most of the year at school. But this was a different ballpark. At school, I was only half an hour away. Germany was a little bit farther than that.

Pulling away, Mom kissed me on the cheek. "I love you, Ryno. Be careful, be safe, learn lots, and have fun." She glanced behind her briefly at Izabel, who was fiddling with her fingers, trying not to interrupt. "We'll give you two some time."

She walked away and murmured to Izabel they'd be waiting in the car.

Half an hour left.

I held out my hand for Izabel, and she gladly took it. Together, we walked into the airport terminal to have some privacy away from my mom's and her fiancé's watching eyes.

Despite it being so early, the airport was buzzing. The terminal was split into two sections. We were standing at the crossroads of Arrivals and Departures. Baggage claim and arrivals were downstairs. Security for departures was upstairs.

I looked around and located where I needed to go next. Then, I turned to Bells. Her eyes were glassy as she looked at me and forced a tight-lipped smile.

"Well, I guess this is it," she said, trying to make light of the situation.

I shrugged. "I guess so."

Her smile fell, and she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. I moved swiftly, gathering her in my arms and hugging her close. Her heartbeat thudded against my chest a little too rapidly. "Shh, it's okay."

I felt her head shake against me as her shoulders shuddered. "It's not, but I love you for pretending it is."

I let her go and held on to her shoulders. "We *will* get through this, one way or another." My fingers tucked a section of hair behind her ear. "You'll be so busy with your first term at Princeton that you probably won't even miss me."

Izabel rolled her eyes. "That will never happen. I'll always miss you." She played with the small heart around her neck.

"I'll miss you, too," I told her.

"Look, Ryan. I know your mom told you to have fun and all..." she trailed off.

"But?" I prompted, knowing what was coming.

"But don't have *too* much fun. I secretly want you to be just a little miserable."

I threw my head back and laughed. "Trust me, Bells. I'll definitely be miserable without you."

She smiled. "Good."

I wasn't worried. We'd get through this. Izabel and I had already conquered so much together. There wasn't any reason why we couldn't survive this too.

The plan was that I'd come home at Christmas each year. Then we would alternate summer trips. I'd go home during the summer of the first year, and the following summer, she'd travel to Berlin.

There would be a seven-hour time difference, so talking on the phone or FaceTiming would have to be planned. We agreed to always try to set time aside during the week when we could talk and spend virtual time together. We could do this. I knew we could.

I kissed her deeply, my tongue swirling with hers as I tried to convey everything that I couldn't say. She kissed me back just as ardently, pressing her body against mine.

When we pulled away, we both had tears in our eyes. This was it.

"I love you, Bells," I said, leaning my forehead against hers.

"I love you too, Ryan, so much." Her arms wrapped around my neck again, and she held me close.

"I promise you, whether it's five years from now or a hundred, I will still love you. Distance or time is not going to affect that," I told her honestly.

Bells smiled at me softly. I could tell she didn't necessarily believe me, but that didn't matter. I would prove to her as many times as she needed. We were each other's endgame.

I grabbed my suitcase, kissed her one more time for good measure, and then turned and headed toward the escalators. Once I reached the top, I turned back to her. Bells smiled at me and waved, then brought her fingers up to her lips to blow me a kiss.

Pretending to catch it, I pressed my fist against my chest. I gave Bells one long last look, memorizing everything about her, and then headed confidently into my next chapter.

CHAPTER 28

FALL — Year 1 — Izabel

SHIT. I was going to be late.

I threw my backpack over my shoulder and ran out of my dorm. How could I sleep in on my first day of classes? Actually, no, I knew precisely how. My roommate and I had been up till all hours of the night, gossiping, drinking contraband seltzers, and learning about each other. She fell head over heels for my *epic* love story with Ryan. She wanted all the gory details.

Speaking of Ryan, I checked my phone to see if he had messaged me yet. No such luck.

Working around the time difference had proven to be somewhat of a challenge. While I was running like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to get to my first eight a.m. class, Ryan was getting started with his afternoon.

He had only been gone for two months. And it was already the longest two months of my life. I had no idea how we would pull off doing this for five years. But he assured me over and over again that he believed in us. And I believed in him.

I bolted across campus to try to get to my class on time. Zipping up the stairs, I found my lecture hall. Most of the seats were taken already, but I saw a few in the middle row that I was willing to claim.

“Excuse me, sorry,” I said to a bunch of my new classmates as I scooted through the aisle to get to the open seat.

When I finally made it, I plopped my backpack on the ground and sat down in a huff. I glanced at my watch. I made it with seven minutes to spare.

I had wanted to get to the building early, so I could look around and find the water fountains and the bathrooms. But this would have to do. I could explore after class. My next lecture wasn't until noon, so I had time.

“Izabel?” I was startled when I heard my name and turned to the student beside me. I had been in such a rush that I hadn't observed who my neighbors were.

My eyebrows furrowed when I recognized the familiar face. “Mark?”

Grinning wildly, he laughed. “Well, this is a pleasant surprise. I didn't know you were coming to Princeton!”

“Oh, yeah, I didn't know you were either!” I tried to sound as happy as he did. “What's your major?”

Mark shrugged, still smiling at me. “Pre-law,” he said confidently. “Or at least that's the plan. You?”

“History. I'm a nerd,” I responded, shrugging. The more I looked at him, the harder it was not to smile back. The kid had an infectious aura to him. His chocolate eyes were so warm and inviting.

“That's awesome. You're definitely not a nerd. I think it's cool that you're into history. It's my worst subject,” he told me. We small-talked for another minute before he threw another curveball at me. “How's it going with the whole Ryan thing? If you two are even still together.”

I narrowed my eyes, not really appreciating the snarkiness in his last statement. “We are. And what Ryan thing?”

Mark looked at me in confusion. “Isn't he in the Norwin Bates program? In Germany? Or did he turn it down?”

I sighed. “Oh no, he's there. He left right after graduation.”

Mark nodded, though his lips turned down a fraction. “Good for him, I guess. Sucks that it’s so far away, though. How’s it going for him?”

How was it going for Ryan? Great. Perfect even. He was living the dream. Ryan had gotten to Berlin and was immediately welcomed into Norwin Bates Industries as a valued team member. The program typically accepted four students from all over the world. It was a highly exclusive internship.

Ryan’s assignment was to Norwin Bates’s own son, Teddy. Due to the heavy workload, it wasn’t unusual for the interns to be assigned to higher executives. Plus, that allowed the interns to see how the organization ran. Ryan told me that Teddy would eventually take over the company once his father retired. The two hit it off immediately, and he’s been on the fast track to success ever since.

Ryan’s days were busy between school and work and then homework. We definitely had to make sure that we scheduled time for each other. But so far, the internship was everything he hoped it would be. I was excited for him. He was already learning so much that it would give him a huge advantage when he finished school.

“He’s great,” I told Mark and then went to pull out my notebook and textbook from my backpack. We were in English 101. A required course for all undergrads.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mark said. He followed my lead and grabbed his class supplies before pining for my attention again. “Hey, I’m glad to see a friendly face around here. I was worried I wouldn’t know anyone. Would you be open to maybe making a study group? I know we’ll be in different classes and whatnot, but I think getting a table or something in the library a few times a week would be cool.”

I looked over at Mark. He was a nice guy. He really was. I could tell he was nervous about the transition into college life, so having a friend right away would do him good. Honestly, it would benefit me too.

“Yeah, Mark. I think that would be great!”

Christmas — Year 1 — Ryan

“Oh my God!” Bells screamed as she launched herself into my arms. Laughing, I dropped my bags on the ground and caught her. I spun her around in the air, elated that she was finally in my arms again.

I held her close and buried my face in her hair. She still used the same shampoo. It was depressing how happy that made me. Staying there for a moment, I pulled away and looked her over. “Heya, Bells!”

Izabel grinned from ear to ear. “Hey, yourself!”

My eyes roamed over her, my hands tracing the outline of her, drinking in all that was Izabel. “Did you change your hair?”

Her hands went up to her hair, and she swooped it over to one side. “Yeah, I got it cut and highlighted a little. Do you like it?”

“You’re always beautiful, Bells,” I said softly, grabbing her waist. “Now, come here.” I pulled her into me and finally pressed my lips against hers.

It was as if I was finally breathing air again. It had been months since I had Izabel right in front of me. Months since I felt those beautiful lips on my own. I was starving for her.

I kissed her like a man deprived for a few minutes until she finally wrestled away from me. God, she was beautiful. Her new hair was a little messed up from my fingers, and her lips were slightly swollen from the kissing. I had never seen anything sexier than her right now.

“Your mom and Derek are in the car,” she said softly, a blush creeping onto her cheeks.

I smiled. That was nice of my mom to send Bells in to retrieve me. She was dying to see me and introduce me to my

new baby sister, but she knew how badly Izabel and I needed a little privacy.

“Oookay,” I groaned, reaching for the bags that I had discarded. “Let’s go see this baby.”

“Oh, you’ll love her, Ryan. She’s a doll!” Izabel crooned as she reached for my hand. “I’ve never seen such a perfect baby.”

Wait till you see ours, I wanted to say, but I bit my tongue.

Izabel and I had now officially been dating for a little over six months. Most of those were long distance, but we were together, nonetheless. We had both been living completely different lives, her at Princeton and me in Germany. But overall, I’d say we did pretty well at the whole distance-loving thing.

There had been a few fights and a few emotional nights. But there were lots of good nights too. I had discovered that, while still not as good as the real deal, phone sex with Izabel was freaking *hot*.

I couldn’t wait to get her naked now, though. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. She was holding my free hand and practically skipping out of happiness. I missed her so much. I had about five months’ worth of love to make up for. I had been picturing that moment with her for months. Having her naked in my bed. My tongue roaming over every inch of her, re-learning the divots and grooves of her body.

Jesus. I was getting hard just thinking about it.

Izabel led me to the car, and I had to focus on calming myself down. I didn’t want to meet my baby sister for the first time with a hard-on.

My mom saw us approaching and hopped out of the car to hug me. Derek followed suit and clapped me on the shoulder.

“Hey, guys!” I exclaimed. My mom had tears falling down her cheeks, but the biggest smile I had ever seen. “You look great, Mom. Now, where’s my baby sister?” My eyes darted to the back seat, where I knew she was hiding.

Derek had stepped around us and unbuckled her. He wrapped her in a fuzzy pink blanket and brought her to me. I dropped my bags on the ground again and held my arms out for her.

“Ryan, this is Thalia,” Derek said, transferring his little girl into my arms. I held on to her tightly, afraid that I’d drop her. She was so tiny I could hardly believe it. Thalia was only a few weeks old. She came right at the beginning of December.

My eyes darted to Izabel, watching us with an expression I couldn’t name. “She is perfect,” I said, jogging back to what Bells said. “Hi, Thalia, I’m your big brother,” I said to the tiny pink bundle as I bounced her slightly.

I held her for a few more minutes before we buckled her back in and loaded up in the car to head home. I was itching to get away from this airport, out of these clothes, and into the shower—preferably with Izabel. She and I had some reacquainting to do.

Hours later, once Izabel and I had frantically made love, we lay together in bed. I held her close, her cheek on my chest, my hand trailing up and down her spine. On the pattern back up, I hit the spot on her back that made her shiver against me.

“I love you,” I whispered to her for the millionth time that day as I pressed my lips against her forehead.

Izabel shifted and hit me with those blue eyes. I had never been so content in my life. I never wanted this moment to end. The two of us were pressed skin-to-skin, and I had never felt more whole.

Christmas was next week, followed by New Year’s. Then back to the grind. I had gotten three weeks off from the internship. Which didn’t feel like enough time, but Izabel and I had fallen in love in less than that. We’d make do with what we were given.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” she told me. Her eyes roamed my face as if trying to convince herself I was actually home. Actually here.

Scooping my arm underneath her, I rolled until I was on top of her again. I sighed happily as I settled between her thighs, feeling her heat seep into me—my favorite place to be.

“Me too, Bells. Real sex is so much better than phone sex,” I teased her.

Izabel shoved my shoulder and laughed. “Whatever. We made do.”

I played with the ends of her hair. She had cut a few inches off. It was just to her shoulders now. And she had thrown some copper highlights in. “What made you want to do your hair?”

She shrugged and smiled. “I don’t know. Right before the break, Mark mentioned getting his buzzed off, and it just got me thinking it was time for a change.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Mark?”

“Oh yeah, Mark Snyder, from Bennett. He goes to Princeton with me.” She paused. “How have I never told you that?”

I rolled off her onto my side and propped my head in my hand. “As in Marky Mark?” She nodded, and I chuckled, though I really wasn’t amused. He had had a thing for Izabel long before she and I got together. “No, you never did tell me that.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe it never came up.” Bells leaned forward and kissed me deeply. “I mean, we were probably busy talking about other things. There is always so much we have to catch up on.”

Laughing, I felt my muscles relax. “You’re right. So you two are friends, then?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, we had some classes together last semester, so we kind of made a study group.”

“Study buddies, huh?”

Izabel rolled her eyes. “Not in the way you’re thinking. He’s just a friend.”

I wasn't sure how I felt about this new information. But I knew Bells. And based on the way she threw herself at me at the airport, I had to believe that she still felt as strongly as I did. I always asked her to trust *me*, so now it was time to put my money where my mouth was and trust *her*.

My fingers found the silver heart necklace on her chest and started to fiddle with it, pointer finger running over the smooth edge. She had my heart. I hadn't taken off the dog-tag version of mine once in the time that we were apart.

This long-distance thing was a little more complicated than I had thought it would be. We lived separate lives, her at school and me in Germany. It was manageable, and we were doing as best as we could. But there were parts of her life I had no role in, which was hard to swallow sometimes. And vice versa. I wanted to be involved in everything Izabel. She meant the world to me.

I tried my best to keep her in the loop of everything that happened in Germany with school and work. Though I was sure, a lot of it went over her head. Izabel was brilliant, but engineering was something that she just couldn't grasp. Which I understood. Most of the time, I didn't know what was happening.

Four and a half more years. That's it. Then we could be together for the rest of our lives. We could do it, right?

Summer - End of Year 1 - Izabel

"CANNONBALL!" Ryan screamed as he ran from the end of the dock toward the water. He catapulted into the air and lifted his knees to his chest, curling into himself.

I squealed and tried to swim away from the landing zone as fast as possible. I was still not the world's best swimmer, but I could doggy paddle really well. And I knew how to keep myself from sinking, so I was happy with my progress.

Ryan flew through the air and landed in the water with a huge splash. I covered my eyes as the water splashed on my face. My boyfriend popped out of the water right in front of

me. Tossing me a wild grin, he shook his hair and the water out of his eyes.

“Heya, Bells,” he said cheekily, kissing me.

I smiled against his lips. “Hey, yourself.”

“What do you think that scored?” he asked, referencing his splash.

I pretended to think about it for a minute. “I don’t know, a five, maybe?”

Ryan looked like I had just sucker-punched him in the gut. “A *five*? Bells, c’mon, that was at *least* an eight.”

“The splash only went to, like, here,” I told him mockingly, holding my hand up above the water’s edge.

Ryan narrowed his eyes and scooped me up in his arms. I giggled as he spun me around and launched me into the water. When I came up, sputtering, I splashed him right back. We continued to water fight until our fingers were pruney, and we were out of breath.

After we were done swimming, we made camp up on the dock. The sun was at its peak today, making the wooden boards hot to sit on. Luckily, Ryan thought ahead and brought us a few extra towels to make a small picnic blanket. It was the most colorful tablecloth I’d ever seen, decorated in a tropical theme.

Ryan was also thoughtful enough to pack a lunch. He swung the lunchbox from over his shoulder and plopped down next to me. Rummaging around in the pack, he produced two sandwiches, chips, and sodas.

I unwrapped the one he handed to me and took a big bite. After chewing and swallowing, I shot him a questioning look. “Peanut butter and jelly?”

He shrugged in between mouthfuls. “We were out of lunch meat at my house. Besides,” he said, taking another quick bite, “can’t go wrong with a PBJ on a hot day.”

I conceded and scarfed down the rest of my sandwich. Once our bellies were full, we lay side by side on our towels,

soaking up the sun.

“What a perfect day,” Ryan observed after a few moments of silence. He tilted his head toward me, hitting me with his green eyes.

I smiled back at him and rolled onto my side. “What about it is perfect?”

“The sky, not a cloud in sight. The lake, the water feels great, and it’s surprisingly not crowded today. And you,” he said, grinning. “I missed you, Bells.”

Ryan had only been home for two days at this point, and he only got two weeks off this time around. That meant we were taking full advantage of his time at home. He would return to Berlin for the full summer internship with Bates. He wouldn’t have to worry about school for another month or so, but he would be spending all his time working.

I had finished up my first year at Princeton with flying colors. While I hadn’t gotten straight As for the first time in my life, I wasn’t discouraged. I was really looking forward to next year, because I would get to take a few more focused courses rather than just the general education credits.

This year was difficult without Ryan. Sometimes we would go all week without talking to each other. And I felt like sometimes, even when we did get to speak, we both had other things that we knew we had to be doing: homework, projects, or chores. But still, we persisted. When Ryan said he would call, he always did. He was never one to go back on his word.

Me, on the other hand...

Once or twice, we had scheduled a Skype date, and I got sidetracked with studying or some other extracurricular activity. And while I was always apologetic, Ryan was always understanding. He’d say, “Go have fun, Bells. You only go to college once.” And then we’d meet up again at the end of the week.

He really didn’t like that I was still hanging out with Mark, though. He never came outright and said it, but I could tell. He would get this line between his eyebrows whenever I

mentioned something Mark did. Ryan was all about trust, and he'd repeatedly say that he trusted me, though he would occasionally question why I didn't hang out with people inside my own major. The truth was that I tried, but I never seemed to click with anyone. Thankfully, I always had Mark to fall back on. He seemed to be the one constant in the craziness of moving to a new campus.

He had nothing to worry about. Mark was a great friend, but nothing more. Sure, I had fun hanging out with him, but I never felt whole at school. Half of my heart was with Ryan in Berlin, and I was never complete unless we were together. That's what made all this struggle worth it. When we saw each other over breaks, I was reminded how much I was missing when he was gone.

We had four more years. I believed in us.

"I can't wait for you to come to Berlin next summer," Ryan said, still looking at the sky.

I scooted next to him on the blanket and leaned against his shoulder. Ryan kissed the top of my head, lingering there for a second.

"I can't wait either. I'm so excited!" And I was. There were so many things I wanted to see and experience in Berlin. The plan was that Ryan would get a few weeks off and show me around.

It was still a year away, but it was something to look forward to. That was how we were getting by, I think. Having things to look forward to; events to count down. We needed to take advantage of every chance we got to see each other and reconnect.

Distance may make the heart grow fonder, but there was nothing quite like being in Ryan's arms.

CHAPTER 29

Thanksgiving — Year 2 — Izabel

“OKAY, YOU CAN DO THIS,” I said, tapping the flashcards into a neat stack. I read through the terms again, waiting for Mark to answer each one correctly before moving on. He had a huge poli-sci exam at the end of the week, and he asked me to help him study.

Mark sat across from me at our table in the library with his head in his hands. “This blows. I’m going to fail the exam.”

I whacked his head with the flashcards. “You are not. Now stop it. You just have to get through this exam, and then we’ll be on Thanksgiving break, and you won’t have to worry about any tests or homework for a *whole* week.”

Mark was not the best studier. He was more of the balls-to-the-walls type of guy, but typically scored well, which was annoying.

He looked at me through his fingers. “Yeah, you’re right. A break will be amazing. Much needed.”

I bit my lip and grinned. It certainly would. Ryan was scheduled to come home for Thanksgiving, and I couldn't wait. This semester was challenging for both Ryan and me, so we needed some quality time to rest and recharge.

As if I summoned him just by thinking of his name, my phone screen lit up with a FaceTime call. Ryan's name proudly stood out on the screen.

"Uh oh, Prince Charming is calling," Mark teased me, grabbing his flashcards out of my hand so I could answer.

I handed them over, shaking my head, and swiped my screen to answer it. Ryan's handsome face appeared, his hair an unruly mess. He had dark shadows under his eyes, which lacked the sparkle they usually had. He must have been having a rough week.

"Heya, Bells," he said weakly, running his hand across his neck. I saw Mark roll his eyes from across the table. He hated that Ryan called me *Bells*. He thought it was childish. Mark only ever called me Izabel.

"Hey, Ry," I said back to him, grinning.

Ryan's eyes trailed over my face, drinking me in. "You look beautiful."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You look tired. Did you just get off work?"

"Yeah, hey, what are you doing right now?" he asked me.

I smirked. "I'm at the library with Mark. Why? What did you have in mind?" Maybe he needed a little pick-me-up after his long day. I'd be down with that.

"I need to talk to you about something privately. Do you think you could step away for a second?"

I frowned, and Mark narrowed his eyes. Something was definitely off with Ryan's tone. I glanced at my friend, and he nodded, going back to his flashcards. I stepped away from the table and into a more private alcove.

"What's wrong, Ryan?" I asked once I was alone. My heart rate picked up in my chest, a list of horrible answers scrolling

through my head.

“It’s nothing terrible. We just need to talk.”

“Okay...”

“I told you about that merger the company’s going through, right? The smaller company they bought?” he asked. I nodded. He had explained how important it was when we talked two weeks ago. “Well, things aren’t going as smoothly as they thought they would. It looks like I won’t be able to make it home for Thanksgiving because they need me here.”

Ryan looked at me warily as he dropped the news. I furrowed my eyebrows as it sunk in. “You’re not coming home at all?”

He shook his head. “No, just not for Thanksgiving. Teddy told me I should be all clear to come home for New Year’s, but since Thanksgiving isn’t a holiday in Berlin, there’s no way around this.”

“That really sucks, Ryan,” I told him honestly. My stomach was clenched up, and my heart sank. “I was really looking forward to seeing you.”

“Yeah, I know, Bells.”

My eyes roamed over his image on my screen. He looked worn down. “Are you okay?” I asked him softly. This wasn’t like him. Usually, he was upbeat and positive, but the man on the screen just looked like he had been through the wringer.

Ryan closed his eyes and rested his chin in his hand. “Things have been...” he hesitated, “rough. I really needed some alone time with you. So I’m kind of bummed.”

“Rough, how?” I prodded him. I walked farther into the alcove and found a corner where I sat and leaned against the wall. I got a few questionable glances from students passing by, but I didn’t care. Mark could study his flashcards by himself for a while, too.

He shrugged and looked at me intensely. “I don’t know. It’s just been kind of a struggle the last few weeks. The back

and forth between school and work and work and school is wearing on me. I barely feel like I have time to breathe.”

“I understand,” I whispered. I got involved with the Historical Society at Princeton this semester. It had proved to be more demanding than I had thought. It wasn’t engineering, but I understood what he was talking about when he said he was stretched thin.

“Some turkey and pumpkin pie and stuffing were sounding hella good, too,” he joked with me. Typical Ryan, trying to lighten up the mood.

It worked. I laughed, and he gave me a small smile. “Well, tell you what,” I started, thinking quick on my feet. “As long as you *promise* you’ll be home for New Year’s, I’ll talk to your mom, and we can make up a big turkey dinner for you then.”

Ryan’s face lit up at my suggestion. “You’d do that?”

I grinned. “For you? Yeah, I guess I can make an exception.”

“You’re the best, Bells. Really,” he murmured. Then he went quiet for a minute as he looked at me with a doopy expression. “I don’t know how I got so lucky with you.”

“Honestly, I don’t either,” I teased him. “If I recall correctly, you kidnapped me and made me fall in love with you. I sometimes wonder if we’re living in a freaky erotic novel.”

He sighed in exasperation. “Here I was trying to be all sweet and cute, and you hit me with that. You’re killing me over here, pretty girl.”

“You know I love you,” I said softly. “Just trying to make you feel better.”

“Yeah, I know. I love you too.” He smiled through the screen, and finally, his green eyes sparked to life again.

New Year's Eve — Year 2 — Ryan

“Mmm, Ryan, have you tried these meatballs?” Bells asked me in between bites. She had some barbeque sauce on the corner of her mouth.

I chuckled as I reached up with my thumb to wipe it off. “I haven’t yet, but I’m assuming they’re good?”

“They’re the best balls I’ve ever had!”

I gave her a pained look, and she threw her head back and laughed. I had been home since Christmas, and Bells and I hadn’t had a chance to really *be* together. And now she was dressed up all sexy for the New Year’s Eve party, with that smoky eye shadow and red lipstick, talking about balls.

She would be the death of me.

Juliet was hosting the NYE party at her house. It was nice to see all my friends from school, but I wanted to bring in the new year with just Bells.

I was still feeling bad about bailing on her over Thanksgiving. She said everything was fine, but it didn’t feel like it.

Ever since then, things between the two of us had felt kind of...off. We didn’t talk quite as much, and it was short and sweet when we did. A quick *hi, how are you? Oh good? That’s good.* She still threw herself at me when I arrived at the airport and had been by my side ever since. But I wasn’t convinced.

We really just needed some time to reconnect. And with Christmas and New Year’s, it was feeling somewhat impossible. All I wanted was to get her alone, tear off that sexy dress, and reacquaint myself with all of her. I was aching to be inside her again.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Izabel asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“I’m thinking about sweeping you off your feet and finding a bedroom,” I told her honestly, and she quirked a brow. Stepping closer to her, I put my hands on her hipbones, forcefully pulling her into me so she could feel what I was talking about. “You are *torturing* me in that dress, Bells.”

Izabel patted my chest with her palm. “Cool yourself, Big Guy. We just got here.”

I groaned as I leaned my forehead down against hers. “Can’t we just take a short break? I know Juliet has a guest bedroom somewhere.”

Bells snickered and stood up on her tiptoes. Her lips met mine, eliciting another pained groan from me. She tasted like meatballs, but I didn’t care; I still clutched her to me desperately. Bells wrapped one hand around my neck, gripping and kneading the muscles.

“You two need to get a room!” Todd exclaimed from the other side of the space we were in.

I reluctantly pulled away from Bells and shot him a glare. “That’s what I’m trying to do!” My friend gave me a thumbs-up and laughed.

Glancing back at my girl, I almost came undone right there. She was a sight to behold. All done up with her cheeks flushed and her lips swollen. There was a heat in her eyes that wasn’t there before, and I knew I had hooked her.

She reached down and grabbed my hand, interlinking our fingers. Together, we walked through the house on a mission to find some privacy. Izabel led me upstairs and to one of the guestrooms. She shoved me into the room before turning and closing the door, making sure it was latched behind her. I sat on the edge of the bed and waited.

Slowly, Bells turned back to me and hit me with a sultry gaze. “You, sir, can be quite convincing,” she whispered as she stepped closer. Her hands went behind her back. I heard the sound of her zipper being lowered. Bells kept her eyes on me

the whole time as she shimmied out of her black dress and let it pool around her feet.

I swallowed thickly as she now stood in front of me in nothing but her black strapless bra and a pair of lacy panties. A small smirk had developed on her lips as she carefully stepped out of the puddle of clothing and moved toward me.

“You are so beautiful,” I murmured as she stepped between my legs. I pressed my lips against her sternum between the swells of her breasts, feeling her hands snake up the nape of my neck and into my hair. Her fingernails scraped along my scalp as I pressed kisses against her skin.

“Make love to me, Ryan,” she said softly. “Please.”

My hands circled her waist, feeling the edge of her panties as I pulled her closer. Then, in one swift move, she was in my arms, and I plopped her straight on her back on the mattress. Izabel watched me as I unbuttoned my dress shirt and shrugged it off, her eyes burning with need.

When I started working on my belt, she groaned with impatience. Smirking, I shucked off my pants and then approached her. She parted her legs, allowing me to settle where I needed to be most.

I continued kissing her chest as I reached behind her back to unclip the barrier keeping her from me. Her back arched when it came free, and she pressed herself up and into my tongue.

I chuckled as I lapped at her. “Eager much?”

She huffed in frustration. “I need you inside of me *right now*.”

I was happy to oblige. I pressed into her and instantly felt at home as soon as her warmth wrapped around me. Our movements were sweet but desperate. Before long, we were both crying out our orgasms together.

Once we were both sated and satisfied, we lay cuddled together in the guest bed. I was on my back with Bells curled up against my side. Her head rested on my shoulder, and her fingers drew mindless patterns against my chest. My hand

trailed up and down her spine, occasionally hitting the spot on her low back that made her shudder.

We were both quiet, but my mind was racing. I had just had slutty party sex with my favorite girl in the world. I should be over the moon. But I still couldn't help but feel that something was off.

We reconnected on a physical level, which was more than enjoyable. I wasn't sure if it was her or me, but I did not feel like we were connected mentally. I only had a few more days left in the States before returning to Berlin. Then we wouldn't see each other until the summer.

I thought about all that I had planned for her visit to Germany. She would love every second of it. Or at least I hoped she would. It would be great to get the chance to show her around. To show her a piece of what my life was like over there. And then, hopefully, the little black box sitting in my sock drawer would be the cherry on top for her trip.

"What are you thinking about?" Bells snapped me out of my thoughts, her voice vibrating against my chest.

I glanced down at her. "Nothing, really. Just about how I won't get to see you until summer."

Izabel pushed herself up slightly so she could look into my eyes. She gave a little pout. "I know. That seems like forever from now."

"I need to ask you something," I trailed off, tightening my arm around her waist and bringing her closer. She looked at me expectantly. "It's just...are we okay, Bells?"

Her eyebrows bunched together. "What do you mean?"

"Things just don't feel the same between us. I just want to make sure that we're okay. That *you're* okay with us. With the distance."

She stared at me for a few seconds, processing what I had just asked her. Then, slowly, she leaned in and pressed her lips to my cheek. My eyes closed of their own accord, relishing her closeness.

“I am more than okay, Ry,” she said against my cheek. “I promise.”

I let out a breath that I didn’t know I was holding and clutched her. Those words gave me relief. I don’t know what to do without her, but I never wanted her to be unhappy. If she had said that she wasn’t okay, we would figure it out. I would not be a burden to her.

“Thank God,” I muttered as I rolled her over again, assuming my position between her legs.

She squealed and wrapped her calves around my lower back, pulling me closer to her. I captured her lips in mine, and we picked up right where we had left off.

SPRING — Year 2 — Izabel

My pencil tapped against the wooden table as I thought about what else to put on this study guide. Midterms were coming up, and I had so much to do; I could barely think straight. My head bopped slightly to the music playing out of my headphones.

The library was swarming today with students cramming for exams. There were energy drinks and coffees strewn across the tables and lots of groans of frustration.

My focus was entirely on my study guide, when I felt a pair of hands clamp down on my shoulders, slightly squeezing my muscles. Startled, I whipped my head around to see Mark grinning behind me. I yanked out one of my earbuds and smiled back.

“What’s up?” I prodded. I hadn’t seen him yet today. Usually, he was always willing to study with me.

Mark kept one hand on my shoulder as he maneuvered into the chair beside me. “You will *never* guess what I got you!”

The energy radiated off him, and he sported one of the biggest smiles I had ever seen. His brown eyes were twinkling in mischief. It was impossible for me not to smile back at him because he emanated so much excitement.

“What is it?” I asked him, now pulling out my other earbud so I could give him my full attention.

Mark moved his hand off my shoulder and reached into his backpack, pulling out a manilla folder and sliding it over to me on the table. I shot him a questioning glance and moved to open it.

My fingers moved inside the folder and pulled out the papers. Mark was beside me, practically bouncing in his chair, unable to contain himself. I looked over the paperwork, and my heart rate increased.

“Italy!” I exclaimed, looking over the waiver printed on the school’s stationery.

“Yes!” he shouted back, throwing up his hands. “It’s a fifteen-day historical tour of Italy! The history department is doing a big tour, and it has open slots. I thought you would love it, so I jumped on the opportunity and put our names down!”

This was incredible! I had always wanted to go to Italy. The food, the history, the atmosphere. It would be a perfect summer excursion, and at no cost. I was beyond excited.

Then I saw the dates. And as I mentally pulled up my calendar, my heart sank into my stomach, leaving me with a sour sick feeling.

“Mark,” I whispered, defeated. “I’m supposed to be in Berlin on those dates.”

“It’s fine. You can just reschedule that,” he brushed me off.

“I’ve been planning that trip for months, years,” I said, irritation tingling in the back of my mind. “You knew I was going to be going this summer. It’s not like I’ve kept it a secret from you.”

Or that it really mattered if I had.

Mark fully settled down now, picking up on my quickly dimming excitement. “Look, Izabel. This is a once-in-a-lifetime trip! You can’t miss this. Just think of all the history we’re going to get to experience.”

I glanced down at the pamphlet. The vivid picture of the Colosseum screamed back at me. “I don’t know if I can do that.”

Now Mark was frowning, his brown eyes staring at me hard. “I really thought you’d be excited about this. I saw the poster and knew I had to sign us up.”

“I know, and I appreciate it, but—”

“If Ryan really loved you, he would understand. He would let you go.”

I shut my mouth as Mark’s words hit me in my core. *If Ryan really loved me?*

“Okay, well...” I trailed off, gutted by Mark’s crestfallen expression. “Maybe I’ll call and ask him and see if it’s okay.”

His eyes got slightly brighter, and he nodded. “You don’t need his *permission*. But you should definitely call him. And tell him that you would hate to miss this opportunity.”

Still staring at Mark, I reached for my phone and scrolled until I found Ryan’s contact info. I did some quick math and figured he should be done with work by now. Part of me hoped he wouldn’t pick up so I wouldn’t have to give him this awful news.

Mark was right, though. Ryan would understand. He would see that this was an excellent opportunity for me.

The call rang until I heard the telltale melody that he had accepted the call. Ryan’s face appeared on my screen. It hadn’t been that long since I had seen him, only since New Year’s. But he looked different. He had gotten a haircut and was letting his scruffy beard grow out a bit.

“Hey,” he said, giving me a soft smile. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, um, fine,” I answered back. My eyes darted to Mark, who gave me an encouraging thumbs-up. “Actually, no, it’s not fine.”

Ryan frowned and raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong?”

I glanced at Mark again. He must have gotten my message 'cause he nodded and stood before walking away, giving us some privacy.

“So, Mark surprised me with something today,” I started.

Ryan chuckled darkly. “I already *love* where this is going. What was it?”

“He got me a tour of Italy.”

“Like from Olive Garden?” Ryan asked me, confused. “What, did you get food poisoning or something?”

I laughed, despite this situation not being funny. “No, Ryan. Not *pasta*. He signed us up to go with a group from school on a tour of Italy. This summer. While I’m supposed to be in Berlin.”

“Aw, well, that’s a bummer. Too bad you’re going to miss it. You would have loved that,” he said as he fiddled with something away from his screen. He was probably sitting at his desk at home doing work.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about....” I trailed off. “I *really* want to go on this trip.”

Ryan’s eyes snapped to me again, his entire focus on me. “But you’re coming to Berlin.”

Pressing my lips together, I braced for the explosion I was about to cause. I didn’t have to answer Ryan for him to catch on to what I wasn’t saying.

Ryan’s gaze sharpened as he looked at me through the phone. I couldn’t meet his eyes, and I was sure he noticed. I don’t think I had ever seen such a stormy expression on Ryan’s face. He was not pleased. Rubbing his eyes with his fingertips, he took a deep breath.

“Okay, so let me make sure that I just heard you correctly. You want to go to Italy with *Mark* instead of coming to Berlin to be with *me*?”

The tone of his voice had me pausing, and I instantly knew I had made a mistake bringing this up to him. Ryan had not used that tone on me in what felt like ages. The hardness of his

words transported me back to the time long before Ryan and I had ever made amends, and my stomach soured.

“Well, that’s not really how I would—”

“This is great, Izabel. Really great,” he cut me off with a growl. “We’ve been planning this forever. Can’t you do a different time for Italy? Spring break or whatever?”

“It’s a school trip,” I uttered weakly. “They already have the dates set. Maybe I could come to Berlin after Italy or before. Or you could meet me in Italy!”

Ryan shook his head. “You know that’s not going to work. Trust me, the last place I want to be is third-wheeling with you and your BFF. And you have finals, and then you plan on doing that internship in Chicago for the rest of the summer. You can’t miss that.”

“Mark said—”

“Mark said, huh?” Ryan said, cutting me off.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing, never mind,” Ryan scowled. He pinched the bridge of his nose as if trying to get ahold of his irritation. “Look, I’m really not comfortable with this. I feel like it’s important for us to get to see each other. I miss you, Bells.”

Pain shot through my sternum and right to my heart at the way his voice fell off the end of his nickname for me. I sucked in a tight breath and focused in on Ryan harder. I let his words sink in and really considered what he was saying to me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “You’re right.”

Ryan’s shoulders dropped, and his eyes softened. “I think we just need to address what’s happening here.”

“What do you mean?”

Ryan exhaled deeply and then tightened his jaw before saying, “It feels like Mark is purposefully trying to manipulate you and drive a wedge between us, and I’m worried.”

I fell silent again for a minute before saying back a little defensively, “I don’t think that’s what he’s doing. Mark’s my

friend, and he figured I would want to go on this trip. That's it."

"Just take a step back and look at this from my perspective, yeah? I know I'm not there, but I'm still trying to hold on to you as tightly as I can. I'm worried you're drifting away from me, and Mark's the one pulling you farther and farther away."

My shoulders drooped, and I looked up at the ceiling, eyes burning as Ryan finished his sentence. It hurt my heart, knowing that he was speaking the truth. A part of me wasn't willing to admit it, but Ryan's perspective felt accurate. When I looked back at the screen, he was watching me closely, his expression kind and understanding.

"I know this is hard, baby," he whispered, and a few tears finally escaped from my eyes. "But that's why we planned for you to come to Germany. If you really don't want to come, then we can figure something else out, but I think our trip should take priority for you. I'd never tell you what to do, but this is where we are."

"I miss you," I said back, at a loss for any other words than how I was feeling at exactly that moment. "I feel so lost without you."

"I know," Ryan admitted. "But I don't know how to make this better. Just promise me you won't give up on us yet. Come to Berlin, please."

I swiped at the tears on my cheeks with my hands. There was no way I could say no to Ryan. "Of course. I'll be there, I promise."

Ryan breathed a sigh, and I picked up on his relief. He grinned at me. "Thank you. We'll have the best time ever."

I forced a smile back, relaxing a bit at the familiar butterflies in my stomach from his boyish smile. He was so handsome. I just wished I could see him in person rather than over a screen.

"I love you," I told him.

Ryan winked at me, his smile still apparent on his face. “I love you too, Bells.”

I hung up the call and took a deep breath, burying my face in my hands to settle my frayed nerves from the call. When I looked up, I saw Mark walking back to the table. Realizing I had noticed him, Mark’s face morphed into the biggest puppy dog grin I had ever seen. I couldn’t help but smile back. Throughout day-to-day life, he was the only one who was consistently here for me. I knew I always had Ryan, but getting ahold of him was not as easy as he just demonstrated today.

“Hey, how’d it go?” Mark asked as he sat down next to me.

“I’m so sorry, Mark, but I can’t. I’m going to Berlin to see Ryan.”

Mark stared at me blankly, just long enough for it to get uncomfortable, then he scoffed under his breath. “Of course, he talked you out of it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, my defenses rising. Mark had no right talking about Ryan like that. “What does that mean?”

Mark took the bait and didn’t hold back. “It means that tool of a boyfriend of yours just manipulated you out of something that *you* wanted to do for *you* so that he could have you all to himself.”

Manipulated.

Ryan’s words echoed in the back of my head; he said something very similar about Mark. “Ryan didn’t *manipulate* me into anything,” I shot back, my hackles rising as I went on the offense. “Ryan loves me, and I love him. He’s my boyfriend, Mark. You can’t blame me for wanting to take every opportunity I have to be with him. It’s not your place to say anything about my relationship with him, so I’d appreciate it if you’d remember that.” Irritation started to spread through my chest, and I tightened my hands in my lap until they were aching as I tried to manage my tone.

“Whatever,” Mark scoffed again and rolled his eyes as if I was being childish. “I don’t have time to sit here and argue with you. Won’t do any good anyway. I’ve got shit to do. Maybe come talk to me when your hormones aren’t raging so hard.”

Without another word, Mark shoved back out of his seat and stormed out of the library. I stared after him, my jaw going slack. My stomach was in tight knots, and guilt loomed at the back of my mind. I knew I made the right choice listening to Ryan, but I hated seeing Mark so upset. He was my best friend. But even with that in mind, I had never witnessed such an outburst from him.

What the hell was that?

Biting on the inside of my lip, I returned to my work, feeling insignificant. At this moment, it felt like no matter what I did, I would be disappointing someone. Whether it was Ryan or Mark, I could never seem to say the right thing. I was hopeful that it was just due to the situation I found myself in.

I closed my eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath, deciding that, for now, it wasn’t worth wasting more of my time fretting over. Instead, I chose to focus back on my schoolwork. That was something I could control. So I let myself fall right back into my books and tried to let the negative thoughts of Mark and Ryan leave my mind—for now.

CHAPTER 30

Fall — Year 3 — Izabel

MY BRAIN HURT as I stared at my textbook, trying to commit the words to memory. I had been here all day trying to work through the assigned reading for my exam coming up at the end of the week, but it was pointless. I was feeling more burned out than I had in ages.

It's not that I hated the material; I enjoyed most of it. Now that I was starting my third year, I could get into many more of the classes I was interested in rather than more of the prerequisite classes for my degree. A lot of the material was interesting, but it was very history-oriented, which meant lots of dates and names to remember.

I leaned back in my chair and scrubbed my hands over my face. I was due for a study break. My eyes darted to my phone sitting on the table, and I pursed my lips, doing some quick time math in my head.

Throwing caution to the wind, I picked it up and went to my contacts, selecting my favorites list. At the top, I tapped Ryan's name and chose the video option.

The call rang until I heard the telltale melody that he had accepted the call. Ryan's face appeared on my screen. It hadn't been that long since I had seen him, only since our last video chat. But he looked different. There was a weariness on his face that I hadn't ever seen before.

"Hey," he said, giving me a soft smile.

"Hi," I said, smiling back. "Is now a bad time?"

Ryan ran his hand along the back of his neck and exhaled before shaking his head. "No, I'm just finishing up some work. How's it going?"

"Oh, um, fine," I answered back. My eyes darted to my stack of notes and the mess of writing utensils. "Actually, no, it's not fine."

Ryan frowned and raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

I gave him a wry smile. "I have a huge exam at the end of the week, and I think my brain is shriveling up into nothing."

Ryan gave a dry laugh. "I'm sure that's not the case. What are you studying?"

I waved my hand. "Oh, you know, boring stuff."

He laughed again and rolled his eyes. "Honestly, I don't know why I asked."

My heart ached, and suddenly all I wanted him to say was, "*Tell me something I don't know, Bells,*" just like he used to. But it never came. He was too preoccupied with whatever he was working on on his computer.

"I really miss you," I told him softly, hating how my voice cracked.

Ryan's attention returned to me, and his eyes softened as he looked at me through the screen. "I know. I miss you too."

I leaned my cheek on my hand and stared at him, taking in his handsome face. I was grateful we could video chat like this, but it was nothing like being with him in person. "Did you ask Teddy if you would be able to come home for the holidays this year?"

Ryan looked down at his desk and let out a long sigh. “I don’t think so, Bells. Things are just kind of crazy right now with the company. They need me here.”

I bit my bottom lip, trying to ignore the tears burning in my eyes. I guess it didn’t matter that I also needed Ryan *here*. “Oh, okay.”

Ryan groaned and clenched his jaw. “I’m sorry. I don’t like it any more than you do.”

I swallowed thickly and gave him a smile, hoping it didn’t come off as unhappy as I was feeling right now. “Yeah, I know.”

Ryan went silent again, his focus going back to his work. I watched him type for a few minutes, observing how his eyebrows furrowed. He worried at his bottom lip as he concentrated. The silence was deafening, and I wished I could go back in time and tell him not to go. I wish I had held on to him a little tighter. If I had known there would eventually be more than just physical distance between us, I would have.

Finally, I broke the silence and said, “I guess I’ll let you go.”

Ryan looked back at me, and I was relieved to see a hint of regret on his face. “Oh, okay. Hey, I’m sorry,” he said again.

I gave him a tight smile and nodded my head. “I hope you get done with all your work.”

“Good luck with your exams,” he said, giving me a small smile of his own, which didn’t reach his eyes like I was so used to.

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you soon,” I said, trying to sound hopeful.

“Bye, Bells,” he said, his tone flat and his eyebrows furrowed as he looked at something off to the side of the screen. The distance between us suddenly felt so much more extensive.

My eyes grow wide as he clicked off the call abruptly.

I love you.

I swallowed thickly, staring at the blank screen, and feeling the chasm of those words falling between us. He didn't say it—and I didn't get the chance to.

My heart aching, I set my phone back down and buried my face in my hands, ignoring the few tears that escaped down my cheeks. I hated myself for even feeling this way, but deep down, I so strongly disliked the disconnect that seemed to form between Ryan and me as we lived our separate lives.

Some days we were fine, but then others—like today—I really could feel the thousands of miles between us. There was nothing to do about this conflict, though, other than just wait it out. We still had a couple of years of this to go, but we had made it so far already.

An uncomfortable knot settled in my stomach as I thought about the imaginary mountain we both had to climb together to get to the point where we could live on the same continent once again. Though I knew we were in it together, there were days when I felt Ryan was miles ahead of me, climbing and pushing without a care while I struggled to make it a few steps.

I was tired.

“Brighten up, buttercup,” a familiar deep voice announced as he settled into the chair across from me. I gave Mark a tight-lipped smile, and his eyes narrowed on me. “What’s wrong?”

We had gratefully moved past our little tiff following the ‘I’m not going to Italy, even though you went out on a limb to sign us up’ thing. Mark finally calmed down and realized I had made a good point, and he respected my decision to go see Ryan.

I didn't regret going to Berlin one bit. When Ryan greeted me at the airport, I finally felt like everything was right in my life again.

He had been waiting for me near the entrance to the airport, and though I was in a small river of people, I saw his head poking over the crowd right away. The minute he spotted

me, his familiar green eyes lit up in such a way that had my heart skipping a beat. I ran the rest of the way to him, closing the distance that had become our own personal enemy over the last few months.

Ryan's arms wrapped around me so tightly, it crushed some of the air out of my lungs as he drew me into him. I hugged him back, feeling like my heart was whole once more. When we pulled away, I didn't realize I had been crying until Ryan's thumb swiped at my cheek, brushing away a stray tear.

"Heya, Bells," he said with his mischievous grin.

I wiped away a few more traitorous tears and grinned back at him. "Hey, yourself."

Ryan looked like hearing those words made his entire year. His face lit up, and he leaned down, capturing my lips in a searing kiss that put all the other kisses we shared to shame. When he pulled away, he grabbed my luggage in one hand and wrapped his other arm around me, as if he couldn't stand not touching me.

I had a great time getting to see where Ryan now called home. He showed me around Berlin, hitting all the major tourist spots just for me, picking out sites rich in history. Ryan, though not nearly as interested in those places as I was, was a good sport and participated. He watched me with content amusement as I bounced around each historical site, reading all the placards and filling my brain with as many facts as I possibly could.

On top of all the sightseeing, Ryan brought me to his favorite restaurants, and I was proud to try my very first currywurst and schnitzel.

Each night, after we were both worn out from walking around the city, Ryan would take me back to his apartment, where he'd ravish my body and show me just how much he missed me. When we were both sated, he'd wrap me up in his arms and we'd whisper to each other, talking late into the night.

Leaving him was one of the hardest things I had to do. I kept looking back at the airport, hoping to catch one last glance of him before I left the country. I didn't know when we'd see each other next, and my heart screamed at me to run back, grab ahold of him, and never let him go.

When I was on the plane, I curled up into a ball as best as I could and cried, feeling empty as the miles began to grow between us once again.

I just chose to keep my experiences to myself, avoiding bringing it up in conversation with Mark as much as I could so it didn't start any more problems.

Right now, Mark was about all I had. Most of my other friends I had made while here had split off into their own groups as we began taking classes that matched our degree a little more. Juliet had been somewhat distant, far away at her own college, and swamped with her pre-med classes. Our conversations were growing few and far between, though when we did talk, we picked up right where we left off. But in between those times, I found myself feeling lonely. Thankfully, Mark had stuck around. We often met in the library to study, which was exactly what we were doing today.

Mark set down the coffee he must have grabbed for me on the table and held my gaze steady. "Izabel, I asked you what was wrong. Your eyes are bright red."

I breathed through my nose and shook my head before going back to scribbling something in my notebook. "It's nothing. I'm just being stupid."

Mark reached across the table and stilled my hand. I looked up and met his comforting gaze. "Tell me."

Pursing my lips to the side, I considered how best to say what was on my mind. I was always careful not to talk badly about Ryan to Mark. He was always quick to pick up on any little grievance I had with my boyfriend and turn it into something that it wasn't.

But right now, I had no one else to talk to.

Giving a resigned sigh, I looked into Mark's warm brown eyes and decided it was time to confide. "I'm afraid Ryan and I are growing apart."

Mark blinked for a moment, but then gave a slow nod of his head. "And you're feeling bad about that?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down. "I'm just so tired of this."

"Izabel," Mark started, then paused. He considered his words for a second before continuing, "I don't think it's *your* fault."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm just saying that feeling distance is inevitable when one party has physically introduced distance into the relationship."

My mouth went dry as I held his gaze. "You're saying it's Ryan's fault?"

"Not necessarily, but you have to admit that if he had chosen to stay here, then you two wouldn't be in this situation. You know that."

I remained quiet, letting his words reinforce some deep, dark thoughts that had been buried in my brain.

"Izabel, you deserve someone who will be by your side through every moment of your life. The good ones and the bad ones. Not halfway across the world when you need him most."

My stomach turned to knots, and I looked down at our hands again. His palm felt warm, and it seeped through the icy feeling in my fingers. He gave me a supportive squeeze.

I pressed my lips together, fighting off the emotions that were building behind my eyes. My chest felt too tight, and my stomach was churning.

Pulling my hands out from under his, I ran them over my face and gave a humorless chuckle. "What do I do?" I asked somewhat rhetorically.

“Just follow your heart,” Mark said, his voice a deep murmur. “Trust yourself to make the right decisions at the right time.”

I dropped my hands and looked at him again. He had a soft smile on his lips as his eyes roamed over my face. “You think I can do that?” I asked.

“I know you can do that. You’re smarter than you think. Izabel, you’re one of the best people I know, and if Ryan can’t see that from halfway across the world, then that’s on him.”

A small sliver of warmth spread through my chest, and I offered him a small smile. “Thank you, Mark.”

He winked at me. “You’re welcome. I never want you to feel like you’re in the wrong for something you have no control over.”

“Yeah,” I whispered back. A part of my heart still knew that Ryan wasn’t purposefully putting distance between us. It was just the circumstances.

“Anyway,” Mark said, brightening his tone a bit. “How about we go get something to eat and do something fun to cheer you up?”

Exhaling, I looked down at my textbooks. I really didn’t want to study anymore. I glanced up at Mark again to see he was watching me with expectation. He wanted me to say yes. I knew that this moment would end up being a catalyst, but right now, I honestly just didn’t care. I desperately craved any sliver of light within the darkness attempting to consume me. So I grasped onto the only person around to offer me that—Mark. “That sounds like a perfect idea.”

SPRING — **Year 3** — **Ryan**

“Alright, sir, here are your keys, and you’re all good to go!” the chipper receptionist said to me. I gave her a small smile and then stepped out of the building to see a slick black Honda sitting at the curb, waiting for me.

I tossed my duffle bag into the back seat, and then sat in the driver’s seat. I had to make sure it was comfortable. It was almost an hour’s drive to Princeton from the airport.

She was going to be so surprised. I couldn't stand to wait any longer. It had been a long flight from home, but I needed to see her. Teddy had given me a long weekend off to spend some much-needed time with my girl.

I hadn't seen Bells in way too long. I hadn't been able to get home for the holidays this past year, and our schedules were starting to conflict more frequently now too. Our phone calls and text messages were growing more spaced out, and I felt like I was fraying apart at the edges. Even when we did get the chance to talk, it was like I could feel the thousands of miles between us.

My drive to Princeton was uneventful. I listened to the radio for as long as I could stand it, then shut it off and drove in silence.

Izabel had ended up traveling to Berlin to see me for two weeks, and it had been the best two weeks of my life. We did everything we possibly could in our short time together—catching up, sightseeing, and lots and lots of time reacquainting ourselves with each other intimately.

It was painful letting her hop on that flight home. The look she gave me before walking through the security gate still haunts me in my dreams to this day. It was the epitome of heartbreak, with a hint of loneliness.

That day, I started planning my surprise trip. About two weeks ago, I called her dad for minor sleuthing. I had to make sure that she wasn't planning a trip home and to find out which dorm she was living in.

My GPS on my phone dinged to let me know that I had to turn off my exit. I glanced around as I got closer and closer to the university. Princeton was a historic university, one of the prestigious Ivy Leagues. The campus itself looked old—classic buildings with gothic architecture.

I pulled into a guest parking lot and parked the car. Reaching behind me, I grabbed my duffle bag and slung it over my shoulder. Then I walked toward the dorm building that was hers.

As I approached, I saw students swiping key cards to access the building. I stood still in one spot, looking around to see if there was a check-in desk. This was so different from what I was used to back in Berlin.

“Are you going in?” a girl asked as she approached me. She must have seen my confused expression, and she giggled. “It’s okay. I live here. I can let you in if you want, handsome. You got a name?”

“Uh...” I paused, at a loss for words. “Ryan.”

“Well, Ryan, what brings you around here?” she prodded as she grabbed my arm and led me to the door, where she quickly scanned her card, and the door beeped.

“I’m here to see my girlfriend.”

Dropping my arm, she pouted. “Of course you are. Well, I won’t interfere, then. Have fun.” She stepped away once we were inside, muttering about how the handsome ones are always taken.

I chuckled and looked around for a sign or directions or something. Izabel was in Room 307. So third floor, odd side. Meandering my way up the stairs, I found her door. On the outside of the door was a small whiteboard that had swirly purple letters. It depicted Izabel’s name and then her roommate’s.

I remembered the schedule that she shared with me at the start of her semester. I didn’t think she had a class right now. Her door was mostly shut but cracked, leaving just an inch or two of space. I could easily push it open.

So I did, and I quietly stepped into the small room and came to an abrupt halt.

Her dorm room was a double with two beds, two small desks, and two dressers. One bed was made up of a blue patterned comforter with a teddy bear sitting proudly on top.

But what stopped me in my tracks was what I found on the other bed. Izabel and Mark were sitting on the floor, leaning against the edge of one of the beds. Mark’s head was tossed back, his mouth wide open as he snored. Izabel was against his

side, her head lolled onto his shoulder. Both were fast asleep. Notebooks, pens, and flashcards were strewn across the bed and on the floor.

I took in the scene briefly, letting my brain catch up with the images my eyes were seeing. Then I felt the heat sear through my body.

I dropped my duffle bag on the ground with a loud thud. “Bells.”

Izabel stirred at the sound of my voice. She lifted her head and looked around, confused. When her eyes landed on me, with my arms crossed against my chest, she quickly straightened up and shoved Mark awake. The boy next to her startled with a snort and lifted his head.

“Ryan?” Izabel asked as she joined the land of the living again. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to surprise you since it’s been so long since we’ve seen each other,” I said, my voice flat. My blood thrummed, but I bit down any anger that threatened to rise.

Izabel and Mark both scrambled off the floor. Izabel wrapped her arms around her stomach and smiled at me sheepishly. I glared at her, and the smile fell off her lips. Mark noticed the quiet exchange and stepped up to me, and patted me on the shoulder.

“Hey, man, long time. This isn’t what it looks like. We were studying and took a nap. That’s all.”

I glared at Mark, still trying to keep a hold of the fire that threatened to unleash. Of course, I trusted Izabel wouldn’t do anything out of sorts, but still, seeing her cozy with Mark rubbed me the wrong way. “You need to get the fuck out of my face, *man*.”

Mark recoiled from me and held up his hands in mock surrender. He glanced back at Izabel, who nodded toward the door. “You should probably go, Mark,” she whispered.

He stared at her for a second too long before grabbing his backpack off the desk chair and leaving the dorm room.

That left Izabel and me. Her blue eyes locked on mine. She warily stepped toward me, lifting a hand to my cheek. I maneuvered out of her way and gave her another hard look. Her face fell, and she sighed.

“Nice to see you too,” I muttered.

“You should have called to let me know you were coming,” she shot back.

“Why, so you could put on a big show of everything being perfectly fine for me? Really, Izabel?” I shook my head. “I shouldn’t have to—”

I paused, not liking the direction I was taking this. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I inhaled deeply. “I just—this isn’t what I was expecting walking in here. Please, just be honest. Is there anything going on with him?”

“No,” she said firmly. I stared into her eyes, trying to determine if she was actually telling the truth. I was relieved when I found no hint of deceit, but I did pick up on the way she cowered slightly under my hard glare, and I knew. She tried to catch herself from faltering, but it was too late.

“But you do like him.”

Izabel’s arms wrapped tighter around herself, and she cast her eyes down at the floor. I felt my heart crack as she slowly nodded.

IZABEL

I watched Ryan as he let out a harsh breath and moved over to the edge of my bed. He sat down and gripped his fingers in his hair. I stayed there for a second, trying to catch my bearings. Slowly, I walked over to the bed and sat down next to him. I carefully placed my hand on his back. I could feel his warmth through his shirt, almost like he was radiating heat.

Ryan was *here*.

I could hardly believe that this was real life and not a dream. I had to be dreaming. Because he was *here*.

And he looked incredible. I hadn't seen Ryan since last summer, and since then, he had filled out considerably. He still had scruffy facial hair, which made him look much older than his twenty-one years. He must have been hitting the gym because he was much more muscular than I remembered.

I would have given anything to be in a different room right now, having a different conversation. Preferably without clothes... But we had to get through this.

I took a breath and then readied to explain myself. "No. I don't like him like that. It's just—Mark has pretty much been my only friend here. I don't seem to get along with any of the people in my classes, so all I have is him. And I barely get to talk to you anymore. I don't want to hurt you. I'd rather die than hurt you. But—"

Ryan stared at me, trying to piece everything together. Then he let out another sharp breath as he popped off the bed. His fingers dug into his hair as he paced back and forth. "How did this happen?"

I wasn't entirely sure if that question was rhetorical or not, but I answered anyway. "It's just been so *hard* without you here. We're *hours* apart. I can never talk to you when I need you."

Ryan stopped pacing and turned to look at me. I wasn't sure if it was the words that got him or the tone of my voice when I whispered them. But the thunderous expression melted away, and he calmed considerably. Ryan came and sat beside me on the bed, waiting for me to go on.

"This has been a lot harder than I thought it would be. I miss seeing you. I want to be with you more than once or twice a year," I told him. I could feel the telltale sting of tears in my eyes and knew they were not far off. I looked up at the ceiling to try to ward them off for as long as I could. "It's just been so hard, Ryan. I've been struggling. And Mark has been here this whole time, seeing me struggle and helping me cope. I feel like I've been pulling apart at the seams, and he's been helping hold me together."

“Bells...” Ryan’s voice broke after my confession. He reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

The first tear slipped out of the corner of my eye and trailed down my cheek. I shook my head back and forth. “I’m not going to be why you don’t have a successful future. If I told you how I felt, you’d come home.”

“Damn right, I would. I’d be on the first flight out.”

“Which is what I didn’t want,” I said honestly. “I don’t want you to come home and forfeit all the work you’ve done. I know you love it over there, the culture, the school, the work. You love it all.”

Ryan reached for me and pulled me into his lap. I wrapped my arms around his neck and let him hold me as I allowed the tears to fall. “I love *you* more, Bells. I don’t care about any of that if I don’t have you. Ask me to come home. I’ll drop out, drop everything if that’s what it takes.”

“You’re not happy.” It wasn’t a question. Ryan’s whole approach deflated like he was putting down his weapons and admitting defeat.

I slowly shook my head and closed my eyes. I heard Ryan let out a sigh, and I finally looked back at him. “No.” He gave me a tight-lipped smile and placed me back on the bed next to him. “Are you happy?” I asked him right back.

Ryan begrudgingly shook his head. I could tell it wasn’t what he wanted to admit, but we were here together, baring our souls. It would only hurt us more to lie at this point.

“Then what do we do?” I asked shakily.

He hesitated, and I watched him closely, waiting to hear his solution. Finally, he stiffened slightly and dropped his head. “Maybe we need to take a break.”

My chest ached, but I nodded twice. “For how long?”

“I don’t know,” he responded with a disbelieving laugh. “I never thought we’d be here. This definitely wasn’t how I saw this visit going today.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

“Hey,” he said before placing his pointer finger under my chin and bringing my gaze up to him. “This isn’t your fault.”

More tears welled up in my eyes, and I pulled away, laughing without humor as they started to spill down my cheeks. “I feel like it is.”

Ryan wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his chest. In a swift motion, he maneuvered us from sitting on the side of my mattress to laying flat. I cuddled closer to him, breathing in the smell of his laundry detergent mixed with the telltale scent of travel. His arms tightened, and he held me close.

We laid together for heaven knows how long before he whispered into my hair. “Maybe we just agree to see how it goes. I don’t want to hold you back anymore or make you feel like you’re trapped in something you don’t want.”

My heart splintered again. “I still love you, Ryan.”

He nuzzled his nose in my hair and breathed me in. “I know. I love you too. But that’s why I have to do this. Time apart will help you figure out what you want with your life.”

My eyes burned, and I wanted to cry. Over and over in my head, I kept hearing Mark’s words, “*You deserve someone who will be by your side through every moment of your life. Not halfway across the world when you need him most.*”

The rational part of me knew Ryan would move mountains for me, yet my heart ached to know that the minute Ryan left today, things would go back to exactly the way they were before. I would continue on with my life here, only getting to talk to Ryan when the stars aligned just right. He would leave, go back to his program, and I would still be alone.

I was exhausted. Drained.

There was nothing that I wanted more than to hold on to him as tight as I could. But right now? I was too tired.

I couldn’t ask Ryan to give up his dreams just for me. I don’t think I could live with myself if I did that to him.

And I knew it was selfish, but Ryan was giving me an out. I was torn in half with the decision of what to do. I didn't want to give up on Ryan, but at that moment, I couldn't fathom him walking out that door and the distance setting in again.

The loneliness and the emptiness from the last few months fell over me like a bucket of ice-cold water, chilling me deep down to the bone and reminding me of the nights I spent wide awake, feeling like I was falling apart. I couldn't go back to that. I don't think I would ever stop missing Ryan, but being stuck in a crevasse of thousands of miles between us was not something I wanted to return to. I was already broken. I didn't know how much more of this I could take.

So, I took his offer. I nodded and buried my face in his chest again, hugging him as tightly as I could. "I wish things were different."

"Me too," Ryan said back.

My heart broke as more tears tracked down my cheeks. Ryan held on to me for a while longer. Neither of us said a word, rather choosing to bask in each other's presence for this remaining time left together.

When Ryan was finally ready, he untangled himself from me and helped me off the bed. He gave me a sad smile once we were facing each other, then leaned down to place a lingering kiss on my lips. I closed my eyes and basked in this moment for as long as possible, memorizing the way he tasted and how his familiar cologne wrapped around me like a comforting hug.

This wasn't at all how I saw our story ending. But I had to hold on to the fact that it wasn't over. We would find each other again.

When Ryan pulled away, I opened my eyes and gave him a teary smile. "I'll miss you."

"Me too, Bells. More than you'll ever know, but I think this is what needs to happen." He sounded like he was trying to convince both of us.

Meanwhile, I felt like my soul was ripping in half.

“Don’t forget about me, okay? Even if you get rich and famous,” I tried to tease.

“Never,” Ryan said with conviction. “I could never forget about you.”

His arms tightened around me. Then he let me go before I could get a chance to change my mind. I felt sick to my stomach. Nausea roiled deep in my belly, and for a moment, I thought I might throw up. What was happening? Why was I letting him go?

Reason told me that I was allowing this to happen because it was for the best. I couldn’t do this any longer without it affecting me negatively. This was what was best for both of us.

But then, why did it hurt so badly?

Distance was our enemy. And for now, there was no other option.

I squeezed my eyes shut, telling myself over and over that we were doing the right thing. We would find our way back to each other someday. I knew that with every fiber of my being. I wanted to hate him for it, but it was no use. I could never hate Ryan.

Even though the pain I was experiencing now was stifling, I wouldn’t have changed a thing. I was forever grateful that I had decided to give that boy I loathed so much another chance. I couldn’t imagine where I would have been if I hadn’t.

Ryan gave me one last withering look, like he was memorizing everything about me, and then he turned away. My heart ripped into shreds, but I stayed where I was and didn’t chase after him. Without even one more glance behind him, Ryan Miller walked out of my life.

The Story Continues in “Liberating Bells.”

Read Ahead for a Sneak Peak

LIBERATING BELLS (EXCERPT)

Chapter 1 - Ryan

Five Years Later

“It is a beautiful Sunday evening here in Cedar Ridge, Tennessee. We hope you enjoyed your flight and welcome home!” the pilot’s voice echoes over the intercom.

I glance up from the long, monotonous contract I’ve been reading and blink my eyes. My vision is a little blurry from staring at the text for so long. I adjust the glasses on my nose and let the pilot’s words seep in.

Welcome home.

I haven’t been home for what feels like an eternity. If my memory serves correctly, the last time I was here was Christmas two years ago. I had come home to celebrate my sister’s sixth birthday and spend the holidays with my family.

In the years after leaving Cedar Ridge, my visits and phone calls became more and more scarce as time passed. My mom tried her best to be understanding, given the circumstances, but I knew it was hard for her not getting to see me as much. Germany became my home without me fully realizing it, and work became my outlet.

At that time, there wasn’t much left for me in the States. Sure, I missed my family like crazy, but the emptiness I felt every time I landed in Cedar Ridge was enough to keep me away for a while. For a long time, I wasn’t ready to face those feelings.

But now, things are different, and not in a good way. I’m needed back home in Tennessee permanently. So once again, I packed my life up and crossed the pond one last time. For good.

Once I've gathered up my carry-on items into my bag, I remove my glasses, rubbing at my eyes a bit to help reduce the blurriness as the plane slowly taxis into the gate.

I'm a little surprised that I feel anticipation instead of heartbreak at the prospect of being home. A part of me is still aware that things will never be the same, but the other part is ready to reclaim my life with my family by my side.

As soon as we receive the all-clear from the flight attendants, I collect my briefcase and grab my suitcase from the bin overhead. The rest of my belongings have already been shipped to my mom's house. I file behind the rest of the passengers through the aircraft and then into the airport terminal.

My feet carry me past the baggage claim and over to where I know my family will be waiting. A huge grin splits my face as soon as I see them. The young girl beside my mother drops her homemade *Welcome Home, Ryno!* sign onto the floor and runs at me at full speed, giggling the whole way. She launches herself at me as soon as she's in range, and I catch her, laughing too, as I spin her around.

"Hey, squirt!" I exclaim, as my little sister clutches my neck in a giant bear hug.

"Hey, Ryno!" she squeaks back, gripping onto me for dear life. "Did you see the sign I made?"

"I did, but you dropped it back there," I tell her, setting her down and rumpling the top of her soft blonde hair.

She looks back and sees our parents walking toward us. Her dad has the sign tucked safely under his arm, and she nods.

I crouch down to get a good look at her. She has blonde hair and green eyes like me. Though my hair has turned more of a dark sandy brown over the years. I'm still amazed at how small she feels. I'm not tall, by any means; my stepdad Derek still has a few inches over me. But next to Thalia? I feel like a giant.

“Geez, you’re getting big,” I tell her. “How old are you now, twenty-seven?”

Thalia smiles at me and shakes her head. “No, that’s you. I’m only eight.”

I plant my palm on the side of my head mockingly. “Oh, that’s right, you’re eight!” Reaching out, I tickle her tiny waist, and she instantly bursts into a fit of giggles.

As soon as Derek and Mom are standing next to us, I smile and stand up. Mom wraps herself up in my arms, hugging me tightly to her. She is also much smaller than I remember—almost frail. When I let her go, I notice she has tears in her eyes.

“Hey, don’t cry,” I say as I hold on to her shoulders.

She gives me a sheepish smile and wipes her cheeks. “I’m just so glad you’re back.”

I pull her in for another hug and hold her tight, but not too tight. I’m afraid I might break her. “Me too, Mom.”

Derek looks at me with pride as he extends his hand for a shake. I release my mom and accept his offer, gripping his hand tight and shaking it.

“Good to see you, Ryan,” he says. Derek loosens my hand and claps my shoulder in the way only a father knows how. He and my mom got married right before Thalia was born, and he’s been a constant in my life ever since. I’m honestly happy to see him too. He is the perfect father to my little sister and a fantastic husband to my mother.

Though he and I had a rocky start, I’m glad to have him as part of my family.

After we settle the first round of hellos, we file into my parents’ car and start the trek home. Thalia is overjoyed when I sit in the backseat with her. I happily buckle in next to her and play I Spy during the drive.

At my mom’s suggestion, we stop to grab a bite to eat at our favorite Mexican restaurant. Over an abundance of chips

and salsa, Mom and Derek ask many questions about work and life in Germany.

My life has taken a completely different course than I had initially planned. After moving to Germany right after high school, I started working at a company called Bates Industries, which offered me an internship that coincided with my degree plan.

As soon as I graduated with my bachelor's and master's degrees, I worked full time at Bates Industries as a structural engineer. I quickly became close friends with the company's new CEO and assisted in helping the company grow to new levels.

Teddy just recently got married, so he moved Bates from Germany back into the US. It will be easier for him to run his company with its headquarters back in the same country as him.

This couldn't have been better timing for me. I originally planned to stay with Teddy and Bates Industries, but with our clients spread out worldwide, I would have still needed to travel quite a bit. And at this point, my family needs me.

After all this started rolling, I took some time to contemplate what I wanted to do. At the end of the day, I only saw one option—I couldn't stay with Bates Industries. I approached Teddy with the notion that I would be going off and starting my own engineering firm. To my surprise, he was more than supportive and offered to invest in my business to help kick-start the process.

It was one of those moments in life when everything seemed to fall into place perfectly.

Now that I'm officially home, I plan to start looking into renting office space and setting up an LLC so I can begin the venture of opening my own business. It will be a lot of work, but most things in life worth having are, so I'm willing to go the extra mile.

I fill my parents in on all my plans, and they are entirely on board. Derek's mind starts going off with different ideas

and suggestions. I nod along, wishing I had asked his opinion long before today. My stepfather seems to have an excellent business sense.

Once my family and I are all stuffed full of tacos and burritos, we head back out to the car. I open the trunk, rummage through my carry-on bag, and then shoot my sister a conspiratorial look. Thalia laughs and raises her eyebrows.

“Now I know you’re probably too stuffed for dessert, huh?” I tease her as I hold my surprise behind my back.

Thalia sticks her hands out in a “gimme gimme” gesture, and I hand over my treat. Her little mouth forms an ‘O’ as she observes her gift.

“Chocolate! Mommy, Ryan got me chocolate!”

I squat down in front of her so we look eye to eye. “Not just any chocolate,” I say, tapping the outside wrapper. “That’s German chocolate. Only the finest for you, kiddo.”

Thalia throws her arms around my neck and hugs me again. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re the best big brother ever!” Then she turns to our mother. “Mommy, can I have it right now?”

My mom looks at the two of us with a soft smile and nods gently. “Maybe just a little bit. We’ve gotta get you home and into bed, young lady.”

I ruffle my sister’s hair and then load her into her booster seat again. When we arrive home, Thalia is passed out with chocolate smeared all over her face. I unbuckle her seatbelt and carefully carry her inside and to her room while Derek is kind enough to grab my bags.

Thalia’s room is awfully girly. The walls are a light purple with yellow and pink daisies stenciled throughout. Her bed has a canopy and a lot of stuffed animals strewn everywhere. Along the perimeter are twinkly fairy lights that give off a soft, calming glow.

I pull back her covers and settle her into bed, pulling off her shoes before tucking her in. Reaching over to her

nightstand, I grab a tissue and wipe off the evidence of her chocolate coma.

Such a sweet little girl.

I watch her for a second, sound asleep, before I head back downstairs. I don't see my mom, so she must have also called it an early night. Derek is sitting in the living room, a golf game on the television. With a glass of liquor in his hand, he looks up when he hears my footsteps.

"Hey, thanks for getting her settled in. Your mom was feeling the effects of the excitement, so she headed to sleep." He nods down at his glass. "Can I get you one?"

"Sure."

He gets up and pours me a glass before settling back on the couch. We both sip at the amber liquid, the heaviness of our new reality weighing over us and seeping into the silence. My throat feels thick as my mind spins with questions. Me and my family have been living with this new diagnosis for the last few months, but it still doesn't make the harsh realization of how everything has changed any easier. I finally get the courage to ask my stepfather the first question lingering on the tip of my tongue.

"So, how is she?"

Derek sighs and takes a deep sip. Suddenly, he looks older, the lines on his forehead and around his eyes seeming deeper, more pronounced. "The chemo is scheduled to start on Wednesday. They diagnosed her with stage three. So treatment will be intense, but it's still treatable."

"Geez," I murmur, chest tightening.

"Yeah, neither of us saw this coming. That's why we're so grateful you were able to come home to help with Thalia."

My eyes burn, and I take another sip of my drink, hoping to dampen down the emotion threatening to rise inside of me. For so long, my mom was all I had. The possibility that I may have to face life without her burns in the back of my mind like a nightmare I can't wake up from. Thalia, still being so young,

only makes things worse and leaves a sick, nauseous feeling lingering in my stomach that nothing will ease.

I glance over at my stepfather. “Have you guys explained to her what is going on yet?”

Derek shakes his head. “Not really. She knows that Mommy is very sick, even though she doesn’t look like she is, and we’ve told her that her medicine might make her lose her hair. But I don’t think she fully grasps the severity of cancer.”

“That’s probably for the best,” I say. “Let her keep her childhood for as long as she can.”

“Agreed.”

I watch Derek as we sit in silence. The recent diagnosis is taking a significant toll on him as well. His normally dark hair and beard have gotten gray speckles, giving him the salt-and-pepper look. He has dark circles under his eyes, proof of many nights spent awake worrying about his family’s future.

Derek has turned out to be the rock my family needed, someone I respect and value as part of our family. After my dad died in the war, it was just me and my mom. If Derek hadn’t come around, I wouldn’t have Thalia, and my mom may not have been as happy as she is now.

My eyes travel over to the collection of family pictures hanging on the living room wall. They show the story of our family growing and expanding. Only the first one has me, my mom, and my father. The others have transitioned from just me and Mom, to me, Mom and Derek, then to our family of four once Thalia was born.

I think about what my mom is facing with this cancer, and I am immensely glad that I am home to be by her side. Cedar Ridge hasn’t been my permanent place of residence for many years, but it has always been my home.

And while the house looks and feels the same, everything about life here is not how I left it eight years ago.

**LIBERATING BELLS
(EXCERPT)**

Chapter 2 - Ryan

“Here, Ryno, have some more pancakes!” My mother’s sweet sing-song voice rings from across the kitchen.

I chuckle. “Really, Mom, I’m fine. I’m full.” I glance at my plate, cleared of all the bacon, eggs, and pancakes she piled on twenty minutes ago.

Of course, Mom acts like she doesn’t hear a word I say and skips over to me before plopping another full stack of her famous blueberry pancakes onto my plate. “Eat up!”

I groan as I fold up the newspaper I’ve been reading and set it on the table. “Are you trying to make me explode?”

Mom’s blue eyes twinkle with happiness as she watches me dig in. Her pale blonde hair is pulled into a messy ponytail, with tiny wisps still hanging free. I hate to think she may lose her hair since she loves it so much.

“I know it’s been a while since you’ve had a home-cooked meal, Ryno, so I wanted your first breakfast to be memorable!” she exclaims as she kisses my head.

I am almost twenty-seven years old, but I will never not accept affection from my mother. I grin between mouthfuls of pancakes, and she laughs.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?” my mom asks as she sits beside me at the table.

I swallow my bite and then turn to her. “I need to find a condo or an apartment or something today, and then maybe start the search for some office space,” I answer as I take a sip of coffee. “Then I might see Liam and Juliet if they’re free.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely. Maybe you’ll get a chance to catch up with Izabel too. She’s teaching up at Bennett, did you

know? I ran into her mother at the supermarket recently and we got to chatting.

The pancakes I just swallowed turn to lead as they travel down my throat. *Izabel*.

“Such a sweet girl. It was a shame you two didn’t work out,” my mom speculates, unaware of the fact that I’m choking to death right next to her. “It seems like she’s very happy with that Mark fellow. He’s a good guy, from what I hear.”

I scowl down at my pancakes, my appetite now officially gone. “Yeah, I’m sure he’s just perfect.”

I haven’t heard from Izabel in years. Since we broke up five years ago, there have been a total of two exchanges between the two of us. Once, when her sister married Teddy, since we were both in the wedding party. I will never forget that night because Izabel and I fell into each other again. It was as if, for that night, everything was okay. We were okay. But as soon as the sun rose the following morning, we returned to square one. She disappeared without a trace, and I didn’t hear from her again.

Both instances left me with more heartbreak than I care to admit. It was pathetic. I’m over it, though. We both made our choices, and we both moved on.

“Alright, girly,” my mom says, clapping her hands, addressing my little sister. “Time to get you ready for school.”

Thalia wipes her face with her napkin before bouncing away from the table and up to her room. My mom turns to me again and gently touches my shoulder.

“I’m sorry if being home causes you pain, Ryan,” she whispers. “I know how difficult things got for you after everything.”

I sigh and close my eyes. “It’s okay, Mom. I’m happy to be back. And besides, Izabel and I are long over. There’s nothing there anymore. She’s moved on; I’ve moved on. It’s for the best.”

Mom looks at me compassionately before nodding and cleaning up after breakfast. Though I still feel sick, I scarf down the rest of my pancakes and rinse my plate before setting it in the dishwasher. I kiss my mom's cheek and then head to my room to prepare for the day.

After spending hours looking for a condo, I finally settle on one that is relatively close to downtown Cedar Ridge, and thankfully, they have a few available units. I schedule an appointment to speak with the landlord, ready to make the leap right away.

Our town isn't huge, but we still have a significant business district to show for the smaller population. Since I will be starting up my own business soon, I figure it's a good idea to be close to where all the magic happens.

After that's settled, I wander back into my bedroom and poke around in the closet, feeling the need to start purging through some of my old things to get ready to officially move out—again.

On the top shelf of my closet are a few boxes that I haven't gone through in years. I'm sure they're filled with old artwork from elementary school or trophies from my glory days on the soccer team at Bennett. As I'm lifting one down, I don't see the stacks of books piled on top, and they all come crashing down as soon as I tilt the box just slightly.

I swear and duck out of the way so they don't whack me in the head. Once the dust has settled, I look around at the carnage, trying to figure out what exactly just dive-bombed me.

My heart gets stuck in my throat when I see a familiar group photo staring up at me from the open yearbook. Of course, out of all the pages that it could have fallen open to, it had to be the one from Camp Wildwood.

A sour feeling settles in my stomach as I crouch down to get a better look. The yearbook is from my junior year, the group photo from our last day at Camp Wildwood for the summer. The guys from Bennett are intermingled with the girls from our sister school, Hawthorne Academy.

My attention instantly goes to where I'm standing in relation to the beautiful girl with the striking blue eyes who seems to haunt every waking thought. I'm standing off to one side with my best friend, and *she* is on the opposite end of the photo.

My heart pangs at the sight of Izabel from all those years ago. It's hard to think that only a year after that photo was taken, things would have changed for us so drastically. I take in junior Izabel, noting that she isn't smiling in the picture. Camp Wildwood was her worst time of the year, and much of that had to do with me.

If I could go back, I would never have made those weeks so miserable for her. I wish I could have just bucked up and admitted that she intrigued me. Maybe then we wouldn't have had to go through everything we did.

But then again, that's the whole reason we were together.

With a sigh, I give one last glance at that picture, memories of Izabel and my time in that shoddy old cabin running through my mind before snapping the book closed and shoving it back onto the top shelf of my closet.

The past is in the past.

* * *

Later that evening, I find myself back in my childhood room. I'm set to move into my new condo next week, and I have a meeting with a landlord about office space tomorrow. A listing popped up right as I checked this afternoon, and I was quick to jump on it. Things are moving right along.

From what it sounds like, I should be able to get into the space this weekend and begin working by Monday. Now, I just need to submit all the paperwork and find an assistant.

Flopping onto my old mattress, I pull my phone out of my pocket. I quickly make an ad online for an assistant for hire, and then roll onto my back, my mind spinning. There is so much to do.

But still, even with the never-ending to-do list, my mind keeps returning to the thought of the girl with the blue eyes. I wonder what she's doing—I wonder *how* she's doing.

Every so often, my thoughts get away from me and they spiral out of control. Is she happy? Does she sometimes miss me like I miss her?

Eventually, I rein it in, reminding myself that it's over.

I could play the *would've, could've, should've* game until I'm blue in the face. But it won't do any good.

I have new ventures to focus on. That needs to be my primary focus.

I'm back to help my mom through this new chapter of her life. I'm back to support Derek and Thalia through it all. I'm back home to start my own business and make a name for myself outside of Bates Industries. I'm back to get my life back on track.

I am not back for her.

LIBERATING BELLS (EXCERPT)

Chapter 3 - Izabel

“What’s the matter with you?” Mark’s harsh tone draws me out of my daydream.

I look over at him from the passenger seat of the car to see his eyebrows furrowed in concern. Blinking a few times to reorient myself, I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“You’re awfully quiet over there.”

I force a small smile, and then look back out the window. I don’t have the heart to fully explain to Mark what’s on my mind. I’m not sure how he would react, and I don’t have the energy to figure it out firsthand.

The last few weeks have been exhausting.

Midterms at the high school have just finished, which means I’m pulling long evenings trying to complete the grading on my students’ midterm essays, and on top of that, gearing up the class for the final semester of materials.

Mark has been *somewhat* supportive throughout the whole thing. My boyfriend doesn’t quite understand my passion for teaching. He does well at his law firm. Well enough that I don’t have to work—a fact he never forgets to remind me of.

But what he doesn’t understand is that I *enjoy* teaching. More so than anything else in my life. It’s one of the only things I have to look forward to every day.

So having him nag in my ear, especially when I’m stressed enough as it is, has me falling into retrospective silence.

“Hey,” Mark says again. “Cheer up. You’re the one who’s dragging me to this dumb birthday party. The least you could do is act like you actually want to be here.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and wince at Mark's tone.

"Who even throws a birthday party for a one-year-old?" Mark continues to mutter. I open my eyes and glare out the window as he pulls into Juliet and Liam's neighborhood.

"I think pretty much everyone," I say back, trying to make my tone sound as teasing as possible.

I must succeed because Mark chuckles, and some of the tension in my shoulders relaxes. We don't say anything else to each other as he finds a space on the road and parks his car.

Mark and I have been together for almost four years, but still, sometimes, he surprises me by getting bothered by the most minuscule things.

We each get out and walk together up to my best friend's large Victorian-style home. I still am in awe every time I come over. Juliet has done well for herself. She just finished her residency at St. Helen's, the primary hospital in Cedar Ridge. She is now an attending emergency room physician. Liam works part time at Bennett as the head coach for the soccer team and then freelances for an insurance agency.

"I'll just go set this on the gift table," I say once we're inside, holding up the gift bag we brought for Ashton.

"I'll go with you," Mark says, looking around the foyer uncomfortably.

I give him a tight smile, but make my way through the living room toward the table adorned with gifts for the birthday boy.

It's when I set the gift on the table that I feel it. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and every cell in my body comes alive. Unconsciously, my spine straightens, and I look around the room.

My stomach flip-flops when I see him.

Ryan.

I blink a few times, wondering if it's a trick of the light, but no, he's actually here.

“Why the fuck is he here?” Mark growls from beside me, asking the question that is burning in my mind as well. Albeit, my version was much less crude.

“I don’t—I don’t know,” I breathe, and it’s the truth.

“Did you know he was back?” he asks, as his glare snaps down to me, accusing me of something I had no part of.

I shake my head wordlessly, my eyes still glued on Ryan. As if he can feel me watching him, his gaze roams over the room and settles on me. A softness fills those eyes I used to know so well, and he watches me with interest. After a moment, he raises the beer in his hand, saluting me with a dip of his chin, and then takes a sip. His eyes never leave me.

I can’t believe what I’m seeing. Ryan is back? When? How? Why?

Next to me, Mark huffs in annoyance. “Great, just what we needed. You should probably steer clear of him. Don’t want to put new salt in old wounds, you know?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. I hope Mark can’t hear the way my heart thunders inside my chest or see the way my muscles have gone rigid. He traces his hand down my side and takes my hand, giving it a small squeeze.

Mark would probably fall over dead if he knew what was running through my head right now, but I can’t help it.

Ryan. Ryan. It’s Ryan. He’s here.

I take a few seconds to trail my eyes over my ex-lover across the room. I observe the broad shoulders I used to clutch and his dark hair I used to tangle my fingers in. That same sharp jawline, now with a bit of scruff that I used to press kisses to. And those eyes I would find myself getting lost in.

He looks good.

He is even more filled out since the last time I saw him, now looking more like a man rather than the boy I loved.

I recall the last time we encountered each other when Ryan’s boss, Teddy, married my sister, Sage. We were just as magnetic then as I feel we are now. Though there’s a whole

room of distance between us, I can feel him as though he were right next to me. My body responds to him being so near, as if no time has passed at all.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach as I remember the last time Ryan held my hand as he led me to his hotel room. How careful he was as he unzipped my bridesmaid's dress, letting his fingers linger longer than necessary on my bare back and over the ridges of my spine. How he—

No.

That was then. This is now.

I finally tear my eyes away from Ryan and look down at the floor. Mark's right. It's probably a good idea to keep to myself tonight. I shake off the memories and allow Mark to lead me into another room. But the entire way, I can feel Ryan's gaze on me until I'm out of his sight.

Mark leads me through the living room and into the dining room, where Juliet is busy feeding the birthday boy spoonfuls of applesauce. As soon as I set my eyes on her son, Ashton, I feel a smile form on my lips.

Juliet glances up as soon as we get closer, and her eyes light up. "Hey, guys! I was wondering when you were going to get here!"

"We got a little...distracted," Mark says, squeezing my hand suggestively. I blush and look away, wishing he wouldn't be so brash sometimes. Not to mention, his superfluous insinuation makes the moment seem a little more thrilling than it actually was.

Juliet raises an eyebrow with a smirk. "I'm sure. Well, help yourselves to some food. I'm just going to finish up here, and we'll cut his cake."

"Did Liam do the grilling today?" Mark asks.

Juliet nods and scoops another spoonful. "Sure did. We've got hotdogs and burgers, so help yourselves. All the fixings are on the counter."

As soon as we're out of the dining room and heading into the kitchen, Mark pulls me to the side. "I think we should probably just wait to have dinner ourselves later."

I frown at him. "Why?"

He gives me a sheepish but serious look. "I don't really trust Liam's grilling. It's always only half-cooked."

I laugh, despite myself, and pat him on the cheek. "I think we'll probably live. If you're worried, have a hot dog. They're pre-cooked."

Mark's hand covers my own on his cheek, and he leans down to kiss me, his lips pressing against mine gently. "You're right. Here, why don't you go back and sit with Jules, and I'll make you a plate."

I kiss him again before heading back to Jules's side. As soon as I'm settled, I scan the room to make sure Ryan hasn't snuck in without me knowing. The last thing I need is a confrontation between Mark and Ryan. That would be one surefire way to ruin a birthday party.

Mark has never been a fan of Ryan's. Even as far back as when we were in high school. Ryan Miller was always the golden boy, and I think Mark got overshadowed one too many times.

On top of that, Mark was with me throughout Ryan's and my entire long-distance relationship. Not that Ryan specifically did anything wrong, but the distance wore us both down. Mark was always the one there to cheer me up when I was feeling blue.

I think Mark probably still holds a little resentment for Ryan putting me through that. When I told Mark that Ryan and I had broken up, he wasn't the least bit sympathetic. I'm pretty sure his exact words were, "Good, you can do much better than that tool."

"Where'd your loser boyfriend go?" Juliet mutters under her breath.

I look over at her and bristle. Just as Mark doesn't like Ryan, Juliet likes Mark even less. "He's getting food. He said I

could come and sit with you.”

“You can, can you?”

“Unless you don’t want me to,” I fire back. Juliet sits up straighter and narrows her eyes at me, sensing the challenge in my words.

The two of us stare at each other until she finally caves. Her shoulders drop, and she gives me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Izzie. I just don’t like the way he controls you sometimes.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Mark isn’t controlling me. He offered to get me food.”

We’ve had this conversation hundreds of times. I’m not sure what Juliet’s issue is. I don’t see anything wrong with what Mark’s done. In fact, I think it was sweet of him to offer to get me a plate while I hung out with my friend.

Juliet took the news of the breakup between Ryan and me pretty hard. She’s always been holding out hope that Ryan and I could set aside our differences and get back together. I honestly thought she was going to throw me in the lake when I told her I had started dating Mark officially.

She has never gotten along with him. Whenever I bring anything up to her about our relationship, she’ll glare at me and say, “Well, he’s just not Ryan, is he?”

I understand where she’s coming from. I do. Ryan was an amazing first boyfriend, the best I could have ever asked for. I just wish she would let it go. It’s been years. Ryan is the past, and Mark is my future. It’s not fair to Ryan or me to keep questioning what could’ve been.

“Hey, baby,” Mark greets me as he returns with two plates. He sets one down in front of me: chips and veggies and a hot dog with no bun. I look over at his plate, and it’s exactly the same. No sign of a single hamburger. I press my lips together, fighting back an amused chuckle.

I quickly demolish my food and do my best to chat with Juliet. She’s not fully engaged with Mark sitting next to me, and she’s too eager to run off when someone calls her name.

When she excuses herself, I scoot over into her chair to play with Ashton.

I feel Mark's eyes on me and turn around to face him. He's grinning at me with a dopey look on his face. His chocolate brown eyes are warm and gentle.

"What?" I ask, unable to keep myself from smiling back at him.

"Nothing," he says, and his lips twitch. "You just look good with a baby.

I flush and turn back to Ashton, who's now smacking his hands in a small puddle of applesauce on his highchair tray. Mark scoots closer to me and rests a gentle hand on my shoulder. He leans in close and presses a kiss against my hair. I can't help the shiver that shoots down my back.

"Maybe we'll have one or two of our own someday, hm?" he whispers in my ear before pressing another kiss to the side of my head. My lower belly clenches.

I turn to meet his eyes and give him an unsure smile. Babies?

"I don't think we're there yet," I say softly. "But yeah, maybe someday."

"Well, I think we're closer than you think," he says with a wink.

I'm suddenly immensely glad that I still have my IUD. I decide then to double-check my calendar when I get home to confirm when I need to get it replaced. I am definitely not ready for a baby with Mark, no matter how close he thinks we are.

I love Mark. We've been together for years now. The first year was a little rocky, as we went through a lot of petty arguments and breakups, but we made it. We've been happy ever since.

I have mixed feelings about being Mark's fiancée. Mark and I have been together so long, it's the obvious next step. I should be excited about that prospect, looking forward to the

moment Mark finally gets down on one knee and pops the big question, but something is holding me back from feeling that full-blown enthusiasm toward wearing his ring on my finger. Though the idea makes my heart race, I'm not entirely convinced it's from excitement.

Juliet finally comes back in, holding a single-serve chocolate cake. Liam is hot on her trail, holding his phone up to record. She plops it down on Ashton's tray and lights a candle shaped like a number one. A small crowd of party guests has gathered, and we all sing "*Happy Birthday*" to Ashton, who has no idea what's going on. Juliet and Liam help him blow out the candle, and then they set the little boy loose.

Ashton looks at his parents as though asking permission, and then goes for it. Icing and cake crumbs are everywhere as the kid takes giant handfuls, pressing them into his mouth greedily. The crowd murmurs with laughter.

Juliet excuses herself again to go cut the real cake while we all watch her son in amusement. Ashton now has chocolate all over his face and his clothes and isn't even close to calling it quits.

I follow my friend back into the kitchen to see if I can help with anything. She's got the big sheet cake on the counter and a knife in hand. It's a white-frosted cake with tie-dye icing flowers squeezed into the corners. In the middle, it says *Happy First Birthday, Ashton*, in bright blue icing.

The paper plates are at the ready as she makes the first cut. We talk mindlessly, her about work and me about school, as she plates the pieces of cake. Then she has me set them out on the table in the main hall for people to grab. I take a few at a time, walking into the hall and safely setting them down with no issue.

As I turn around after my latest trip, a band of boys flies in from the living room, chasing each other with fake swords.

The kids rush around me, pushing and pressing, and I stumble back, my feet getting tangled. I can't catch my balance soon enough, and I'm sure I'm going to wipe out on

the floor. I can't wait to hear what Mark will have to say about that. As I start to fall, I'm already dreading that conversation.

But I don't fall.

Instead, I find myself caught in a pair of strong arms and swept up until I'm pressed against a firm chest. My heart stutters as Ryan looks down at me, giving me a wide grin.

"Gotta be careful around here," he says, his voice rumbling low in his chest. "There are some wild creatures in these parts."

I blink at him before common sense takes over. Quickly, I stand up and straighten my shirt. Amusement is still sketched across Ryan's face as he watches me, his eyes twinkling.

"Thank you," I say under my breath.

"You're welcome, Bells," he responds, and I think my heart goes into full cardiac arrest.

Bells.

I haven't heard that nickname on his lips in years.

Ryan observes me for another moment or two. Both of us stand there in silence, taking each other in. Ryan, with his hands stuffed in his pockets, and me, with my arms wrapped protectively around my waist.

My chest hurts as I realize we're practically strangers. It hurts even worse with that realization, knowing how much he meant to me once and vice versa. But I don't know him now. I don't know anything about him other than that he looks gorgeous standing before me.

I want to wrap my arms around him, just to be close to him, to feel him against me one more time.

But I can't.

"Well," he says finally, breaking the silence. "I was actually on my way out, so... It was good seeing you, Bells. You look good." His lips tighten into a smirk. "Tell Marky Mark I said *hi*."

My eyes widen at him as he turns on his heel and walks away. I want to call after him, make him stop, and draw me into his arms again, but I don't. He grabs his coat out of the closet and walks out the front door without another glance. Then, feeling another set of eyes on me, I turn to see Mark sitting in the living room. His eyes are narrowed, and I instantly know he witnessed the whole exchange.

My shoulders slump, defeated, as I know Mark will let me know just how much he's bothered by our little interlude, no matter how innocent it was. Instead of waiting around for him to say something, I head back into the kitchen. I'm sure Juliet is wondering where I disappeared to.

The party continues on. We all enjoy our cake—maybe not as much as the birthday boy—and move into the living room for presents. It's a big show, and while Ashton loves the toys his parents help him unwrap, he keeps getting distracted by the wrapping paper.

We all watch and cheer him on as he moves from present to present. Mark sits next to me, a hand over my knee. He grins widely when Ashton loves the toy we picked out for him. I smile too.

His hand tightens as soon as Ashton turns his attention to his next gift. I look over at Mark to see him watching me, his eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

He leans forward and murmurs, "Don't think I've forgotten what I saw, Izabel. We *will* be discussing whatever that was."

A chill runs down my spine, but I nod my head. Without a response, I turn back to Ashton and force myself to have fun for the remainder of the party. It works, and I do enjoy myself immensely, but still, I catch myself glimpsing back at the front door every few minutes, wishing the only person I want to see right now would walk back in.

Liberating Bells releases March 5, 2024.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much to everyone who has been involved with creating and perfecting *The Loathing Ryan Duet*!

Ryan and Bells are two of my OG characters who have been with me for so long, I hardly know who I am without them. It's so satisfying to finally give them the story they deserve and get the chance to share them with the world.

Ryan and Izabel first came to me in 2011, and now all these years later, I finally get to see it all come full circle.

I have many people to thank for assisting me in this process:

Thank you to one of my oldest writing friends AnnRea, who reached out when Ryan and Bells were first introduced to the writing world on Wattpad. I can't believe we have been friends as long as we have. She was there when it was first written, and when I choose to pick this story up again in 2019, and in 2020 when I fully committed to rewriting the Duet. I can't have done it without you, your initial feedback and help really made these stories into what they are today. Thank you!

Thank you to my dear friend Kris Wood who has helped so much in this final stages of revision and editing to perfect this story. Thank you for loving Ryan and Izabel just as much as I do. Your friendship means so much to me!

Thank you to my lovely beta-readers who gave me such great feedback. And thank you to my editor Mckenzie who helped me in all the grueling stages of the editing process.

Another big thank you to Nicole with IndieSage for designing these beautiful covers for the paperback and ebook versions of this Duet.

And as always thank you to my husband for always being a support for me with my passion for writing. I can't imagine life without you!

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Aria Harding is an up-and-coming romance novelist from the Midwest, USA. Aria has been a long-time lover of romance novels and is excited to join the ranks as a romance author. Her first book, “Chasing Infinity” was published in May of 2023 and there are many more exciting projects to come. Her goal is to write stories that make readers feel as though they are immersed in the world and experiencing the same highs and lows as the characters on the pages. Her favorite tropes to write include slow burn, enemies-to-lovers and second-chance romances. Aria always looks forward to hearing from readers, so feel free to reach out on social media and have a chat!

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