

# A GAME AS OLD AS TIME

— JAKE STEHMAN



# **A Game as Old as Time**

Jake Stehman

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TO MY WIFE KATIE

Thank you for pushing me to seize every moment.

# CHAPTER 1

**“Happy Thursday to all of our rush hour listeners on this hot and sticky August afternoon. This is Johnny May for WRXT radio, here to discuss another year of South Mountain Pioneer Football! A bit of a somber broadcast as we go through our preseason preview without our beloved Coach Weston for the first time in almost 15 years. The devastating car accident back in April stunned us all, and the aftershock is still rippling through the community. Local Boosters and the School Board have pushed full support behind playing the season, but one must wonder how this team will respond.**

**New Head Coach Mike Bianchi hopes to bring stability to this program after such a tragic event. He comes to us with an impressive college football coaching resume; however, his abrupt resignation from his last job in California has some around town concerned about the hire. Luckily for Coach Bianchi, he will be returning five key starters from a district championship team. This includes All-State running back Tyquan Carter, whose explosiveness will be paired with one of the top senior receiving duos in the district in Jefferson Taylor and Andy Green. The defense will be in good hands with senior Emilio Cortez, who not only excels at linebacker but also anchors the offensive line.**

**The big question mark, though, will be the quarterback position. Returning starter Gunner Weston will be expected to lead this group of players after an impressive junior season. But, after his father’s sudden passing this spring, many are wondering if Weston will be able to live up to expectations.”**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Gunner felt like he was in a tunnel by the time Ty finally switched off the radio.**

“Man, screw that guy!” Ty exclaimed. “He just loves to hear himself talk.”

***So true.***

The old Sentra, a gift when Gunner first got his license, inched forward as he relaxed his foot against the pedal. He gripped the steering wheel tight as his mind raced while waiting for the red light.

“Yeah, G,” Andy shouted from the back, “that guy is so full of shit!”

A slap on the back from his friend was enough to rock Gunner out of his trance—a state that had unfortunately become a common occurrence. He merely nodded and switched to the Bluetooth music on his phone.

“We know what we have, so screw that guy!” Andy was smiling in the rearview mirror, obviously expecting Gunner to engage and agree. However, Gunner’s chest was so tight that he thought it would explode if he opened his mouth.

***Just breathe.***

He repeated it to himself as the light finally turned green. His eyes remained forward, his glare intensifying as he took a quick turn into the sprawling neighborhood he had grown up in.

He used to love this drive. The peacefulness of the fresh-cut lawns and hemlock trees spreading by the sidewalks was always a comforting return from practice. The waves of neighbors as he passed and the smiles on everyone’s faces were always welcomed after a hot day in pads. But now, after what had happened, the rows of split-level and colonial-style houses were just another depressing backdrop. A cold reminder of the life he’d once had.

“What do we have, AG?” Ty leaned back against his seat and rubbed his buzzed black hair.

“We have us.” Andy was peering out the window now. “We have JT, who is as fast as a damn gazelle, Cortez, who is batshit crazy on the field, and, well, us.”

Gunner could not help but crack a thin smile as he glanced at Andy in the rearview mirror. Even after a long, hot day of two practices, his voice still carried the upbeat, energetic tone that made him a captain.

“You mean you have me.” Ty punched Gunner in the shoulder, almost turning them off the road.

“Careful—you trying to kill us?” Gunner snapped, unable to hide the annoyance in his voice as he steadied the wheel.

“Right. Sorry, G. Not trying to hurt the arm that is going to take us to a state championship.”

Gunner shook his head, smiling slightly.

“Yeah, right,” he said, flashing the blinker and turning down Andy’s street. “If it’s up to Coach, we’ll never throw the ball.”

Ty chuckled, and he slapped his large hands together.

“I mean, can you blame him? He does have the best damn running back in the state on his team.”

### ***Typical Ty.***

Gunner shot an annoyed look at Andy, who merely rolled his eyes. His friend’s messy blond hair, which covered his forehead and reached past his nose when it was soaked with sweat, did not hide his irritation at the comment.

It was not that Gunner’s best friend was wrong. Ty had just been named to the watch list for the Pennsylvania Player of the Year and was a sure bet to be playing Division One college football next year. However, his egocentric personality had lately seemed especially grating. The boisterous tone that normally accompanied it was also wearing thin on Gunner as he pulled up in front of Andy’s house.

“Well, boys, this is my stop.” The young wide receiver tapped Gunner on the shoulder before getting out. “But like I said, man, we know what we have.”

### ***Right...***

Gunner plastered on the fake grin he had been working on for months as Andy got out of the car. The departure was enough to set Ty off on the next topic, and he began to talk through what was still needed for the party tomorrow night at Emilio's.

***Look at that stupid-ass prop.***

His eyes had landed on something they had been trying to avoid. The cutout on Andy's front yard, a plastic South Mountain Football helmet with Andy's name and number in the middle, seemed to taunt him.

***Why do we even—***

Ty punched his shoulder, and he instinctively jerked the car into drive. The internal battle he had been fighting began to dissipate as his grasp once more tightened around the steering wheel.

"You know he's forgetting the cups," Ty joked. His voice sounded quiet and far away in Gunner's ears.

***Right.***

Gunner flexed his hands and stayed quiet. His mind began to jump back and forth until it landed on the radio broadcast they had been listening to.

***Expectations?***

"G? You cool?"

***Of course.***

Gunner cleared his throat and shrugged as he pulled up to his house. Somehow, he had driven the two blocks home without even realizing it.

"G?" Ty's voice was no longer boisterous or arrogant. It was softer, one that a best friend uses when they know something is wrong.

"Yeah man," Gunner said as he shifted the car into park and rested his head against the leather steering wheel. "Just tired, you know?"



Ty's eyes didn't move; the silence in the car was heavier than the humid air outside.

"I know, dude." His best friend finally swung open the door, allowing heat to overtake the interior. "Hey." Ty's voice was still low as he swung his bulky legs out. "Just get through tomorrow's practices, and then we can relax for a few days. We can hit up Emilio's party and, you know, just chill and have some fun before school starts."

Gunner nodded in halfhearted agreement.

"You need to have some fun." Ty's bicep flexed as he grabbed the handle. "We all need to have some fun."

***Fun?***

Gunner waited as Ty grabbed his bag from the back and moved across the street toward his house.

"See you in the morning, man. Remember, it's your day for bagels!"

***Right.***

Gunner took a deep breath and finally built up the strength to ease out of the car and step into the sweltering summer heat. He gave a lazy wave to his best friend and popped the trunk of the Sentra. The musty odor that greeted him was pungent yet familiar—somehow comforting after the last few months.

He tossed his bag into the middle of the yard and began his walk down to the mailbox. He had followed this routine for years after practice, even though it required that he pass his own football helmet cut-out in the yard.

***Screw that prop.***

His name and number, etched in yellow, glowed against the emerald backdrop of the lawn.

***So stupid.***

He snapped his leg back, catching the number sixteen helmet with the underside of his foot. The loud clang rang out into the humid air, and he did not even bother to look at the mail as he stomped back across the pavement.

“Ellie!” The voice startled him, and he jerked his head around toward it. A small dog with a leash trailing behind it was in his yard, gnawing at the edge of his gym bag. “Stop it!”

A girl who looked to be about his age regained control of the leash and tried to pull the dog back onto the sidewalk.

*Never saw this dog before.*

“It’s OK.” He bent down and gave a gentle pet to the corgi, which calmed at his touch. “She probably just enjoys the terrible smell coming out of this bag.”

He glanced up, the sun outlining the girl’s silhouette. Her hazel eyes shimmered in the reflection of the rays, and her toned legs straightened as he rose.

*Who is that!?*

“Sorry,” she said softly, still working hard to corral the small but clearly strong little dog.

“It’s...” he hesitated, watching her long brunette hair, which was swept into a ponytail, sway as she resumed her run past him.

His eyes followed a small bead of sweat that ran down her olive neck when she turned and struggled once more with the leash. He inhaled as the sparkle of moisture ran down her chest.

*Damn, she is hot.*

He finally got enough wind into his lungs to yell after her. “I mean, it’s OK!” She glanced only briefly back at him before continuing down the street at a full sprint.

“Pretty dog!” he shouted. “I mean...”

*Not as pretty as you, though.*

He was mumbling to himself softly, unable to pull his gaze off the girl as she sped away.

“Gunner!” interrupted a voice from inside the house. “Dinner is ready!” He grabbed his bag but could not help but take one more look at the girl as she disappeared around the corner.

### ***Who was that!?***

He swung open the door to the split-level house. The air conditioning hit his body so hard that it instantly sent a chill up his side.

“Did you get the mail?” The woman’s familiar voice, wafting out from the kitchen, was the calming sound that Gunner needed.

“Yeah, Mom, I got it.”

He made his way in, placing the mail down on the table and trying not to make eye contact with her as he kissed her on the cheek. The smell of her lemon chicken made his mouth water as he watched her cut a piece and place it on a plate for him.

“Thanks, Mom,” he whispered, forcing a smile as he grabbed some potatoes.

“You not eating with us?” His sister’s shriek was less welcome. Her sea blue eyes shot daggers at him as she moved a strand of her light brown hair away from her face and took a seat at the table. “It would be nice to have a family dinner for once.”

### ***Family dinner.***

Gunner kept his head down and slid around the table. The plate was now heavy in his hand as he fought to avoid the picture hanging on the living room wall.

### ***There are no more family dinners.***

His father’s stare from the portrait was burning into his skin. The family photo of their vacation in the mountains was just another taunting image he had to avoid today.

“Peyton, be nice to your brother,” his mom snipped, her empathetic gaze locked on him with concern. “She is right, though, Gunner. It would be nice to eat together tonight.”

### ***Yeah...***

He clicked his bottom jaw, still refusing to look at the picture on the wall.

“I...” He tried to catch his breath, but it refused to fill his lungs. “I have to get some stuff ready for school next week, sorry.”

Their eyes followed him as he dashed up the stairs and out of sight. His chest had ballooned once more, and he felt like it might explode with each step he took.

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“Dumb dog,” Hailey huffed as she hustled down the street. The glare of the muscular boy she had just passed was still hot against her back. “You always have to go getting in trouble, don’t you, Ellie?”

She rounded the corner fast, now out of sight of his searching green eyes, and made her way up the driveway to her house.

*What was he staring at?*

She shook her head and reached into her pocket for the house key. A sly smirk appeared on her face as she replayed him kicking the plastic football helmet in his front yard.

*Typical football player.*

A loud bark from Ellie had her turning back before she could open the door. Her father blasted the horn on his car.

“Daddy!” she yelled childishly, fighting the excited corgi, which had redoubled its efforts to escape.

“Sorry, sweetie!” Her father quickly jumped out and extended the bag in his hand. “But I brought dinner!”

*Wonderful, more fast food.*

The little corgi quieted at his voice. She gently unlocked the door and held it open for him as he briskly skipped inside the house.

“Daddy, what did I tell you about always going out for dinner? We’ve been to that stupid shop a hundred times already.”

She unhooked Ellie’s leash, who quickly sprinted to the couch and jumped on an older girl who was staring blankly at

the TV.

“Melissa, sweetheart, I brought dinner.” He kissed Hailey’s older sister on the head as he passed by. She didn’t respond.

***This must be a bad day.***

Melissa stood slowly before sluggishly dragging her body out of the room.

***Poor Melissa.***

Her sister’s brown hair was frayed and matted like it had not been washed in days, and she still had on the same pajama pants she’d worn all last week.

“How was Ellie on the walk?” Her dad pulled out salads as Hailey entered the kitchen.

“Good. You know her, always getting into trouble.” She was trying to engage in the conversation, but her mind kept creeping back to her sister, who had finally taken a seat at the table.

“Hey Melissa, maybe you should go with Hails next time she takes the dog for a walk? I know it’s been a scorcher, but it might be nice to get outside.”

***What are you doing, Daddy?***

Hailey glared intently over at her father, who merely smiled and put the salads down on the table. The silence that followed built into an awkward tension as they both awaited an answer.

“Yeah, maybe,” Melissa muttered softly. “Maybe next time.” She took a few small bites and went silent again.

***Not a chance.***

Hailey could not help but sigh; her father kept his fake smile on. They grabbed their plastic containers and silverware before taking a seat at the circular wooden table. For a few moments, the only sound was that of the TV in the other room, which murmured throughout their meal.

***I hate family dinners.***

For Hailey, the unspoken horror that had happened to her sister was a constant presence, and watching Melissa suffer through each day was becoming an unbearable sight that typically left Hailey without an appetite.

“So.” Her father flashed another forced grin. “Are you excited for the first day of school, Hails?”

He took a quick bite and tilted his head to her.

***Is that a serious question?***

Hailey froze, a piece of lettuce hanging from her fork as she sized up an answer.

“I guess as excited as I can be for my first day of senior year at a brand-new school all the way across the country without any friends.”

Her father inhaled deeply, peering down at his plate.

***Stupid Hailey!***

Melissa had already dropped her fork and was staring at the blank wall in front of her.

***Of all the things to say!***

She knew better than to be sarcastic right now.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice echoed in the quiet, empty room. “I didn’t...I just...I mean, yeah, I think I have everything I need.”

She stared sheepishly at the scarred surface of the wooden dinner table. They reverted to silence once more until her sister abruptly stood.

“Done already, Melissa?” Her father’s voice did not match the smile on his face.

“Just wasn’t very hungry tonight, Dad.” She was already well on her way to the living room.

***Same.***

Hailey took a few more bites before making her way over to the sink. Her father remained seated, his disappointment palpable.

***I hate this.***

She had always loved speaking to her father, and when she was younger, she had admired how hard he worked to raise his two girls. However, for the last few years, he had struggled to find answers. His face was endlessly stuck in a look of confusion and anxiety. The losses their family had suffered, along with everything that had occurred after, had left a black cloud over them all. That image, which gave rise to a rotating hole in her stomach, had Hailey swiftly finishing at the sink in hopes of avoiding any more talk. Her father stood.

“Baby girl,” he said, coming close and grabbing her hands before she could get away. “I know this is not easy for you.”

***I do not want to do this now.***

She could not help but look up. His soft hazel eyes were weary and lost, making her stomach turn more violently.

“But I need you to be strong, please.” His gaze was imploring as he motioned toward the living room. “I need you to be strong for your sister and...and for me.”

***I know.***

She squeezed his dry, callused hands.

“Don’t worry, Coach,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. “I’ll be tough. I know the drill.”

She wouldn’t be able to hold it together if she stayed any longer. Hailey stepped out of the kitchen, taking one more look at her sister as she made her way to the stairs. Her eyes began to shift around the living room. The sight of unpacked boxes made her lower her head as she gripped the railing tight.

***This is not home.***

Hailey hated this new house, hated the old carpets and outdated kitchen backsplash by the sink. She hated the tiny backyard and the entire colonial-style layout around her.

***This will never be home.***

She missed California. She missed her friends. She missed her mother.

As Hailey climbed the stairs, she glanced back at her father. He stood by the sink, slightly hunched over as the water continued to run in front of him. The South Mountain High polo shirt he wore was drenched with sweat stains and stuck to his stomach. “Coach Bianchi” was emblazoned across the left side of his bulky chest.

*I hope this was all worth it.*

He began to turn, but Hailey was already in motion, jumping up the rest of the steps toward her room before he could say another word to her.



# CHAPTER 2

**“Happy Friday to all, and I hope you are staying cool during this hot Eastern Pennsylvania summer day! This is Johnny May with another edition of Pioneer Football Live. We had a great conversation yesterday about expectations for this season, but I want to start today with breaking news that has just come to us at WRXT. The School Board and the Pioneer Football Boosters have officially voted to have a new scoreboard added this year in honor of Coach Weston and his contributions to the Pioneer program. The vote was contested by a few within the district, as it will pull funds from other after-school activities. But after a vote last night, it passed 9 to 1. In other news, the school has announced that tickets are still available for the first game next week against Neversink High...”**

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“Dad! Turn off that dumb station!” Hailey yelled.

*I feel stupid.*

The pink skater skirt looked great with her white halter top. Yet, as she rocked back and forth, she could hardly recognize the girl staring back from the mirror.

*This is not me.*

She adjusted the skirt again as she tried to make herself feel more comfortable.

*At least I can wear sneakers.*

“I think you look great.” The voice startled Hailey, who twirled toward it.

“Melissa!” she shrieked, trying to cover herself up. “I am so sorry! I should have asked to borrow this, but I...”

A small smirk brightened Melissa’s face as she walked into the room.

*She smiled.*

“You don’t have to ask, Hails.”

Melissa picked up the comb by the sink and began to stroke it through her hair.

***Just like when we were young.***

Hailey’s eyes remained on the mirror as she admired just how beautiful her sister was. Even now, in an old tee shirt and shorts, she looked like she could step onto a runway.

She had shorter, light brown hair, notably different from Hailey’s longer and darker brunette. However, as Hailey continued to gaze at them together, she could see why so many thought they were twins.

“You look beautiful, and it fits you perfectly.” The two posed beside each other for a few moments as Melissa finished with her hair. Her sister turned and brought them face to face. “You look like Mom.”

***No way!***

The words made Hailey’s heart jump, and she wrapped her arms tightly around the girl, now almost a grown woman, she had grown up with.

“I feel stupid!” Hailey chuckled as she pulled at the skirt again, trying to get it down past her knees.

“Stop it!” Melissa said, laughing. “I told you, it fits perfectly!”

The two fell into silence, their eyes having a conversation of their own.

This was the first time in the weeks since they had moved into this house that Hailey’s sister had been upstairs. Normally, she spent the night on the couch with the TV on low. While this particular moment had calmed Hailey’s typically swirling stomach, she could not help but notice the pain in her sister’s caring brown eyes.

***I am so sorry, Melissa.***

She once more wished she could find the right words to help. She wanted so much for the light to return that, in the

past, had shown so bright. She wanted to see the carefree older sister, the cheerleading captain, that she had always looked up to.

“Wow,” said her father, breaking the sisters’ gaze. His hand was propped against the bathroom door. “What are you getting all dressed up for tonight?”

***Stop it, Daddy.***

Melissa rolled her eyes and pushed him out.

“Daddy,” Hailey said, following the two down the hall, “I told you. Juliana is picking me up to go to a small get-together at her house.”

Melissa was still ushering her father down the hallway as he tried to interject.

“What party? What type of party is it?”

He was now backpedaling down the steps, and Hailey giggled as her sister continued to corral him.

“Just relax, Dad!” Melissa was still grinning as she forced him into the living room. “You told her to make some friends, and she is.”

Hailey made her way to the middle of the room and placed her hand on her hip.

“Daddy.” Her voice was soft as she narrowed her eyes at him. “I know you’re worried, but I promise this is just something small with the girls. Juliana wants to introduce me to a few students who are involved in the music department. I figured I would go before school starts.”

He studied her as Melissa rubbed his shoulders.

“Music department?” He perked up, but his face still wreaked of concern. “Are you thinking of joining the music department?”

***Oh no.***

“Well, I guess everyone has to do an after-school activity at South Mountain. It sounds like the Theatre Club was the only one that had an opening for a new student.”

***How ironic.***

She knew her voice sounded annoyed, but she refused to hide it. She had asked to join every other club, but from what the principal had told her, she had no choice.

“OK,” he said, still unconvinced. “But you need to be home by ten. I mean, nine! Be home by nine!”

Melissa shook her head as Ellie started barking at a knock on the door.

“Just have fun, Hails!” Her sister winked before going to answer.

***I love it when she is happy.***

“Hailey!” A young girl sprinted into the room with energy Hailey only wished she could match. “You look so pretty!”

She thanked Juliana and complimented the high-waisted jean shorts and strapless shirt she was wearing. Her new friend’s glossy black hair was the perfect complement to her rich tan skin.

“I cannot wait for you to meet everyone!”

Her father quickly stood back up as Juliana pulled Hailey to the door.

“Remember!” He was practically chasing after her as they left. “Be home by 10—I mean 9!”

She turned and waved.

“I will, Daddy!”

***No need to worry.***

Juliana was grinning ear to ear as they moved out of sight and toward her car at the end of the driveway.

“You have no idea how excited I am for you to meet everyone!” Hailey smiled nervously as she got in. “They are going to be so excited to meet someone who is coming from a California performing arts school!”

She started the car, hitting the gas and peeling into the street before Hailey could fully buckle herself in.

“Are we in a hurry?” Hailey laughed as she grabbed the dashboard.

“Just a little—we’re late!”

Hailey’s shoulders stiffened as she tilted her head.

“Late to your own house?”

Juliana snickered as she took a sharp left turn.

“Well, you see...” Hailey could tell something was up. “I knew you wouldn’t come out if I told you what was going on.”

***What is going on!?***

They continued down a back road for a few minutes before pulling into the large driveway of the Cortez house, which she had visited once before.

***Oh my!***

Unlike when she first met Juliana, cars were parked all over the grass and driveway. The sheer volume of vehicles immediately signaled to Hailey that this was no small get-together.

“I know—please, don’t be mad! It’s just, my brother and I are having a big party for all the seniors, and I thought you should meet everyone before classes start.”

***Party!?***

The young woman had a slightly embarrassed smirk on her face as she snapped the car into park.

“Juliana.” Hailey gripped the door handle as her eyes went wide. “My dad will kill me if he finds out I am at a house party!”

Juliana waved her hands impatiently, her straight black hair dancing in the wind blowing through the open window.

“I know, I know! Listen, all my friends are coming too, so this is half my party. One of the nice things about being twins! My parents are traveling, and we have the pool and a giant fire out back!” Hailey watched as a few kids who seemed about

her age walked by the car. “No one comes back this way. We are in the middle of nowhere. Please, please!”

Hailey felt her shoulders sag in the face of such genuine pleading. Juliana was the first, and only, friend that she had made since she arrived. Classes were about to start, and the whole reason she had come out tonight was to avoid being completely surrounded by a bunch of people she had never met on her first day of school.

***Daddy said to make friends.***

The thought of meeting so many new people made her hesitate, but she finally built up the strength to nod and shifted her clammy hand to the handle.

***Try and make friends.***

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“You need another one?” Gunner squinted up to JT, who smiled and reached down toward him.

“Yeah, sure,” Gunner said, clearing his throat and handing his friend the empty cup.

***Why the hell not?***

JT simply nodded and began to make his way over to the keg. His long legs were a spectacle as he glided across the concrete around the pool. Like always, JT had dressed to impress, wearing a light blue button-down that complemented his white Nike swim trunks. While he may not have been the most vocal, he was a fantastic listener and exactly what Gunner had needed for the last few hours.

***I hate parties.***

Gunner eased out of the lawn chair he had dropped onto when he arrived. He gave the backyard a long, hard scan as he moved across it, admiring just how spacious and secluded the Cortez’s house was. The fact that the family traveled so much made it the prime spot to throw a party for a large group. Although, typically, Gunner much preferred the quiet movie nights to something like this.

“Cannonball!” He had to shield himself as Emilio’s body hit the water.

The splash scattered a few of the girls who had gathered around the edge of the pool, and he could hear laughter nearby.

“Crazy ass!” Ty chuckled, taking a sip from his plastic cup. “See!” He punched Gunner’s arm. “You just needed a night out!”

***Right, Ty.***

Gunner adopted the forced smile he had been working on and tried to clear his mind. The alcohol, which had helped relax his shoulders, at least a little bit, was now becoming a hindrance as he tried to count off everyone from the senior class who had shown up.

***Shit.***

“Look, G! Charlotte made it to the party!” Andy was laughing as he pulled up a chair next to him.

***Not what I need.***

Emilio emerged from the water. His massive arms and chest practically launched him out of the pool.

“You aren’t going to say hi?” Emilio mumbled as he shook himself off, spraying a group of girls who had ducked away from the initial splash.

***Not a chance.***

Gunner sheepishly turned away. The thought of even acknowledging Charlotte, who was the captain of the cheerleading squad and someone he knew all too well, was nowhere close to the top of tonight’s to-do list.

***Of course.***

It was clear that she had worn a short skirt and a tight top for him. Her quick peeks over at him were so obvious that even the soccer players she was flirting with saw them.

“I would rather not,” he said softly, making Ty shoot up and slap him in the chest.

“Emilio! Can you please get our boy a shot so he can smile!?”

***No way!***

Emilio pointed to him questioningly as he made his way over to the outside tiki bar. He struggled to fit his wide shoulders through a gap in the crowd before he moved in behind his friends and threw off his backward Phillies hat.

“No shots. Please, no shots.” Gunner shook him off as Charlotte caught his gaze. The flip of her blonde hair was followed by a quick bat of her eyes.

***Screw this.***

Gunner was scrambling up from the chair, trying to move away before Charlotte could make her way over.

“Here, maybe this will help.” JT handed him his cup, now full of beer from the keg.

“Thank you, Jefferson Taylor!” Ty yelled as he threw his shirt off.

“Do you really have to walk around half-naked?” Andy relaxed against the chair, flexing his biceps sarcastically at Ty.

“Just trying to show you boys what to strive for in the weightroom. If we all looked like this, we would have no problem winning state!” he shouted. Then he winked and jumped off the diving board.

***Whatever you say, Ty.***

Emilio slapped Gunner on the back. The force of the impact practically knocked him over. “How’s my captain doing?”

***Just great.***

Gunner held the fake smile, but he could tell his long-term friend was not buying it.

Emilio was much more vocal than JT; at times, his fiery personality was known to get him into trouble. However, on that fateful night in April, Emilio and his sister, Juelz, had been among the first to his house, and they had refused to



leave until his mother returned from the hospital with the news.

“I’m OK, man,” Gunner sighed. Emilio’s large hand didn’t move from his shoulder.

Seconds ticked past as they stood in silence. It was not until two cheerleaders sauntered by and flashed them a flirtatious grin that one of them spoke.

“What do you think?” Emilio said, raising his eyebrow. “Your father always said life is made of moments.”

*Not what he meant.*

Gunner hesitated and peered down at his feet. The Nike sandals he wore hid the fresh scars he had already accumulated during practice.

Hearing the words come out of Emilio’s mouth had officially killed any desire Gunner had to drink. And the thought of hooking up with someone just did not feel right. Would it piss off Charlotte? Maybe, but Gunner had things on his mind besides his ex-girlfriend.

“Jesus Christ! Emilio!!!” The scream erupted from the house.

*Shit! Juelz!*

They both turned and took off at a full sprint across the patio, exploding through a door into the large, expansive kitchen.

“Juelz! What the hell is going on?” Emilio shrieked as he slid across the granite floor with his wet feet.

“Emilio, one of your damn friends threw up in my bathroom!”

*Oh boy.*

Gunner could not hold in the laugh as he helped Emilio get his balance. The small group immediately shuffled into the massive living room, where a large crowd had gathered.

“I told you to keep your damn football friends out of my room and away from my bathroom!”

Emilio rolled his eyes. “Who is it?”

Unfortunately, this was not the first time this had happened at one of these parties.

“I don’t know! Just get him the hell out!”

Emilio’s fiery twin sister continued to yell as she chased him up the stairs. Her intense personality, which was the only thing she had in common with her twin brother, appeared to be in full force tonight. However, she was at least six inches shorter than Emilio and at least half his weight. Gunner considered her stunningly beautiful, even though she never tried to dress up, and her close relationship with him always brought questions from his ex-girlfriends.

*Where’s Andy when you need him?*

“You would think you football players would know how to hold your liquor, with as much as you drink,” said a girl sitting on the couch.

“You know, Bridgette,” Gunner responded, moving closer and taking a sip of his beer. “I thought that you Glee Club people would listen to better music than this shit.”

He pointed to the speakers, which were playing some pop song from the radio.

Bridgette was one of Juelz’s close friends from the Theatre Club, and she always found a way to draw Gunner’s attention. Her snarky personality, however, constantly led to confrontation when the two groups were together at the house.

“Well, not like you would know anything about good music.” She leaned forward with a flirtatious smile. A flick of her short black hair was a clear invitation for him to come closer.

*Well, well...*

She had been drinking, and he could see that the solo cup in her hand was only half full. Their eyes locked for a brief, awkward moment before Juelz came sprinting back down the stairs.

“Gunner!” she yelled, grabbing him from behind.

“Juelz!” he said, winking at Bridgette and hugging her back.

“Is Bridgette giving you problems again?” She moved in between them like a protective sister, causing Bridgette to roll her eyes.

“Nah, just friendly banter, right Bridgette?” He smiled at her as she turned her head, a smirk also visible on her face.

***Not tonight, though. I’m not drunk enough.***

“Hi, Gunner!” A tall, lanky boy sat down on the couch, waving frenetically.

“Hey, Brad! You guys enjoying the party?”

“Of course!” The young man answered immediately, but Bridgette merely rolled her eyes and took another sip of her drink.

“Woah!” A yank by Juelz had Gunner’s body lurching the other way. “What are you doing?” he said, laughing as he sarcastically waved goodbye to the other two.

“I am not starting this tonight with Bridgette.” Juelz seemed fed up with this party already. “You’ve messed around with enough of my friends, and you hate her, even if you are drunk!”

***True.***

Gunner followed her around to the sunroom, where a few of her other theatre friends had gathered.

“Hold up, Juelz. I’m not *that* drunk, and you really think I would do something with Bridgette?” His voice rose, and all the eyes in the sunroom turned toward them.

“Not now!” Juelz fought to stay quiet and pushed him forward. “You guys all know Gunner.” She had tried to play it off, but the awkwardness that followed had him yearning for the crazy eyes of his ex-girlfriend outside.

***These people hate me.***

He recognized some of the kids from school but was struggling to remember any of their names.

“Gunner, I wanted to introduce you to a new senior who just moved here from California.”

Gunner’s eyes fell on the girl who had been walking the dog.

“Gunner, this is Hailey.” He could tell she recognized him right away, as she smiled slightly and nodded.

***No way she’s in theatre.***

He wanted to say something, but his eyes were stuck to her pink skirt. He swallowed hard and tried to prevent himself from staring too much at her white top, in which she fit so perfectly. Unlike Charlotte, she was dressed comfortably and looked relaxed. Hailey stood with a confidence that Gunner was unable to match and that had him struggling to catch his breath.

***She’s not hot, she’s beautiful.***

“Hailey, this is Gunner. He plays football with my brother but is one of only a few that I like!”

He smirked and nodded.

“You are too nice, Juelz. But I think we—I think we ran into each other once already. Your dog really liked the smell of my football bag.”

Her eyes shifted to the floor.

“Yeah, sorry about that. My dog is always getting into trouble.”

***That voice...***

Gunner was still struggling to regain his composure, and he could now feel his face getting warm.

***Pull yourself together.***

She anxiously took a drink of the soda in her hand, bringing his attention back to her perfectly toned legs.

***Damnit, Gunner! Don’t be weird!***

She seemed uncomfortable as he continued to stare, but his mind was wandering uncontrollably.

“G!” He heard Emilio call from behind. “It’s Bailey! The little shit could not hang with the big boys, and it’s ugly. I need el capitan right now!”

Gunner put his finger up, trying to wave off Emilio, but he just kept yelling, now in Spanish.

“I thought you only invited seniors?” Gunner asked, shooting an annoyed glare at Juelz. The fact that he had to leave Hailey’s gorgeous hazel eyes for a drunk underclassman made him clench his jaw.

“You know my brother. He invites the whole damn team.”

Gunner forced a laugh and then hugged her. The gesture was mainly to play off the awkwardness and the annoyance he was trying to hide.

“I should probably go help. I guess I’ll see you all Monday.” The group nodded forcefully, clearly ready for him to leave.

“Hailey,” he said, stumbling over his words. “It was, um, it was great seeing you again. Welcome to town.”

***Welcome to town? What the hell was that?***

He made his way toward Emilio, whose voice was now echoing against the high ceilings of the house.

***She’s different.***

Turning back, he smiled at Hailey, who avoided his gaze and instead turned her attention to Juelz, who was whispering in her ear.

***She’s so different.***

# CHAPTER 3

**“It is football eve here on WRXT, and I, for one, cannot wait to get this season started. As we approach game one of the new season, we have many questions that are yet to be answered. What will the Pioneers look like under new Head Coach Mike Bianchi, and can his college-style coaching translate to the high school level? What should we expect from quarterback Gunner Weston, who will obviously be playing with a heavy heart in his first game since his father’s passing? Can this team, that last year came up just short of a state championship game, get back and possibly win it all? It will fall on the team’s veteran leadership to get them back to a state-semifinal and secure them a chance to play in Hershey Stadium at the end of the year.”**

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“You really got Coach fired up at practice today.” Ty was smirking at Gunner as they opened the door to Tony D’s pizza parlor. The annoying voice of the radio DJ blared over all the speakers. “I mean, I thought for a second he was going to unload on you.”

*Whatever.*

Gunner just shook his head and got in line. The noise from the dinner crowd was picking up from the other side of the wall, causing a slight headache to begin to throb in his temple.

*Not my problem.*

Coach Bianchi had been pushing them for weeks, and Gunner had finally had enough. His offense was as bland as his speeches, and his play calling, which refused to give Gunner the opportunity to throw the ball, was about as predictable as Charlotte’s flirtatious advances during every lunch.

*My father was a much better coach.*

“I mean, like I said though—” Ty raised his hand so Tony could see they had arrived. “All Coach has to do is give me the ball, and we’ll be fine.”

Gunner ignored him as he tried to erase the incident from his head. He could still see his coach’s face locked on him as he stood by himself, the rest of the team on the line for sprints. He knew he had messed up the second he opened his mouth, but he was a captain, and someone had to say something.

***Why does it always have to be me?***

“Look, man.” Ty made his way to the counter and grabbed the pizza that awaited him. “I know you and Coach B don’t see eye to eye. I mean hell, how that man produced that fine-ass daughter of his I will never—”

“Watch it!” Gunner’s voice rose, and he flashed a glare toward his friend. The jolt of anger came out of nowhere but coursed heavily through his body.

***What the hell was that?***

Gunner’s face instantly went warm as he shied away. He took a deep breath and squinted up at the multiple chandeliers that illuminated the large dining area on the other side of the wall.

“Chill dude!” Ty’s eyes were wide and questioning. “You know the deal. You can’t go banging the coach’s daughter, G. It’s like an unwritten rule—a game you can’t play. Plus, you’re the quarterback, and Charlotte is the captain of the cheerleading squad. That’s like a fairytale or some shit.”

***Not my fairytale.***

Gunner gritted his teeth as his friend started away.

“Charlotte’s all yours, Ty.” He finally said what he had been waiting to say since the breakup a few weeks before. “Trust me, I know you’ve had your eye on her for a long time.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ty shot back. The two stared at each other in silence as the bell went off behind Gunner. “Just remember, G. This is our senior year. We are

going to win state. We are going to win state for your dad.” Ty propped the door open, but their eyes remained locked. “I need you, G. The team needs you. It’s us, like it’s always been.”

*Us...*

Gunner took another deep breath and nodded slowly. His propensity to overreact had caught up to him again.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s just, I mean, tell the boys I said hi when you see them.”

Ty meant well, and Gunner knew he had been out of line.

“Tell the fam I said the same.” He flashed his patent Tyquan Carter smile and stepped through the door.

*Man, what was all that—*

“Gunner!” called a gruff voice from behind the counter. “Your food is done.” Gunner inched forward, grabbing the bags and extending the cash he had in his hand. “No, no kid,” the man insisted, waving his hand dismissively. “This one is on me.”

“Tony, please.”

The burly man behind the counter just shook his head as he pointed to the door.

“Please, Gunner. Take this back to your mom and sister and give them my best.”

Gunner lowered the bills and thanked him.

“How are they doing, by the way?” Tony asked as Gunner made his way around the corner.

That was precisely one of the questions Gunner had hoped to avoid, and he stuffed the bills into his pocket before taking another long inhale to gather himself. A familiar picture by the cash register grabbed his attention as he tried to steady his vision. His father and Tony stood together, holding a grand reopening sign, in front of this very pizza parlor—the original building had burned down.

“Doing OK.” Gunner jerked his head up, trying to keep his voice from breaking. “Just taking it day by day, I guess.”



***I'm a terrible liar.***

Tony's green eyes looked exhausted, and his protruding stomach, which you could see through his apron, rocked as they went silent. It was clear that he wanted to say more; perhaps he wanted to press the conversation further. However, just like Gunner, Tony appeared to be at a loss for words. A large sigh finally brought them together into his well-known, tight, Italian bear hug.

"You look so much like him," he exhaled as he patted Gunner's back. "Life is not fair sometimes. I just hope that the new scoreboard that we are putting up can help us all remember what your father has done for this town and community."

***I can't do this.***

Gunner's chest had begun to tighten, and his eyes were starting to swell.

"I gotta go, Tony, but," he snatched up the bags, "I really appreciate this."

Tony stood, a subtle wetness filling his own eyes, for a few moments before he finally turned back to the counter.

"Good luck tomorrow, kid. I know as long as we have a Weston on the field, we have a chance."

***Great.***

Gunner nodded and took one more look at the picture of his father and Tony. Their radiant smiles were the last push he needed to spin and half-run for the door.

***Woah!***

A woman shrieked as Gunner barreled past her, narrowly avoiding a collision in the small waiting area.

"Ms. Summers!" He jerked away, trying not to show how upset he was. "My fault. I was in a hurry, and I'm so sorry."

She didn't seem upset at all. Her warm, calm expression helped ease his breathing as he rocked back onto his heels.

"Are you OK?" she asked, her face shifting to concern.

***I'm fine.***

He gave a slight nod and tried to slip by.

“I just need to get home. My mom and sister are probably really hungry.”

She put her hand on his arm and forced him to come to a stop. The genuine concern she was showing was not all that surprising, given that Ms. Summers was one of his favorite teachers and a strong supporter of the football team. Her music classes were a much-needed break from his hectic AP schedule, and Gunner admired the way she engaged with her students.

“Before you go, I spoke with Principal Davis this morning.”

***Great.***

He tried to avoid eye contact with his teacher.

“I know you want out of stage crew this year.” Gunner was jutting his lower jaw out, trying to hide his frustration. “You know you need to do a club or after-school activity. It is required by the school and—”

“I play football. That’s my after-school activity.”

***What the hell is wrong with me!?***

Her soft blue eyes widened; a splash of disappointment spread across her face in an instant.

“You know that does not count toward an activity, Gunner. And with you leaving, all the other football players have applied for other clubs.”

His face was getting hot. The bags in his hands were getting heavier by the second.

“Yeah well, with everything going on, I just don’t feel like I can do it again this year.” He took another look at her: The disappointment still painted her face as she ran her hands through her dirty blonde hair. “I know my dad wanted the team to support the musical and stage crew, but I just can’t this

year.” He pulled away, quickly shuffling to the door. “I’ll talk to Principal Davis tomorrow and see what he says.”

His feet were picking up speed as he threw the door open.

“Gunner!”

He ignored Ms. Summers’ call as the door slammed shut behind him.

***Why me? Why the hell does she need me to do—***

“Oh shit!” Gunner shouted as he practically ran through a girl who was coming down the sidewalk. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t watching...” His voice trailed off when he realized that it was Hailey standing in front of him, her arms spread out in shock.

***It’s her.***

“Hailey...” His voice cracked as he tried to gather himself. “I’m so sorry. I was just in a hurry, and I, I should have been more careful. Are you OK?”

She nodded at him but didn’t meet his eyes.

***Crack a joke, or tell her she looks nice.***

He opened his mouth, but she hurried around him before he could mutter another word.

“Good to see you, Gunner. Have a nice night.”

She threw open the door to the pizza parlor. He heard the front counter’s ringing bell before the door slammed shut behind her.

\*\*\*\*\*

***He almost killed me.***

Hailey practically sprinted to the pizza parlor’s cash register. A small line at the front caused her to abruptly halt and, finally, take another breath.

***Why do I keep running into him?***

She was analyzing her fingernails as she waited for the other customer to get her food. The fact that this football

player was eating up so much of her thoughts made her want to stomp her foot.

Sure, he was cute. His bright green eyes, his sleek, dark brown hair, had made her hesitate for a second at last weekend's party. However, he was the quarterback of the football team, and Juliana had told her everything she needed to know about him and his cheerleader girlfriend.

***Typical football player.***

After only a few days of school, she was already sick of hearing about Gunner Weston and his football team. She hated the sport, and she hated that her father had gotten back into coaching. Football had ruined their family two years ago, and she was convinced when they left California that they were finally done with it.

"Ms. Bianchi!" The voice of the other customer shook her from her thoughts.

***Crap.***

"Ms. Summers!" Hailey smiled, trying to seem happy to see her.

"I am so glad I ran into you." Her teacher waved off the man behind the counter, who seemed upset by something she had said to him. "I wanted to speak with you, but I know how crazy the first week of school can be."

***You have no idea.***

Hailey reluctantly kept the smile plastered on her face, but her gaze fell to the ground.

"How are you doing? I can only imagine how different this is for you."

***Very different.***

Her teacher's gaze was welcoming enough to allow Hailey to relax a bit. The craziness and noise of the pizza parlor did not appear to overwhelm this woman at all.

"It's OK. Different, but everyone has been nice."

***Well, almost everyone.***

She had felt the tension with Juliana's friend, Bridgette, the minute they'd met. It did not help that Juliana had told the entire group that she had come from a performing arts school in California. She could tell instantly that they were intimidated by her, and she could feel the uneasiness every time she entered the room.

***Why do I have to be so different?***

"I know it can be intimidating, transferring to a new school, but the kids here really are nice."

***Right.***

Ms. Summers paused. The awkwardness grew as Hailey tried to figure out something else to say.

"Thanks," she said finally.

"Well, I spoke with Juelz, and she told me that she introduced you to some of the other students in my Theatre Club."

***Here we go.***

Hailey's smile wavered as Ms. Summers continued.

"I really hope you can join us in the musical this year. You have such a great background in performing arts, and I won't lie to you: I need as many people as I can get."

***I'm sure you do.***

Hailey yanked at her tee shirt as she desperately glanced toward the pick-up counter, hoping with all her might that her name would be called.

"I am definitely thinking about it," she lied, trying to move a bit closer to the cash register.

"Good!" Ms. Summers' voice had excitement in it that Hailey was not able to match. "I actually handpicked the musical for this year." Abruptly, her teacher's ecstatic grin faltered.

"I heard," Hailey said softly as she watched Ms. Summers regain her composure. "Juliana could not stop talking about it the other night."

***All night.***

Ms. Summers cleared her throat and lowered her voice to a more serious tone.

“I know most of the students think the story is just some girl falling in love with a beast while talking to a bunch of household objects, but,” she looked toward the door, “I think it means so much more. If we do it right, it will be magical.”

***Magical?***

Hailey’s smile wavered as the parlor owner placed a bag on the counter.

“It’s certainly a special play.” She nodded at the man as he finally called her name.

“I would love for you to try out for the lead.”

***No way.***

She was frozen for a second as she stared at the linoleum tiles on the floor, trying with all her power to push herself forward to the counter.

***Deep breath, Hailey.***

“Well, I am sure you have some great people who can play that for you.”

The words were forced, and she remained with her back turned to her teacher.

***Please just leave.***

Her chest was getting tight, and she could feel knots starting to ball up in her stomach as the silence stretched between them.

“Think about it, Hailey. You were born to be the lead.”

***Please, just leave me alone!***

Ms. Summers’ comment made her hand tremble as she pulled the money from her pocket. She could hear the teacher move through the door; her shoulders relaxed a bit when it slammed behind her. The man behind the counter held a stern

frown as he gave her the bag of food, and he hardly acknowledged her when she handed him the money.

“Tell your father I said good luck tomorrow.” He was heading back toward the grill before the change he had given even hit her hand.

“Thanks,” she murmured, glancing at the picture on the counter.

***What a stupid town.***

The man who had just left was hugging a football coach. The two both smiled widely as they held some dumb sign for a fundraiser.

***Just get through the year.***

She twisted away, hastily making her way back to the door and throwing it open.

# CHAPTER 4

**“Welcome, Pioneer fans, to another year of South Mountain football! It will be an emotional night for all, as, for the first time in almost fifteen years, a new coach will be on the sidelines. Everyone on the field will be playing with heavy hearts tonight, but none more than quarterback Gunner Weston. It will be up to Coach Bianchi to keep his team and his quarterback in the right mindset as they prepare for what should be a stiff challenge against Neversink High. Last year, these two teams played a classic, and we expect another close one tonight as Pennsylvania high school football gets underway!”**

\*\*\*\*\*

“Daddy?” Hailey watched as her father finally switched off the radio and dropped back against the seat of the car. “Daddy, are you OK?” He slid forward, adjusting the visor on his head.

*I hate when he does that.*

“You bet, sweetheart.” It was clearly a lie, but he left her no time for a rebuttal as he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “You sure you don’t want to stay and watch the game tonight?”

He was almost pleading with her—again—as he reached for the door handle.

“I think I will pass.” She tried to smile but was distracted by all the fans heading into the stadium.

*This is crazy for some dumb high school sport.*

As she turned her gaze back to him, she could see his blank stare reaching out across the parking lot.

“Thanks for stopping by and wishing me luck. I can’t wait to see you girls tonight when I get home.” He sounded exhausted. Hailey’s forced grin only got a gentle nod from him before he opened the door.



***I hate all of this.***

Her father's slumped shoulders was just another reminder of why she hated this sport so much. The long hours of watching stupid tapes, the hot practices, and now he was babysitting a bunch of spoiled high school kids.

"Daddy," she said before he closed the door, "remember, it is just a game."

He tapped the window and nodded before moving toward the school.

***It is just a stupid game.***

A knock on the top of the car distracted her from her father.

"Hey!" Juliana had somehow found her.

***Oh boy.***

She rolled down her window and tried to match her friend's enthusiasm.

"Hey!" Hailey responded, and she waved to a few students she had met at the party the week before.

"You coming? Want to come with?" Juliana pointed to a few seniors who were already heading down the hill to the stadium.

"No, I don't really like football," Hailey admitted.

"Your dad is a football coach, and you don't like the sport?"

***Absolutely.***

"The fact that my dad coaches is probably the main reason why I do not like football." The blunt truth was followed by a nervous giggle as she lowered her head. "It is also probably not good for the coach's daughter to sit by herself in the crowd during a game. It tends to get a little hostile."

Juliana leaned in. "You won't be by yourself. I'll be with you."

***She is great.***

The response brought a sincere smile to Hailey's face as she shifted in the seat. The girl now peering into her window had,

so far, been one of the only positive things about moving to this town. Hailey was still trying to figure out how Juliana was twins with the jerk of a brother that Hailey had met at the party. Juliana was so pretty and genuine, while her brother Emilio was bulky, loud, and full of himself.

“Maybe next time.” Hailey could see the parking lot filling up, and she gripped the steering wheel tight.

***I need to go.***

Juliana remained for a second before backing away.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said as she started toward the stadium. “I’ll make sure to text you and let you know who wins!”

Hailey fired the engine of her SUV to life and waved as the group left.

***I will know who won.***

She flipped the car into drive and waited for a few more fans to pass.

***One look at Daddy tonight, and I will know.***

\*\*\*\*\*

***Life is made of moments.***

Gunner took a deep breath, his hands resting on his kneepads.

***It’s what you do with those moments, Gunner.***

He kept replaying his father’s voice in his head as he kneeled by himself in the endzone.

***You can do this.***

He gathered his strength and finally stood. The eyes of the entire town seared his neck. The pregame warmups were still going on, but all the attention from the stands had fallen on him.

“G!” Ty was behind him now. “You ready for this?”

***Maybe?***

Gunner took one more deep breath and put his fingers in front of his mouth, whispering to himself.

***It's what you do with those moments.***

He bent down, grabbing the white and blue helmet at his feet. The reflection of his face in the polished helmet greeted him as the burning lights above intensified.

In the past, this was where he had felt at home. The fresh smell of cut grass, the lights beaming down, and the crowd screaming. He always felt safe between these lines, like he could accomplish anything or take on anyone.

***Just be yourself.***

“Let’s do this,” he said unconvincingly, but it was enough to spring Ty into motion.

They took off to the sideline, Gunner surveying the crowd until he found his mom in the bleachers. She was up near the press box, where she always sat, but he could tell that something was different tonight. A slight shimmer that he knew was a tear glistened on her cheek.

***Don't cry.***

He jogged briskly to the bench and grabbed some water. A cotton taste he had never experienced before a game was spreading down his throat.

“Gunner.” The voice was soft and made him twist around.

***P.***

Peyton stood in her cheerleading outfit behind the bench as tears built in her eyes.

***No.***

“Hey, it’s alright.” He ran over and hugged her tightly.

“Are you OK?” she mumbled as the tears began to stream down.

“I’m OK, little sis.” He tried to recall that forced smile he had been practicing. “Going to win this for him tonight.” He

squeezed her one more time and kissed her on the head. “Just you watch.”

They inhaled as one before separating; for a few seconds, Gunner struggled to let go.

***It’s OK, baby sis.***

Peyton had been so strong over the last few months, but the way she looked tonight, with mascara smearing under her eyes, made his insides churn. The look of pure sadness mixed with exhaustion was too much.

“Give Mom a wave.” He knew she needed it too. The weight he had felt in the endzone was nothing compared to what he was feeling now.

“Thanks, Gunner,” Peyton whispered, her voice cracking as three other cheerleaders came to walk her back to the track.

***It’s what you do with your moments.***

He took a few more deep breaths before throwing on his helmet and beginning a slow jog to his teammates. Coach Bianchi had waited for him, and the whole team welcomed him with pats and cheers.

“Let’s go, G!” Emilio shouted, slapping him on the helmet.

***OK, here we go.***

He glanced over at Andy and JT, who were grinning as well. The rest of the group pulled in tight as Coach Bianchi bent down.

He was taller than Gunner had initially expected him to be. In fact, he was just a little shorter than JT, and his stocky build made his arms swing by his side. He continually adjusted the visor on his head to show his bald spot. Though Gunner only had a few weeks of practice with the man, he was beginning to believe it was a nervous twitch the coach didn’t realize he had.

“OK, guys. You’ve worked all off-season for this. You have made sacrifices and pushed yourselves to your limits. Now it’s time to play our game. It’s time to play Pioneer football. Play hard, play tough, and play smart. Pioneers on three: one, two, three!”

The team broke the huddle as Gunner and Coach Bianchi locked eyes.

“I got this for you, bro!” Ty jumped in between them as he prepared to return the opening kickoff, but they did not break the stare.

*Does he want to say something to me?*

Their gazes remained entangled until the referee’s whistle cut through the air. An explosion of cheers erupted behind them before Coach Bianchi finally pivoted away.

**“We are seconds away from the opening kickoff to another season of South Mountain football. Tyquan Carter will be back to return the opening kick, and you can already feel the anticipation in the stadium. And here we go, the kick is a long one and is taken by Carter at his own five-yard line. Carter sprints up the right side, breaks a tackle at the fifteen-yard line, and another at the twenty! Tyquan Carter is now at the twenty-five, the thirty, and is finally brought down around the thirty-five-yard line by two Neversink Bobcat defenders! What an electric player Tyquan Carter is!”**

“Hell yeah, Ty!” Gunner sprinted onto the field and slapped his helmet.

*Great start!*

A sense of normalcy was beginning to wash across him as he made his way into the huddle. The feeling of being with his teammates, on this field, imparted a sense of control he had not felt in months. His eyes skipped across the two lines of players, five in front and five in back. All of them were waiting for him and the play call that would start the season.

“OK, men,” he said, nodding. “Let’s do this!” When he called out the play, the words floated out of his mouth like a song: “Gun Right, 24 pull trap on one.”

He pushed Emilio toward the ball, repeating the play as the entire huddle clapped in unison.

“Break!”

Gunner slowly inched his way to the line, surveying the field. The orange helmets of the opposing team were dancing; the reflections of the late summer sun and lights beaming off the plastic brought back his slight headache. He squinted, trying to focus, as he stopped five yards behind where Emilio was bent over.

*Focus.*

The orange helmets settled into position. A few players pointed out Ty in the backfield as Gunner inhaled.

*Just hand it to Ty and let him go.*

He brought his hands in front of his face again, blowing on his fingers, and repeated one more time.

“It’s what you do with your moments.”

**“First and ten for the Pioneers as Gunner Weston approaches the line. I think we all feel for this kid playing with such a heavy heart, only 4 months after losing his father. Weston calls out the cadence and takes the snap out of the shotgun. He hands it to Carter, who moves to the right side and is stopped for a short gain. The Bobcat defense was waiting for Carter, and he picked up only a few yards on the play.**

**Second down for the Pioneers now as Weston comes under center this time. He calls out the cadence once again and takes the snap. He pitches to Carter, who tries to make it around the left side but is quickly tackled by a pack of Bobcats! Coach Bianchi has to realize that Neversink is going to be waiting for Carter to get the ball, and they’ll have to throw on third down.**

**Here we go, third down, and Weston is back in the shotgun. Weston HANDS OFF to Carter, and he is quickly wrapped up in the backfield. Wow! I was not expecting a run play on third down and long, but it looks like Coach Bianchi is not yet comfortable letting Gunner Weston throw the ball. It will be fourth down, and the Pioneers will have to punt.”**

Gunner dropped his head as he ran to the sideline, throwing off the side of his chin strap.

“No worries, no worries!” Coach Bianchi was in full throat, clapping his hands. “Just keep playing hard, keep playing hard.”

***Bullshit.***

Gunner stomped to the bench and snatched a cup of water.

“What do you see?” Coach Bianchi had followed him back to the bench. His visor shifted feverishly as he leaned closer.

“I see they know our game plan,” Gunner said sarcastically as he reattached his chin strap. “We need to throw the ball if we’re going to have any chance of winning.”

***Stupid play calling.***

Gunner ran by his coach without another word. The defense had gathered and was preparing to take the field.

“Gunner!” Coach Bianchi shouted as he sidestepped another coach and readjusted his visor again. “Get me the ball back, and I’ll let you have your chance.”

***Whatever you say, Coach.***

Gunner only stared as the defensive play call rang through the air.

“OK! Let’s make a statement!” Emilio was practically seething as he made the call. “Tight Cover 2 sag, Tight Cover 2 sag!”

Gunner was on autopilot as he jogged to the rear in his safety position and began to scan the orange helmets lining up in front of him.

***Get the ball back.***

“G!” Ty yelled from his cornerback spot in the far-right side of the field. “Watch the second receiver, Acosta, on the inside! Dude is fast—be careful!”

Gunner flashed a thumbs-up and replayed what Coach Bianchi had said.

*Just give me my chance.*

He was the one seething now—the players in front of him started to fan out into position.

**“OK, folks, the Bobcats have the ball after the punt, and it will be Rodney Stevens at quarterback. The young sophomore quarterback looks over the line of scrimmage and calls out his cadence. He takes the snap and fakes the handoff to his running back. Stevens is going to look deep on the first play of the game! He lofts one down the field and has a man! It’s his receiver, Acosta, and...”**

*Shit.*

Gunner lowered his head as he pulled up near the endzone.

*I got beat.*

He threw his hands down by his side, the opposing team running by and celebrating.

*How did I get beat on the first play?*

Gunner’s mind spun as he walked slowly to the sideline. The cheers from the metal bleachers on the visitor’s side had begun to echo through the stadium.

“God damnit, Gunner!” Emilio screamed as he rushed off the field. “What the hell were you doing?” He stood, his arms straight out, while Gunner pushed by to take a seat on the bench. “Hey!” Emilio tried again. “Gunner!”

*Enough.*

Gunner shot up from the bench and grabbed him by the facemask.

“Just worry about yourself, and block the guy in front of you for once.”

*What is wrong with me?*

Emilio didn’t respond. He froze as the rest of the team looked on.

“Gunner!” Coach Bianchi waved him forward. “Are you good? Do you have your head in this game?”



*Yes.*

Gunner could feel his coach's eyes on him as he glared out onto the field.

*Just let me throw the damn ball.*

"Yeah, I'm fine."

His coach's gaze never wavered. After the kickoff, another loud explosion from the crowd made Coach Bianchi jerk his visor back across his head before he pointed to the laminated play sheet he held.

"OK, then let's open these sons of guns up. Let's go Gun Left 384 X Slant. Watch the safety, and make sure he isn't cheating, OK?"

Gunner's glare remained straight ahead, the orange helmets now a blur as they moved back into position.

"Gunner!"

His head shot back, and he nodded.

"Got it, Coach," he said, sprinting out onto the field.

*My time.*

The huddle was silent as Gunner approached and repeated the play.

"On two, on two, ready!" The break was less enthusiastic this time.

"G, you OK?" Ty leaned over to him as they set into position, but Gunner's eyes were already scanning the defense.

*Your moment.*

**"OK, we've got first and ten for the Pioneers as they try to recover from what has been a terrible start to this game. Weston, back in shotgun again, takes the snap. He sets quickly and throws, and it is..."**

*The safety!*

Gunner never saw him. He broke on the ball so fast that his receiver never had a chance to prevent the interception.

*You have got to be kidding me!*

The opposing player was already speeding down the sideline, his arms waving as he pranced into the endzone.

*What am I doing!?*

Gunner tried to move, but his feet were glued to the ground as the orange helmets started celebrating and jumping around him.

“G?” Andy grabbed him by the arm. “G, that safety was reading that shit, man.” Gunner’s headache was intensifying. “G?” Andy grabbed his shoulder pads and steered him toward the sidelines.

“My bad...” Gunner could only mumble. His pupils were darting around uncontrollably as his vision blurred.

“You, OK?” Gunner could hear the alarm in his friend’s voice.

*No.*

He strained and squinted up to his mom, who was now standing. Her face was splashed with concern as she clapped her hands together and tried to beam a smile in his direction.

*I am not OK.*

He twisted and peered out onto the field. The other sideline was cheering madly, the orange helmets taunting him with each celebratory bounce.

\*\*\*\*\*

**“Well, Pioneer fans, not the start we wanted in the first game of the year. A tough 28-14 loss to Neversink will push South Mountain to 0-1. A terrible start was too much to overcome, and while our boys played better in the second half, one must wonder what was going on in Gunner Weston’s head. He struggled early, and it continued through most of the game. While Tyquan Carter continued to show why he is the best running back in the state, the question must be asked: Is it too much for Weston to come back and play after such a horrific loss?”**

# CHAPTER 5

“Wow.” Gunner tiptoed around the outside of the door. The voice that had drawn him in continued to echo in the empty auditorium.

*Amazing.*

When he had first entered, he had done so to think. He needed a quiet place to process everything that had happened over the last few days. The auditorium after musical tryouts had seemed like the perfect place, but just like every other recent decision he had made, it appeared he was wrong.

*Who is she?*

The voice pulled him closer. The girl on stage was singing the audition song for the lead, but from what Gunner had heard earlier, she was much, much better than any of the others who had tried out.

*This girl is amazing.*

He ended up backstage before even realizing that he had moved. A peek around the large cotton curtain finally revealed who was performing to the empty seats.

*Hailey!*

He almost squealed as he caught a glimpse of her moving on stage. The girl who had blown off every advance he had tried so far was graceful, moving effortlessly in a floral print dress to the song playing over the speakers.

*Beautiful.*

He watched as she repeated the number, sounding even better this time and almost floating along the wood. He could not help but take another step closer, trying to hear what she was angrily mumbling to herself after yet another flawless performance.

“Shit!” he cursed as he slipped on the curtain.

*Damnit!*

The landing was hard, and the bright lights that spotlighted him from above felt like just another taunt from the universe.

“Oh my god!” Hailey shouted. “Are you OK?”

Gunner jumped up, trying to play off the pain in his back.

“Fine! Just fine!”

***Damn, that hurt.***

His voice cracked with the lie.

“Gunner?” she squealed as he lifted himself onto the stage.

***You’re an idiot.***

A bruise was probably already forming near his shoulder blade, but his burning face was much more distracting.

“Hey!” His voice cracked again.

“What are you doing here?” She was the one who now looked embarrassed, rubbing her arm at the speed that her father normally shifted his visor.

“Well, you know...” He straightened out the curtain and coughed, trying to think of something to say. “I work for the stage crew, and well, and I was just trying to get everything cleaned up from tryouts.”

***Stop lying!***

She tilted her head as he played with the nylon string on his gym shorts.

“You work stage crew?” she asked skeptically.

“Yeah.” He shrugged his shoulders, a small wince playing across his face at the sudden jolt of pain. “Everyone has to do some type of club or after-school activity at South Mountain. My dad always wanted me to do stage crew for some reason.”

She stared at him for a few more seconds before quickly twirling around.

“Well, that’s great. I am sure they can use the help. I have to go, though. It’s getting late.”

She had recovered quickly, but Gunner was still stuck in place.

“I didn’t see you at tryouts today?” he finally managed.

She bent down to pick up her books, which were lying next to the curtain, and he could not stop his eyes from following her every move.

“Well, I already have a part in the musical, so I did not have a tryout today.”

Gunner stood up straight.

“Wait, you’re not the lead?”

She spun, her eyes narrowing as she practically ran past him.

“I am surprised you even know what a lead is.”

***Man, she is tough.***

His feet instinctively followed.

“Number one, everyone knows what the lead is in a musical. And number two, you were ten times better than any of the others who auditioned today.” A soft laugh escaped before he continued. “I mean, I’m assuming Bridgette will get the role, and you are like a million times better.”

She stopped abruptly. Her books were clenched directly against her chest when she turned to him, and he once more could not help where his gaze traveled.

“Bridgette has spent three years preparing for her chance to be the lead in this play, and she deserves the opportunity.”

The tone made Gunner jerk his eyes up from her chest. The piercing glare of her hazel irises was more intense than ever before.

***She really does hate me.***

He cleared his throat and kicked at the ground in defeat.

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, she has been doing this for a while.”

He could feel her looking him up and down. The microscope treatment made him shift uncomfortably.

“I would not expect you to understand, but I am playing a very important part in this play, as well.”

She stormed off toward the end of the stage, her feet heavy against the laminate wood planks.

***Jeez, this girl.***

Gunner inhaled to collect himself.

“I’m assuming you’re playing the teapot, then?” It was the only thing he could think of saying to keep her in the room.

“Why...” She stopped at the top step, her back still toward him. “Why would you say that?”

***Here we go.***

Gunner took a step forward, his confidence growing since he had clearly piqued her interest.

“Well,” he said, sitting on the edge of the stage and dangling his legs. “She sings the famous song in the movie, and, well, your voice sounds like a soprano.”

She twisted toward him, reluctantly moving back across the stage.

“What do you mean?”

Gunner brought one knee up to his chest. A slight twinge crossed his face when pain played across his back, but he didn’t hesitate.

“Well, from listening to you sing, you sound like a soprano.” She appeared to like what he had to say, and he cracked a slight smile.

***There you go, bring her in.***

“Are you trying to explain vocal ranges to me?” Her voice went harsh in an instant, and the confidence that Gunner had felt moments earlier shattered around him.

“No, no, I just...” She was moving quickly toward him, standing over him in seconds. “I just, I mean, you know...”

listening to everyone over the last few years, I just picked some things up.”

She glared down at him, making him squirm.

“Well, I appreciate you trying to show off, but it is getting late, and I have to go.”

***Damn, she is SO tough.***

And just like that, she was already back on the steps. Her dress bounced above the Converse sneakers that she always wore.

“I mean, you can also dance...”

***Last chance, Gunner.***

“So I assume you are going to teach Bridgette how to waltz?” He tilted his head in hopes of a response.

“The waltz?” She stopped. This time, though, she immediately spun to him. Her eyebrow curled inquisitively instead of furling in anger.

***Got her.***

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***He is baiting me. This is a game to him.***

Her mind was telling her to simply walk toward the exit.

***Do not respond; just walk to the door and leave.***

Hailey, however, did not move. The young man she had been trying to avoid for weeks was now front and center, and she was again struck by just how attractive he was. His short, dark brown hair was messily parted to the side, and his green eyes glistened in the lights. He played the part of a football player perfectly, with his broad shoulders and shirt sleeves that hugged his large biceps. The tight South Mountain Football shirt also made it clear that he took good care of his core and chest muscles.

***Walk away!***

She couldn't help it. His eyes pulled her back toward him.

***Stupid, stupid Hailey!***

“What do you know about the waltz?” she asked.

He smiled at her, his white teeth gleaming in the auditorium light.

“Well, most believe that the waltz originates from outside Vienna in the early seventeenth century. Since the film we all watched as kids is staged during the Victorian period, I guess this dance is some adapted French version of it.”

***How does he know any of this?***

She was moving across the stage without even realizing it.

“I see you have watched the movie and have access to a computer.”

He shrugged, his eyes pulling her even closer as he got up and began to amble around the stage.

“You see,” he said, taking a few steps. “My dad had the entire football team take dance lessons two years in a row.”

He was box-stepping across the stage, and she was struggling to pull her gaze away.

“The waltz, you see...the waltz was one of my favorites.” He started inching closer to her. “It’s slow tempo, elegant, forces you to work with your partner.”

He stopped and extended his hand to her.

***Not a chance.***

“You have to work with and trust your partner, each following the other at times.”

***Do not grab that hand.***

Her fingers itched, but then she turned away and stomped back to the steps.

“Well, just because you know a few vocal ranges and how to dance does not make you a musical expert.”

She fought the urge, but she could not stop herself from peeking back at him. He merely shrugged and continued to dance alone, clearly enjoying the spotlight provided by the lights above.



“Well, I didn’t tell you about my singing lessons.”

***He’s lying.***

He smirked at her, dimples creasing his cheeks.

“You took singing lessons as well?”

He lowered his head playfully.

“Well, no. My only singing lessons came from the shower.”

She giggled before she could stop herself.

***Stop that.***

He was good, exceptionally good, at this game, and she was enjoying it. It had been a long time since she had talked with a boy one-on-one, and even though he was the quarterback of the football team, this was nice.

“But I was being serious when I said you have the most beautiful voice I’ve ever heard.”

***Game over.***

Just like that, her shoulders tensed. She pushed her books back up against her chest and pivoted away, leaving him standing with his arms stretched toward her.

“I’m sorry...” he said quietly, confused.

“Please, Gunner. I need to go, and you realize who you are talking to, right?” She was frantically waving her hands by the time she hit the bottom step.

“Yeah.” He jumped off right in front of her. “The most talented person I’ve seen on this stage, ever.”

***Sure, sure.***

“Listen.” She kept moving, and he let her step by. “Before I moved here, I was in a performing arts school in California. Of course I am going to have more practice than most of the people here.”

***Please do not follow me.***

She could hear his footsteps behind her.

“Well then, even more reason for you to be the lead!” She turned, standing almost eye-to-eye with him due to the gradually rising floor. She was ready to fire an immediate retort, but his smile ignited a spark in her chest that surprised her.

“It’s not that easy...”

“Really?” He stepped by, opening one of the wooden double doors and holding it for her.

“Yeah, really,” she said as she went past, keeping an eye on him as they made their way into the main lobby of the school.

### ***What is going on?***

“You know, my dad used to tell me that life is made up of moments. You have no idea when a moment is coming, but when it does, you have to just take it. You know?” He had walked to a trophy case not far away. A picture of a man hung right in the middle, smiling out at them. “Go for it and see what happens. He always used to tell me that it’s not the result of that moment but the fact that you actually took action that matters.”

She watched him as he stood in front of the glass, silent and still.

### ***His father.***

Hailey had heard a lot—too much—about Coach Weston since she arrived in town, but this was the first time she realized what he had looked like. She couldn’t decide what she hated more, hearing about Gunner Weston or his father, who had been the perfect coach for this town.

### ***I’m done with this.***

“Well.” She headed for the door, but he beat her there, his shoes scuffing against the floor, and again held it open for her. “I have some moments that I need to take care of at home.” The outside heat smacked her in the face. “I just...I just don’t think now is a good time for me to take on the lead.”

### ***Or ever.***

He started rubbing his hands together as they walked toward the parking lot.

“I understand that.” He leaned back and peered into the nighttime sky. The stars from above lit up the car hoods as they walked in silence.

***Who is this guy?***

This was not the Gunner Weston she had heard so much about, the superstar quarterback who could have whatever and whoever he wanted. This was someone who was lost, someone who was hurting. His green eyes had deep pools of sorrow in them, and while he might have been able to hide it from most people, Hailey had seen that look before.

“Gunner, Hailey!” The voice startled them. “Wait!”

Ms. Summers sprinted toward the parking lot.

***Oh no.***

Hailey looked over at Gunner, and she saw the same surprised expression that must have been on her own face.

“You two!” Ms. Summers was out of breath when she stopped next to Hailey’s car. “You two were wonderful back there!” She pointed to the school and smiled. “You two have so much chemistry!”

***What!?***

“I told her she should be the lead, Ms. Summers, but she was having none of it.” Gunner hadn’t missed a beat. He flashed a smirk her way.

***He does not quit.***

“Gunner,” Ms. Summers asked excitedly, “how would you like to be in the musical this year?”

***Excuse me!?***

Hailey’s mouth fell slightly ajar. Her eyes widened as Gunner gave a vain laugh and rubbed his chin.

“Ms. Summers,” he said, the sarcasm returning to his voice, “with all due respect, I don’t think I’m the right fit for the

musical.”

***There is the arrogance.***

Her cheeks started to heat up immediately.

“Gunner, you are the perfect fit!” Ms. Summers was prancing around the parking lot as she pleaded with him. “You are so confident on stage, and the way you danced! Plus, you were in the chorus up until ninth grade, so I know you can sing.”

“You were in the chorus?” Hailey blurted.

“For a few years.” He threw his backpack into his car.

“Gunner!” Ms. Summers stepped closer to him. “Think about it, please. Right now, I only have Brad. While he is currently cast to play the male lead, I’m not sure I can get him out on stage in front of even one person, let alone hundreds.”

Hailey leaned in so as not to miss this part of the conversation.

“Gunner. You would be incredible in the starring role!”

Hailey caught his gaze briefly as he glanced over at her and then down to his steering wheel. He was quiet for a few seconds, almost as if he were entertaining the idea, before he finally looked up.

“With all due respect, Ms. Summers...” His flashy grin to Hailey was no longer playful but full of self-absorption. “I already star every Friday night.”

***What a jerk!***

Ms. Summers said no more. They watched as he fired the engine to life and drove off, his lights slowly disappearing around the corner at the end of the parking lot.

“I’m sorry, Hailey.” Her teacher’s voice was barely audible. “I really want this play to work this year. This town, this community deserves something special after everything that has happened.”

Ms. Summers walked slowly to her car. Hailey clenched her fists at the sound of the teacher sadly toying with her keys.

***What a selfish jerk.***

She glanced one more time at the end of the parking lot.

***What a coldhearted, selfish jerk.***

She threw open her driver-side door, cursing out everything that was Gunner Weston and his family.

# CHAPTER 6

**“Welcome fans to another night of South Mountain football. Tonight, our Pioneers travel to Hawk Valley, where they will take on the Mountain Hawks in a regular-season district showdown. After a tough loss last week, Coach Bianchi will be looking to get his team a win and this season back on track.”**

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Gunner stayed down on one knee as he spoke to himself in the endzone.

***This is your moment.***

He could feel the stares from the crowd glaring down on him, almost as piercing hot as the lights that lit up the field.

“G!” Ty yelled as he came up behind him. “You ready?”

***Ready as I’ll ever be.***

Gunner nodded. His eyes, however, stayed on the ground. Finally, he used all his strength to exhale and stand.

“Let’s get a win tonight!” It was all the energy Gunner could muster, but it was enough to send them both into motion.

His vision was shaky as he gazed across the stadium. The red and white uniforms of the other team ran back and forth with each new stretch they performed. It took everything Gunner had to force his legs to press forward. The Nike cleats on his feet felt like cement bricks as he dragged them across the grass, which looked like it had not been watered in weeks.

“We gotta get this one tonight, G.” Ty had built into a jog, and Gunner could not find the momentum to keep up. The back of the white and blue shirt in front of him, *Carter* laminated across it, sprinted further and further away.

***Come on.***

Coach Bianchi was the next face Gunner saw, and he willed himself to run faster so he could join the pregame huddle.

“OK, guys.” The bulky head coach was on one knee, peering up at the rest of the team, when Gunner settled in. “We need to stick together tonight, play as a team, and play smart.”

*Of course.*

Gunner lowered his head, as the bright lights were beginning to give him a headache.

“Play hard, play smart, and play tough. If you do that, I promise that we will win this game!”

*Real original.*

The whistle from the referee brought a roar from the crowd as the kickoff team ran onto the field. A hasty shift of his coach’s visor brought a boiling into Gunner’s stomach that he struggled to understand.

*What’s wrong with me?*

He tried to concentrate. The reflection of his face on the helmet at his feet was the last thing he saw before the whistle on the field blew again.

**“Another great return for Tyquan Carter, who brings the ball to the Mountain Hawk thirty-five-yard line. It will be first down and ten as Gunner Weston brings the Pioneers onto the field. Weston will be looking to bounce back after a tough game last week.”**

“Alright guys, let’s make this count,” Gunner said, scanning over the players in the huddle. “Forget about last week and do your job.”

He called out the play, sending Emilio to the line before repeating it one more time.

“Break!”

As the team moved toward the line of scrimmage, Gunner brought his hands up to his mouth, whispering into them.

*This is your moment.*

He tried to steady his vision, but the dull headache had gotten stronger. The red helmets of the other team were a blur as he settled in behind Emilio.

**“Weston calls out the cadence and takes the snap. He hands it to Carter, who is immediately hit and stopped for only a few yards on the play. Coach Bianchi is going to have to trust Weston to throw the ball if they are going to have any chance of winning this game.**

**Gunner Weston brings the team back to the ball on second down. Weston takes the snap, and he is going to throw. He has time and he... WOW! What a bad pass by Weston as he threw the ball way out of bounds—not even close to his receiver, Andy Green. Gunner Weston just does not seem comfortable tonight.**

**OK folks, here we go. Weston gets his team back up to the ball. He calls out the cadence and takes the snap. He is going to throw again. He is looking to Jefferson Taylor on the right side, and the ball is...”**

*Jesus Christ!*

He missed again, and this time he threw it right to the other team. He had JT wide open. As he stood in disbelief, throwing off his chin strap, he heard the home crowd explode in cheers.

*What am I doing? What’s going on?*

His helmet was beginning to suffocate him, and he quickly ripped it off.

*I can’t do this.*

His chest was getting tight, and his legs were losing strength as he darted by his teammates near the bench.

*Dad, I can’t do this.*

A voice was yelling at him, but he was struggling to focus. The lights from the field were penetrating, and the headache was pulsating so hard that he thought his temple might burst.

*Life is about moments, Gunner.*



His dad's voice was now ringing in his head, making the headache almost unbearable as he buried his forehead in his hands and dropped to the cold metal bench.

***It is what you do with those...***

“Gunner!” The loud scream boomed right in front of his face. “Gunner, I need you to focus right now! You need to wake the hell up because your teammates need you!” He forced his head up from his hands to find a red-faced Coach Bianchi standing in front of him. “Gunner, you are the quarterback, the leader, and right now, I need you to lead your teammates!”

***I can't do this.***

He stood up slowly, walking toward the end of the metal bench.

“Gunner, what are you doing? Get back over here.”

It all felt like a nightmare. Gunner's stomach was heaving, forcing him to grab his midsection for support.

“Gunner, what are you doing?”

***I'm done. I can't do this.***

He was mumbling like a madman as he felt his shoulders being grabbed.

“Gunner, what—”

***I can't lead this team!***

“I am done!” he shouted, the whole sideline turning to him as he finally snapped. “I can't do this!”

It was that bubbling anger that was coming up from his stomach now. A ball of fire that he had tried to bury for so long.

“I am done with all of this!”

This was not how it was supposed to go. This was not how he was supposed to experience his senior year. It was supposed to be different, with him as the captain and his father as the coach.

“Gunner, you can’t quit on your team! They need you!”

A stadium of eyes were again searing into his skin, and he could feel them saying the same thing. They wanted him to lead. They wanted him to fix this.

*They want me to be my father.*

He caught a glimpse of Peyton, who had broken from her cheerleading line and was walking toward him.

*Stay away, Peyton!*

“Gunner!” Coach Bianchi yelled, leaning toward him.

“Yeah!” Gunner’s voice barreled through the sideline. His teammates avoided his glare. “Well, you would know a lot about quitting on your team, wouldn’t you, Coach!?”

He knew what he had said, and he knew what that meant for him. Yet, at that moment, when he spun away, he couldn’t have cared less about any of it.

*Screw this game.*

Peyton was shouting his name, chasing after him, but he was already sprinting out of the stadium.

*I have to get out of here.*

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**“Well, Pioneer fans, another disappointing night, as our South Mountain High football team lost again, and this one was not close. The final score was 52-7, but the game will not be the talking point in the papers tomorrow. The real story is about Gunner Weston, who left the sidelines after throwing an interception on the first drive of the game.**

**Weston has not looked like the all-district quarterback we saw last year as he has tried to play through what has been a tragic time for him and his family. A lot of people around the community are wondering if Coach Bianchi should have even given Weston the chance to go out and start. He clearly is not in the right mindset to be playing football, and you must wonder if Coach Bianchi has the best interests of this young man at heart.”**

Hailey switched off the radio and steadied herself next to her sister, who was staring straight forward on the couch.

***Why would they say that about Daddy?***

They had not spoken since the game ended, and as the headlights flashed up the driveway, Hailey could feel her heart sink.

***I hate this so much.***

“I’ll get the soup warmed up for him.” Melissa seemed to already know what to expect.

Hailey could not help but stare at the door, waiting for the doorknob to turn and her father to enter. Seconds turned to minutes, and she knew her father was sitting in the dark, collecting his thoughts in the car before coming in.

He did this after most games, but when they lost, he could spend hours out there by himself. When they were young, he had told them it was because he never wanted to bring the games home with him, but Hailey still struggled each time she watched him from the window.

The beep from the microwave meant the soup was finished, and as if on cue, the doorknob finally turned. Her father walked in with a large smile on his face. The notepads in his hand were crumpled, and he threw them down, along with the duffle bag he typically carried.

“My girls!” He flashed a phony smile to hide his clear grief. Melissa ushered in the soup to greet him. “Dinner!” he squeaked, and he made his way over, pecking her sister on the forehead. “You girls did not have to make me dinner!”

***Stop it, Daddy.***

He did the same to Hailey, not giving either of them a chance to say anything before he headed directly for the sink in the kitchen to wash up.

For the two girls, this routine was typical. But tonight, Hailey could feel that something was different. Her father stood by the sink for a minute, washing his hands before grabbing a towel and turning.

“So...” He threw the cloth down. “What movie are we watching tonight?”

***This is not good.***

He slowly made his way over and grabbed the bowl of soup from Melissa.

“Daddy?” Hailey asked as he dropped onto the chair. “Are you OK?”

He played with the spoon for a moment, and the pause allowed Melissa to ease in by Hailey’s side.

“Fine, sweetheart.”

He beamed a fake smile and took one spoonful of soup before setting the bowl on the table next to him.

***Something is wrong.***

“Maybe,” he said, flipping the TV on, “we can watch your favorite movie.” Hailey’s eyes were fixed on her father as he continued to press buttons on the remote. “You can show me what part you will be playing so I can get ready for the play.”

Hailey swung her legs off the couch and leaned in.

“Daddy.” Her voice was soft, and he finally looked over at her. She stared into his eyes; the agony was clear. “Are you sure you are OK?”

His gaze remained on her for a moment before moving slowly to her sister. They sat in silence as the TV softly played in the background.

“Fine Hails, just fine.”

His voice made her heart sink into her stomach.

***He is not fine.***

Her chest was tightening. Each breath was getting harder and harder to take as she watched her father stand up and slink toward the refrigerator.

***It is just a stupid game!***

She jumped up and followed him into the kitchen. Her father was bent over, the light from the refrigerator gleaming

out onto the floor.

“Daddy?” His arm dropped from the door, forcing her to hastily slide in.

He had his hands on his knees. His head hung as he took a deep breath. As she inched closer, the light that beamed on his face showed something that shook her to the core.

***He’s crying!***

“Daddy!” she screamed, wrapping him up tight in her arms.

***Oh god!***

The patter of Melissa’s feet echoed through the kitchen. The alarm in Hailey’s voice had alerted her that something was wrong.

“Dad!” she exclaimed softly, jumping around the aluminum door and grabbing his hand.

At first, he said nothing. Hailey could hear no sobs, but his body shook. Finally, he turned and collapsed onto the floor, his back pushed up against the open refrigerator.

“Girls...” His voice cracked, and Hailey dropped to the hardwood next to him. “I am so sorry!”

He began to sob. It was something that Hailey had never seen before, and she looked over at Melissa to confirm that her sister saw it too.

***What have they done!?***

She was using all her strength to fight back the tears. Her stomach was in knots. Seeing her father on the floor, so helpless, made her entire body shake.

“I should never have brought us here. We should never have left California.”

Hailey looked over to her sister again, who had now broken into a sob as well.

***Do. Not. Cry.***

“I thought I could make this work. I thought we could have a fresh start.” Hailey put her head against his chest, his

breathing heavy as he spoke. “But I don’t think I can do this.”

***They broke my Daddy.***

It was over. The defeat in her father’s voice was too much, and Hailey could no longer hold back. The tears broke through the shield she had put up, and the floodgates opened as she fell against him for support.

“I promised your mother. I promised her that I would take care of you both and I just—” She could feel his hand on her head now. “I screwed up! I keep screwing up, and I am so sorry!” He screamed louder than Hailey had ever heard. The slam of his head into one of the drawers in the refrigerator made her jump in his grasp.

The cool air blew against Hailey’s neck as she continued to sob into her father’s chest. Even though she knew he was wrong, she could think of nothing to say.

***This is all their fault!***

This was not her father’s fault. This was the fault of this town. This stupid town that never wanted them. This stupid town that had this stupid football team.

***And that stupid QUARTERBACK!***

“Dad, you didn’t screw up!” Melissa shouted. “I did this to us. It’s my fault! I ruined everything.”

***No, Melissa!***

Her father’s eyes shot up at her. A fear Hailey had never witnessed spread across his face.

“Baby girl, don’t you ever say that.”

Hailey could hear the anger in his voice. And while she knew it was not directed at her sister, the change in tone, mixed with sobs, made her shoulders tense.

“This was never your fault.” He must have felt her change in posture because he kissed her on the head and urged both of them to look up. “You two girls are the most important things in my life. I hope you both know that.”

***I do, Daddy.***

Hailey nodded and saw her sister do the same.

“Your mother...” he said, his voice cracking again. “You both look so much like your mother.” He hugged them tight, and Hailey felt more tears stream down her face. “She would be so proud of you both. For how strong you are.”

***I am not strong.***

Hailey squeezed him as hard as she could.

“Your mom always said that I needed to be strong for you girls. But I think, in the end, it is you girls who are the tough ones.”

Hailey got as close to him as she could. Melissa sat down heavily beside them, and Hailey wrapped one of her arms around her sister and the other around her father.

***No, Daddy, you are the tough one. You hold us together.***

# CHAPTER 7

“It’s beautiful.”

Hailey sighed. The dress for the lead role hung in front of her. The golden-yellow fabric, sewn into tiered waterfalls, sparkled in the light of the empty auditorium.

*I would never be able to pull it off.*

She stomped away. The force of her feet against the polished wood reverberated across the stage.

*Why do I even care? I am not playing the lead!*

Her father’s emotional breakdown still weighed heavy on her, and she had felt like she was in a daze during the last few days at school. They hadn’t spoken about it since. Her father was back to his normal routine, and her sister had gone back to being silent. But it happened. And Hailey now understood that her father was breaking right in front of her and she had no way to help.

*I hate this.*

Staying late in the theatre usually helped clear her mind. It had always allowed her to just be herself in an environment that felt safe. She used to love the feeling of the wooden boards beneath her feet and the haze of the lights that poured down on her like rain on a hot summer day. Tonight, however, it felt different.

*It is so lonely.*

She closed her eyes and gently let her shoulders drop. A sound from behind the stage startled her, and she whipped around toward it.

“Hello?” She took a few hesitant steps back, the stage lights forcing her to squint.

*Why can I never get a few seconds alone?*

“Hello?” she said again, more sternly. Finally, she heard a shuffle behind the curtain.



“Hey.”

The unwanted guest emerged.

***Him!***

Her face immediately stiffened as Gunner came to a stop, hands in his pockets.

“Sorry...” His voice trailed off. “You know, I had to get some of the stuff cleaned up for the stage crew and—”

***What a load of crap!***

She spun around before he could finish. A hot anger she had never felt before was boiling inside her stomach.

“They all left an hour ago. Stop following me, and stop watching me!” Her yell projected over the empty chairs below.

“Right.” He moved his hand behind his head. While his face seemed shocked by her response, his eyes held a look of deep discouragement that was unexpected. “I just. I just never heard that song you were singing earlier. I guess I was intrigued, especially because it was you singing it.”

***Not today!***

She stomped toward her books, turning her back to him with a huff.

The game they had played last week had been fun, but now she had seen the real Gunner Weston. He was the one who had broken her father and abandoned his team.

“Well, you would have no idea what that song is.” She was nearly at a sprint as she pressed by him. “That song is from the musical, not the kids’ movie you tried to impress me with last time!” She stormed by him and started down the steps.

“What’s your problem with me?” His question stopped her cold. The feelings inside boiled up to the top of her throat.

***Just keep going.***

“I mean,” he continued, his feet getting closer, “I have been nothing but nice to you, and yet you treat me like I’m some monster.”

***You are a monster.***

She twisted toward him, using every ounce of energy she had not to hit him.

“This!” she yelled, pointing to his steady approach. “This is why I want nothing to do with you!”

He stopped, looking confused.

“You act like you can just do whatever you want. Clearly, I wanted time to myself! Clearly, I wanted to practice by myself!” His face fell. “But you are Gunner Weston!” She threw her hands up in the air. “And if Gunner Weston wants to talk to a girl, he can just come by whenever and she will talk to him.”

***There!***

He shook his head as if he disagreed but said nothing in response.

“You think you’re something special? You think because you play quarterback on the football team that people should just give you whatever you want?” She could not help drawing nearer to him. “Well, I have something to tell you, Gunner Weston!”

His eyes were defeated as they met hers.

“I have met a million of you. Watched my dad coach spoiled brats like you and watched them come and go.” His shoulders sagged. “You take what you want, and you do not care who you hurt along the way. So please, Gunner Weston, just leave me alone, and don’t ever speak to me again!”

She was up on her toes, practically nose to nose with him as her face began to burn.

***Is he going to cry?***

She recoiled a bit at his defeated demeanor. But then he straightened and clicked his tongue.

“So, that’s what you think of me? Huh?” His voice was low, and he shied away. “I’m just some dumb jock that gets whatever he wants.”

***Exactly!***

Her back stiffened at his renewed pomposity.

“Well, at least I’m not afraid to take my chances.” He spun back toward her; the despondent, sad expression had been replaced by an arrogant frown. “At least I’m not afraid to be in the spotlight, to take the lead!”

***No, he did not!***

She clenched her hands together.

“You’re just like your father!”

***Excuse me!***

“You preach and preach and preach, but you can’t even take your own advice!”

Her face was boiling as she jumped forward.

“You have no idea about my father and what he has been through!” She thrust her finger at him, her foot punctuating her words against the wooden stage. “You quit during the last game! You walked off the field, and you let him and your teammates down!”

He glared over at her, his eyes alight with a fiery glower.

“I guess your father would know a lot about quitting.”

***That’s it!***

She threw her books at him and ran down the steps.

“You are so full of yourself, Gunner Weston!” She was now in front of the stage, shouting up at him. “You want to know why we left California? You want to know why my dad quit his job?”

He had not flinched when she threw her books, and he hadn’t moved since.

“My dad coached at that stupid college for five years! He gave them everything, won silly football games, and went to all the ridiculous fundraising events!” Her body was pressed against the apron of the stage as the rage took over. “The weekend before their big bowl game, my sister went to a party

with the quarterback of his team. A monster just like you, Gunner!”

He bent down and began picking up her books.

“And he—” She paused, trying to block the images out of her head. “He raped her!” she blurted. Gunner froze. “He raped her and then left her all alone, someplace she’d never been!”

He jerked upright, shock visible on his face.

“And my dad...” She backpedaled to the exit, her eyes still searing him. “My dad went to the athletic director, the police, and the dean to try to get something done!” she yelled down the aisle. Her books looked small in his hands. “You know what they told him? They told him that my sister had been drinking, that it was probably consensual.”

She stopped, overcome by the memories of her sister explaining what happened, between sobs, while her father sat in disbelief.

“They said they would look into it after the football game. They wanted my dad to coach the quarterback that had just raped his daughter!”

Her voice broke, and she took a long, shuddering breath.

“So, he quit,” she continued quietly. Gunner finally stood up with her books in his arms. “He gave up his dream job and moved us across the country so my sister would never have to be near another arrogant, self-centered monster.”

She shook her head and threw her hands out by her side.

“So he took this job, thinking that this school and community would be good for us.”

***And what a dumb decision it was.***

She peered around the auditorium and waved her arms one more time.

“But like I said, Gunner,” she opened the door and paused briefly, “you are just like all the other football players he has ever coached.”

She pushed through the double doors behind her and took off toward the main entrance. The tears she had been fighting were finally starting to stream down her face.

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“Gunner!” Peyton’s voice jarred him back to reality. He realized he was still holding the plate of food.

“Yeah?” he asked softly, turning to her.

“Are you going to the fundraiser for Dad’s scoreboard on Saturday?” Peyton pointed to the flyer on the refrigerator.

“I can’t,” he said shortly, moving toward the stairs.

“You can’t?” She moved in front of him. “Tony wants this to be perfect, and the whole football team will be there.”

***Perfect.***

He shook his head, trying to move around her.

***I can’t do this.***

The tightness in his chest was making it tough to breathe. He could not take another lecture, especially after what he had heard earlier in the auditorium.

***Raped.***

He kept saying it over and over.

***I’m nothing like that guy.***

He felt his sister grab his arm.

“No Gunner, you have to—”

He jerked away. The force sent his sister tumbling back against the granite countertop.

“I told you I can’t go!” he yelled. Peyton’s face was a mask of shock.

***What did I just do!?***

“Gunner!” his mother yelled as she stood up, knocking her chair on its side.

He shook his head, a searing headache setting in as he squinted to focus. His heart was pounding out of his chest, and the plate in his hand felt like it weighed a thousand pounds.

***Who am I?***

“Gunner, you need to apologize to your sister!” His mom was inching closer to him. His vision was narrowing.

He tried to speak, but his throat was dry. The tightness in his chest had gone up to his head, and his sister’s frightened face was all he could see.

***She’s afraid of me.***

“Gunner?” His mother was moving quicker now, his lack of a response indicating that something serious was happening to her son. “Gunner, what’s wrong?”

His eyes darted to the saltshaker on the table, which was decorated with a picture of him in his football uniform.

***I am a monster.***

“Sweetie—”

He jumped across the kitchen and grabbed the shaker. His mind acted on its own as it told his hands to throw it against the wall.

“Gunner!” his mother screamed as he fell, the saltshaker shattering across the kitchen floor.

***What is happening to me!?***

He could not take it anymore. He finally let go. This was not the anger he had felt on the field or the grief that he had felt during his father’s funeral. This was something different, something that had been building deep inside him. The tightness in his chest, the swelling in his eyes, and the headaches all finally just took over.

“I can’t do this!” he screamed. A sob broke from his throat, and the tears he had been holding back were finally running down his cheeks.

“Oh, Gunner!” His mother was beside him in an instant. “Gunner, baby, it’s OK.”

He shook his head violently as she tried to hold him.

“No, it’s not Mom!” he yelled, burying his head back into his legs. “He’s gone, he just—he isn’t coming back!”

He could feel his mother squeeze tighter as he continued to sob. The tears refused to stop flowing, and his legs began to shake.

***He’s never coming back!***

He continued to cry noisily on the kitchen floor. His mother did not speak as she held him tight.

“I just...” He finally forced his head up. His sister had joined them, down on one knee, and her cheeks were also wet. “I’m just sick and tired of everyone telling me how they felt about Dad.” His mom pulled him close and let him lie in her arms. “I know Dad was perfect. I get it. I just—” His mother began gently rocking him back and forth. “I’m not him! In fact, I don’t know who I am right now!”

***There, I said it out loud!***

He buried his head back in her chest as she held him tight. His emotions poured out of him, and his sister started to sob behind him.

“Gunner,” his mom said in a calm, nurturing voice. “Gunner, look at me.”

He used every ounce of strength he had to pull his head up and lock his eyes with hers.

“Gunner, your father was not perfect.”

The words stunned him. He blinked, trying to focus on her face.

“What...?” He was sniffing uncontrollably.

“Baby, I loved your father so much. He meant the world to me. But...” She pulled Peyton toward them, trying to calm her as well. “But your father was not perfect.”

***Yes, he was.***

Gunner was starting to regain his composure, and he pushed himself up to a sitting position.

“Everyone around town thinks he was.”

His mother gave him a soft smile and patted his head.

“Well, your father would have given anyone in this town the shirt off his back if he could. That was what made him wonderful.” She glanced down at Peyton and stroked her hair. “But your father made mistakes. Mistakes with me, mistakes with you. That’s what made him human.”

***Dad was human.***

Gunner pushed back against the cabinet for more stability.

“Your father loved football. He put his life into it, but at times he hated that he was considered only a football coach. He wanted to be remembered not just as a football coach but as someone who helped build young men.”

He felt more in control of himself as he slid a bit closer.

“But most importantly, he wanted to be remembered as a good man...and a good father.”

***He was a great father.***

“He would spend hours at that school, trying to change things that he felt were broken. He would go meet with business owners and community leaders. I just...” His mother shook her head and lowered her eyes. “I just wish he could have told you both how he really felt. How much he loved you, how proud he was of you both.”

Gunner grabbed his mother’s hand.

***She is so strong.***

“Sweetheart.” She shifted back to him and smiled. “Stop trying to be perfect. Stop trying to be your father.” He squeezed her hand as she leaned toward him. “Your father was so proud of the young man you are becoming. How you are growing up, maturing. He would want you to be you, Gunner Weston.”

***But who is Gunner Weston?***



He could feel more tears forming in his eyes.

“Because that is who you are. You are a wonderful young man. A caring brother, the best son a mother could ask for, and yes—” She squeezed his hand now. “The son of Daniel Weston.”

He swallowed hard. His legs had stopped shaking.

“This town, Gunner...” She peered up at the flyer on the refrigerator. “This town is lost. They are confused; they are still trying to heal.” Gunner sat still, his hands intertwined with his mother’s. “Just like you.” She smiled again.

***She is so much stronger than me.***

“This whole scoreboard thing—if you don’t want to go, don’t go,” she said. Gunner stood up shakily, his eyes falling on the broken saltshaker across the room. “Your father would have hated it anyway.”

Gunner chuckled, but it came out like a sob. His father always told the team to ignore the scoreboard, and now they wanted to put his name on one.

“Your father started that fundraiser to support all the after-school activities.” He grabbed the broom and began to sweep up the salt and pieces of glass as his mother continued. “He believed that it was important for students to be well-rounded. Not just to play a sport but to do other things. To be remembered for more than just football.”

Gunner took a deep breath as both Peyton and his mother moved to the table.

“That’s why he wanted me on stage crew?”

“Your father loved theatre, believe it or not. Something else you probably never knew about him.”

***What?***

Gunner hesitated, the dustpan still in his hand.

“Why do you think he forced you to stay in chorus? He never missed a musical at that school, and having you work backstage just gave him another reason to go.”

***I never knew that.***

He took a seat beside his family.

“Gunner, no one wants you to be your father. You just remind them so much of him that it’s hard not to turn to you right now.” She put her hand back on his. “But Daniel Weston is not what this town needs. They already had the best of him, and it was beautiful.”

She kissed his palm and leaned across the table.

“What they need now is Gunner Weston. The Gunner Weston that your sister and I know. The young man who made his father so proud.”

Gunner replayed the conversation in his head.

***They need Gunner Weston.***

He could feel them both staring at him, waiting for him to say something.

***What can Gunner Weston do?***

He glanced at the flyer on the refrigerator and took a deep breath. The exhale that followed sent him to his feet and directly to the door.

“Gunner?” his mother called nervously.

“Mom.” He stopped in the doorway. “I need to go do something. But I promise that when I get back, we’ll have a family dinner.”

He nodded over to Peyton and blew her a kiss. The smile she gave in response was genuine, and he felt his strength returning.

***OK, Gunner.***

He had no idea what he would do, exactly, but he knew he had to do something. His sneakers picked up speed as he headed out to his car, the keys jingling in his hand as his mother’s voice rang out in his head.

***They need Gunner Weston.***

# CHAPTER 8

**“A tough start to the year for our Pioneers, as they currently sit at 0-2 and last place in the standings. The question at the beginning of the season was whether this team could get back to a district championship, potentially a state championship, game. That narrative has now changed, and many around the community are asking: Can this team even win a game? After suffering their worst loss in over 20 years last week, you must wonder what the mindset is like in that locker room. Another question that must also be answered is what Coach Bianchi will do about his quarterback. Gunner Weston walked off the field after one series last week...”**

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“Hailey!” Ms. Summers, startled, quickly shut off the radio. “I am so sorry. I normally just listen to music.”

*I’m sure.*

Hailey nodded, rolling her eyes behind Ms. Summers’ back.

“Thanks for seeing me.” She eyed a scatter of papers across her teacher’s desk. “I wanted to talk to you about the musical.”

Ms. Summers froze, still facing the other direction.

“I know you really want to do this musical, but...” she said hesitantly, trying to make this as nice as possible, “I just don’t think we will be able to pull this off with our cast.”

Ms. Summers didn’t move. The stillness in the room was heavy and awkward.

“I know,” said the woman finally in a hopeless voice. Hailey slumped back in her chair. “I just...” Ms. Summers rotated in her seat, staring at a picture she had posted in the back of the room. “You know, Hailey, when I started at this school ten years ago, I was all over the place.”

*She needs someone to talk to.*

“I was fresh out of college and was handed the entire music department.” She swung back toward her student, now smiling ruefully. “They wanted me to run the high school music classes and the musical on practically no budget.”

*Typical.*

Hailey noticed the bags under Ms. Summers’ eyes. Like many people in this town, it seemed like her teacher had barely slept.

“After a few days and extremely low turnout for our musical tryouts, I—” She barked out a small laugh. “I broke down in the teachers’ lounge.”

Hailey watched as her teacher replayed the moment in her head.

“I was crying. I was lost. I had no support, and I was ready to quit. And then...” She glanced back at the picture behind her. “And then this man sat down next to me. Someone I had never met. He was not a teacher, but I could tell by his polo shirt that he had something to do with the school.”

Hailey shifted uneasily in her seat.

“He asked me what was wrong, and he just listened to me. For almost an hour, we sat and talked.” A small tear shone in Ms. Summers’ eye. “A man I had never met, and he sat with me for an hour, just talking. He just listened to me complain about how I had failed.”

She stood up and grabbed a few papers, straightening them against her desk in what was a clear attempt to steady herself.

“When I was done, he looked at me and smiled. He told me that I have a passion for what I do and that my moment with these students would come.”

She laughed again, putting the papers down, almost as if she did not know what to do with her hands.

“I had no idea who he was or what he meant. But after speaking with him, for some reason, I felt so much better.” She took one more look at the picture. “You know who that man was?”

***I have an idea.***

Hailey recognized the man from the photos at the pizza parlor and in the main lobby's trophy case.

“It was Coach Weston, Hailey.”

***Of course.***

“Three days later, I received a flyer that the football team was running a fundraiser for all after-school activities, including the musical and Theatre Club. Right after the fundraiser, every football player came to my office and offered to be a part in the play and help with the stage crew.”

***That would be nice.***

The tear finally ran down Ms. Summers' cheek as she rubbed her hands together.

“I filled every role, and we had our musical.”

Hailey took a deep breath; for some reason, her body had clenched up during the story.

“That year, Coach Weston showed up to the play, and every year after, he would be in the crowd. He never missed a night, and he would make sure to come up after the final show to congratulate me.”

***He sounds amazing.***

“After last year's performance, Coach...Coach told me that next year I should do this musical.” Ms. Summers put both hands up against the desk and steadied herself once more. “He told me that it would be special, that he would love to have the opportunity to experience this show with his wife.”

Hailey shook her head, realizing just how much this play meant to her teacher.

“I just wanted to give him his wish, to give him the tribute that he deserved.”

The room went silent again, and Hailey could feel a mist gathering in her eyes.

***I did not even know this man.***

She had originally detested hearing about Daniel Weston. No one wanted the job that her father took, and everyone around town hated her father for taking it. No one could replace their coach, and she loathed even the sound of his name. The more she heard about him, though, the more she realized how great a man he must have been. He sounded kind and caring. He was involved, not just in football but also in the community.

***How could Gunner Weston be so different?***

“Maybe I can help with that,” said a boy’s voice.

***Gunner.***

He stepped in slowly. A stack of papers shifted in each of his hands.

***What is he doing here?***

His face was different today, more like the one that had walked her out to the parking lot a few weeks before. His eyes were fixed on Ms. Summers, but she could still see the sorrow and ache that he tried to hide.

“Gunner?” Ms. Summers turned away, wiping unshed tears from her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Hailey could sense him glance over at her, but she refused to acknowledge him.

“I wanted to drop these off.”

She peeked back as he handed Ms. Summers a flyer. Hailey could not help but try to catch a glimpse of what was on it.

“Gunner...” The teacher’s hand began to shake as she read. “What—how?”

He began to fumble with the papers. Hailey tilted her head, intrigued by his changed demeanor.

***What happened to him?***

He seemed so tired and lost. He did not carry himself like the Gunner she had yelled at or like the boy who had sat behind his steering wheel with an arrogant smile on his face.

***He is in so much pain.***

“I spoke with some of the Boosters. I hope you don’t mind. They decided that my father would want to move forward with the fundraiser, as before, and have it support the after-school activities.”

***What!?***

Hailey’s heart started pumping faster, and the hair on her arms began to rise.

“Plus,” he chuckled to himself, sending a small shiver up her side. “My dad would have hated his name on some stupid scoreboard.”

He looked over at her again; this time Hailey’s eyes locked with his. She saw the sadness and the grief she’d noticed before. He seemed exhausted, like everyone else in this town, but something kept pulling her close to him.

***What is it?***

“I owe you both an apology,” he said, handing Hailey a flyer. “The other night in the parking lot...that, that wasn’t me.” She could feel Ms. Summers’ gaze as he continued to stare at her. “At least, I hope that’s not me. I’m still trying to figure all this out.”

***What is that look?***

“I know that’s not who you are, Gunner,” Ms. Summers said, moving across the room.

He shook his head, flashing Hailey a smile as he straightened his posture.

***Oh god, he is cute.***

“My dad...” He turned away to speak with Ms. Summers, allowing Hailey time to finally exhale. “If my dad really wanted this musical to happen, well, he would want it done right.”

It was as if their teacher was watching her own child walk across the stage at graduation. Her grin was so wide that it took up practically her whole face.

“If you still have a spot open...” He took another deep breath. “I’d like to be considered for the musical.”

***What!?***

Hailey nearly fell out of her chair.

***Breathe, Hailey, or you will pass out!***

“Gunner! Yes, of course!”

***What is happening?***

“I can’t promise I’ll be any good, but—but my dad always said life is made of moments.” He flashed another smile at Hailey. “Maybe this is one of those moments he was talking about.”

Ms. Summers began prancing around the room, the flyer momentarily forgotten in her hand.

“If you want, Hailey and I were about to go over parts. We would love to get your input.”

He looked down and back up, a grin still brightening his face.

***Oh man, that smile.***

“If you don’t mind, I’d love to start on Monday.” His eyes remained on Hailey; she felt completely unable to move. “I have a meeting with a coach and some more apologizing to do.”

***Daddy.***

Her legs felt weak, and she began to rub her fingers together nervously.

***Stop it, Hailey. Get a hold of yourself.***

“But Ms. Summers.” He was almost at the door now, his voice a little surer. “If you give me a few days, I may be able to help with some of those other male roles that you’re having trouble filling.”

***What is going on?***

She felt her stomach fluttering, like butterflies had been set loose and would not go back into the cage. As he waved and



left, she struggled to piece together what had just happened. That was not the Gunner Weston that she thought she knew. The boy who had just left the room was kind and caring, just like all the stories about his father. He held so much pain and sorrow in his eyes, yet there was something about them that kept pulling her in.

***This is not good.***

She took a deep breath, memories of her mother flashing through her brain at an alarming rate. However, something began to overtake them, something she had not considered since she arrived in this town, and it helped ease some of her angst.

Gunner had just lost his father. Somehow, she had forgotten all about that, about his personal loss. She had been so angry about moving to this place, about leaving her friends and the life that she had, that she had forgotten why they had come. His father had died unexpectedly. They must have been close; Gunner was the quarterback, and his dad was the head coach.

***Do not do it.***

The butterflies were overwhelming the tightness in her chest.

***STOP!***

She jerked her head up. Her teacher was waiting patiently, as if she had expected this to happen.

“Ms. Summers.” Hailey took a step forward. The butterflies picked her up and gave her the last push she needed. “I would like to speak with you about playing the lead.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Gunner took a deep breath, his hand shaking on the handle.

***Just walk in.***

He could feel the flyers starting to bend against his sweaty palm.

***Do it!***

His mind screamed at him. He knocked and turned the brass doorknob.

Coach Bianchi spun in his chair. “Gunner?” The screen behind him was lit up with film from the most recent game.

“Coach, sorry to interrupt, but—” He held up the flyers and put one on his desk. “I wanted to drop these off.”

Coach Bianchi picked it up and read it.

“So,” he said, lowering the flyer to his desk, “when did this change?”

Gunner peered around the room, examining the changes to his father’s office.

“Last night.” He forced his attention back to the desk. “The Boosters, well, they just felt like this is what my father would have wanted.”

Coach Bianchi nodded and stood up.

“The Boosters, huh?” He turned to the bulletin board behind him.

“Yeah.” Gunner’s voice was low as he continued to dart his eyes across the office.

***This is weird.***

It felt different. His father’s posters and pictures were gone, and the walls were bare. Coach Bianchi kept the office simple. The room was barely decorated, and for the first time, Gunner realized how much he had hated the clutter that had always covered his father’s desk.

“Something on your mind, son?”

***Son?***

Gunner froze as Coach Bianchi turned back to him.

“I...” He struggled to explain himself. His focus shifted to the only item on the wall: a framed jersey with “Bruins” on the sleeves and “Bianchi” on the back. It was the largest item in the room. “I guess...” Gunner caught his reflection in the glass. “Coach...”

He took a seat in front of the neatly ordered desk that his father had once peered across. A bone-deep exhaustion that had been hidden by adrenaline suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Coach, I wanted to apologize for how I have been acting.”

***Good start.***

“I, I have no idea who that was on the sideline last week, and really, Coach...” His voice cracked. “I have no idea who I am right now.”

***There it is.***

The words hung in the air.

“I look in the mirror, and I just...” Gunner stood up. His mind had started to wander, and his legs began to move him about the room.

***Just stop talking.***

He came to apologize, but as he stood in his father’s old office, he wanted to do more. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to curl up in a ball and just go to sleep.

“I look in the mirror, and I can’t recognize the face looking back at me.”

He slid over to the jersey, staring at himself in the reflection again.

***Who am I?***

“Gunner.” His coach inhaled before continuing. “You want to know why I took this job?” He stood up and stepped out from behind the desk. “People said I was crazy. Crazy that I thought I could fill the hole that your father had left.”

Gunner inhaled, feeling his chest getting tight.

“And they are right.”

***What!?***

“But it is not about filling the hole that your father left, Gunner. It’s not about replacing your father.” He moved back to his chair. “Because I think we both know that’s impossible.”

***Finally, someone who gets it.***

“You see, I took the job because of this.” He flipped on the TV and scrolled through a menu screen. The description read “State Semi-Final” before flashing to the playoff game from last year.

“We lost this game,” Gunner blurted out, taking a seat in front of the desk.

“You did.” His coach quickly jumped to the end of the game. “What do you see here?”

***I don't want to see this.***

He paused on an image of Gunner's father, hands on Gunner's shoulders as the final whistle blew.

***I don't need this.***

Gunner shot up and began to pace.

“Gunner,” his coach said in a stern but empathetic voice, “do you want to know what I see?”

His tone forced the pacing to stop. Gunner inhaled and finally turned around.

“I see a father...I see a father who is so proud of his son. A father who watched as his son played his heart out against one of the top teams in the state. He watched as his team, outmanned and outsized, fought all the way to the end.”

***We sure did.***

“A father who couldn't care less about what the scoreboard reads.”

Gunner was unable to pull his eyes from the small, pixelated image on the screen, and he began to replay that exact moment in his head.

***I am so proud of you, Gunner.***

His father's voice was crystal clear, and it kept repeating the words that he'd spoken to Gunner that night.

“You see,” Coach Bianchi continued, “I took this job because I knew I had this. I knew I had a Weston on the

sideline.”

He moved the clip forward to a picture of Gunner. “Weston” was emblazoned on the back of his jersey.

“I had heard about how great Coach Daniel Weston was, and I knew that if a man could be this great as a coach, as a man...” He pointed directly at Gunner. “Then he must have been one hell of a father as well. He must have raised one hell of a son.”

***He was a great father.***

Coach Bianchi rewound to the image of Gunner’s dad.

“When I saw this picture, I knew. I knew that I was going to take this job. And you want to know what else?” He leaned forward, almost nose to nose with Gunner as he stretched over the desk. “As a father, I know what it’s like to have this moment with your child. To know, at that very moment, that they are ten times the person you are.”

***This moment.***

The hair on Gunner’s arms had risen. He was looking right through his coach, still fixated on the small screen.

“Gunner, having the name Weston on the back of your jersey may feel like a curse. People in this town may expect more from you. They may ask a young man like yourself to take on things that should never be asked of someone your age.”

***Every day.***

“But son.” The bulky man reached even further over the desk. “Your father knew at this moment that you could handle it.”

***I can handle it.***

The tightness was gone from his chest, and his legs were gaining strength.

“Gunner, a man’s body, a man’s face, they change. But a man’s eyes...” He straightened and walked around the desk. “A man’s eyes never change. They are the window to who he

is, and no matter what the rest of that face looks like, your eyes...” Coach Bianchi clasped his shoulder, and Gunner stood to face him. “Your eyes will tell you who you are.”

***Thanks, Coach.***

Gunner had wanted to hate this man, the man who had taken his dad’s job and was brought in to replace him. But, as he stared deep into his coach’s hazel eyes, he knew that was impossible. They were soft and caring but also tired and brimming with pain. He knew what put that hurt in his eyes—something no husband or father should have to experience.

He had lost his wife, the mother of his children—everyone in town knew that—but there was also something else. Something almost no one knew. His daughter had been sexually assaulted by the quarterback of his football team. Coaching that team had been his dream job. As the two stood together, Gunner finally understood. This man was just as broken as he was, if not more.

“Your father, when he looked into your eyes that night, he saw who you had become. He knew the young man that you were at that moment.”

His coach turned and stared at the picture on his desk.

***Hailey.***

In the picture, Coach Bianchi was smiling beside his wife and two young girls. They all looked happy.

“Now it’s time for you to see it.”

Gunner took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Because, son,” Coach Bianchi grabbed the picture of his family and brought it close to his face, “if you do, if you can find what your father saw that night...” His pain-filled eyes darted over to Gunner. “Son, you’re going to find something special.”

They did not speak for a while. The sound of Gunner rifling through the flyers filled the room.

***Find something special.***

Gunner took one more peek at his reflection, which was now accompanied by that of his coach.

***What am I doing?***

This man by his side had been through hell, and Gunner was not making it any easier. In fact, he was being selfish, acting in a way that would have disappointed his father.

“Thanks, Coach. See you...see you tomorrow.” Gunner jumped up and ran out the door.

He had no idea if his coach would let him back on the field, as he knew he had done nothing to earn it. He had been self-centered and arrogant, everything his father had taught him not to be. He had let his team down. He had let the town down, but more importantly, he knew he had let his father down. If his coach gave him a second chance, he would make sure the man did not regret it.

***My father knew who I was.***

Gunner could still see the picture of his father, frozen on the TV screen, in his head as he began to run down the hallway.

***Now, it's time I figured it out.***

# CHAPTER 9

**“Well, Pioneer fans, the season has not started the way any of us would have predicted. Two straight losses to start the year combined with the uncertainty about the quarterback position has Coach Bianchi looking for answers. He will hope to find them tonight as South Mountain hosts district rival Mount Joy High School. The Red Knights are 2-0 to start the season and must feel confident heading into tonight’s game with the Pioneers. The teams have already gone through warm-ups, and you can feel the anxiety from the home crowd.”**

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## ***Find yourself.***

Gunner was kneeling in the endzone again, running his hands through the freshly cut grass. The stadium was quieter tonight, and he could hear his thoughts clearly. The image of his father from his coach’s TV still burned in his head.

## ***You are going to find something special.***

He stood up and peered toward the sprawling metal bleachers. The crowd was slowly trickling in, right before kickoff. He could see all the familiar faces, but tonight it was different. They were stoic, eyes forward, as if they were watching a game they didn’t understand. His gaze fell on the line of cheerleaders on the orange track and found his sister, who was hugging his mother before she stepped up into the crowd.

## ***Be Gunner Weston.***

He started moving slowly toward the sideline. His legs gained a new strength as he approached the pregame huddle.

The white-painted lines that were once a prison now felt like an opportunity. Sure, it was not the same, but it never would be. He was starting to understand that, and as he zoned in on the huddle, all his teammates turned to him.



***Find yourself.***

He sprinted the last few yards. Coach Bianchi was about to take his normal knee in the middle.

“Coach!” Gunner yelled as he barreled into the crowd of players. “Coach, I’d like to say something.”

The eyes of the entire team remained on him as Coach Bianchi stood up and adjusted his visor.

***Please, Coach.***

“OK Gunner, lead us out.”

He stepped into the middle of his teammates. The faces, older now, were the same ones that he had played with since he was six years old. They had grown up together, they had won games together, and as he locked eyes with each of them, he realized something he had been missing all this time.

***They’re all lost.***

He nodded and sat his helmet down, the reflection of the stadium lights gleaming off the top.

“I owe you all an apology.” He cleared his throat and adjusted the inside of his shoulder pads. “Not just because over the last few games I have acted like an idiot. Not because I have played like complete garbage.” Emilio, to Gunner’s immediate right, leaned toward him. “I wanted to apologize because I have lied to all of you.”

He met Ty’s eyes.

“For the last five months, I have told every one of you that I was fine. I acted as if I could handle all of this and be the same guy who has played with you all these years.”

Andy and JT exchanged a quick glance.

“But I lied.” He lowered his head, feeling everyone getting closer. “I’m not fine.”

***OK, I said it.***

It was like a weight lifted off his shoulders. The tightness he had been carrying around started to ease.

“In fact, I’m far from it.” He glanced back to Ty. “Every day I look at myself, and well, I feel like I have no idea what I’m doing.”

He put his hand on his hip and sighed.

“I realized today that I have been trying to do this all by myself. I thought I had to try to figure out all of this alone.” Emilio moved right up beside him. “You guys asked me to be your captain, and I failed you. I failed you because a captain understands that he must trust his teammates.”

A tear was sliding down his cheek, and he dashed it away.

“This team deserves to have captains who understand this and can use it to make us better.” He pulled even harder on his shoulder pads. “Because of that, I am giving up my role as captain of this football team.”

An uneasy shift passed through the huddle.

“AG, JT, Ty, and Emilio,” he said, pointing to each in turn. “You have been the leaders that this team deserves. You are worthy captains. I don’t deserve to stand with you out on that field.”

The team was now anxiously shuffling around as the referee blew his whistle for the game to start.

“But.” He bent down and grabbed his helmet. “As captains, I’m going to ask you to give me another chance. I’m asking this whole team.” He turned to every player in the circle. “I need you, all of you.”

A sense of determination entered his stomach when he pointed out to the football field.

“My dad always said that this football team was a family, and it took a whole family to win a game.” He walked out, standing alone in front of the sideline. “And it’s time I asked my family to help me figure out what to do next. Starting with this game.”

The referee blew the whistle again, ushering the team onto the field.

*Please.*

Gunner clenched his helmet, his knuckles going white from the force.

He had played out this entire speech in his head while sitting alone at his locker but had never actually gotten to the end of it, to his friends' decision.

***One chance.***

"You..." Emilio broke the silence and grabbed his shoulder pads. "You're my brother, G. And I would help you, no matter what."

JT and Andy joined instantly, and the rest of the team followed their lead.

"I know who you are," Andy said, smiling at him. "You are a damn good football player, and—" He wrapped Gunner up in his arms. "You're my brother."

***My brothers.***

Gunner grinned as the team came together. However, he noticed that one of his teammates was missing.

***Ty.***

"No matter what happens tonight..." Emilio did not seem to notice the absence, and he broke into an impassioned shout. "No matter what happens, we do it together. We do it as brothers! They want to come to our field and beat us. Let's show them what Pioneer football is all about! Family on three: one, two, three!"

Gunner broke the huddle and allowed the kickoff team to run by.

"Ty." He grabbed his best friend, who was trailing behind. "Ty? We good?"

At first, Ty didn't turn toward him. Finally, he smirked and twisted with a powerful thrust into Gunner's chest.

"Yeah, man, let's play some football." It was not dismissive, but it was also not the impassioned shouts of his other teammates.

***OK, Ty.***

Gunner knew they needed to talk; the look on his best friend's face made that clear. However, right now, they needed to play. They needed to win a football game.

**“Well, here we go. It will be first down and ten for the Mount Joy Red Knights as they come to the line. Quarterback Blaine Sullivan gets behind center and calls out the cadence. He takes the snap and hands it off to his running back who... WOW! What a hit by Gunner Weston, who came flying up the field from his safety position and delivered a huge hit on the running back! That has to feel good for the young man who has struggled so much in the last few games.**

**OK, Sullivan brings his team back to the line for second down. He calls out the cadence and takes the snap. Sullivan drops back to pass...but is put under pressure by Cortez! Sullivan just throws it deep, looking for his wide receiver. He has a man down the field, and it is...”**

While Gunner had never been a target on the scouting report in the past, he was sure the opposing team had watched tape from the last two games and would be looking to throw at him.

He had been lost, out of position, uncomfortable.

***Not tonight.***

Gunner felt the weathered pigskin nestle into his hands as he left the ground.

***Hold it.***

On this play, he was in the perfect position, and as he fell to the ground, he held tightly to the football he had snatched out of the air.

“G!” Ty shouted when he finally rolled to a stop. A roar from the home crowd reverberated into the air.

***There's that feeling.***

It was one he used to love so much. The ground would almost shake after a big play. It was the sound of an entire town cheering for you. Cheering for all the hard work you had

put in over the last week, the last month, the last year. He had missed it so much, and as Ty pulled him back onto his feet, he extended the football into the crisp night, holding it up for the town to see.

***Interception.***

He started screaming the single word as he took off, running toward his teammates. This time, it was his sideline jumping in celebration.

“That’s how you play defense! That’s how you play defense!” Coach Bianchi was still clapping when Gunner made it over.

“G!” Emilio smacked the top of his helmet. “That’s you, G! That’s you!”

“Nice hit, Emilio!” Gunner could feel his adrenaline pumping as he slapped Andy’s shoulder pad. “Now, let’s give this crowd something to really cheer about!”

He motioned to his coach, on whose face a grin was beginning to grow.

***He smiled.***

“Gunner.” Coach Bianchi leaned over close. “They think we are going to line up and run Ty directly at them. Let’s finally give him some room in the middle.” Gunner agreed with a nod. “Gun right, 121 action go. JT.” His coach shifted over to the tall, lanky wide receiver. “I want you to run as fast as you can, you hear me?”

JT nodded immediately.

“Remember, this is your game, guys. Play your game, and let it come to you!” Coach Bianchi pumped his fists.

***Our game.***

Gunner was oozing with confidence as he led the offense onto the field.

***Let the moment come to you.***

**“OK, so it will be first and ten for the Pioneers after an excellent start on defense. Gunner Weston, who has**

**struggled this year, will try to build off the momentum of his fantastic interception as he comes to the line. Weston calls out his cadence and takes the snap. Weston hands off...wait, he fakes it to Carter and drops back to pass! Weston steps up and throws one deep! He is looking for Jefferson Taylor, who is running free down the right sideline..."**

***Touchdown.***

Gunner's legs were already moving at full speed down the field. He was screaming at the top of his lungs—it all just poured out. It was not tears, it was not anger; it was pure joy. It was the most he had felt in months, and as he hit the endzone, he tackled JT in excitement.

"That's how we do it! One hell of a catch, JT!"

His friend was grinning ear to ear when they both popped up, the rest of the team mobbing around them.

"That's who you are!" Andy grabbed Gunner by the facemask. "You're Gunner Weston! The best damn quarterback in the state!"

Gunner wrapped him up as they made their way to the sideline, raising his hands to a crowd that was finally back on its feet, cheering. He pointed to his mom. Her smile was the widest he had seen in months, and it set him in a sprint right past the bench to his sister.

"That was for you, baby sis!" He picked her up in an embrace. Her joyous shriek only filled him up more.

***That's for all of us.***

\*\*\*\*\*

**"Well, what a difference a week can make, Pioneer fans. One minute it looks like the sky is falling, and the next it feels like we may have found some answers. A blowout victory tonight for our young men as they win 48-14 against district rival Mount Joy. Gunner Weston was fantastic, throwing four touchdowns, and Tyquan Carter added two more running the ball, as the South Mountain**

**offense looked unstoppable. You have to wonder if Coach Bianchi can keep this momentum going...”**

“You should have come!” Juliana shouted, running into the auditorium. “It was amazing! The boys were great!”

***Sounds like it.***

Hailey quickly clicked out of the radio on her phone and grabbed her books.

“Sorry, I stayed late to wait for my dad and was just putting together some notes.”

Hailey had to lie. She was not going to tell her friend that she had listened to the entire game, hanging on each play like it was her last breath. Now she was excited to get home and to see her father. She was looking forward to hearing about each play he had called and how great his team had performed.

***Maybe he’ll talk about Gunner.***

She paused as Juliana joined her on stage.

***Why do I care if he talks about Gunner?***

He’d played a great game; the guy on the radio had made that clear. But every time she heard his name, she felt something more than celebration or pride. The butterflies overwhelmed her stomach—she wanted to hear his name during each play.

***Stop it, Hailey!***

“I thought we promised we wouldn’t start until Monday!” Juliana grabbed her arm and ushered them down the steps.

“I know. It’s just we are so far behind and have so much work to do.”

***So much.***

The two walked into the hallway.

“Hailey.” Juliana spun to her. “You already sound fantastic. It’s like, it’s like you were born to lead and star!”

***Everyone needs to stop saying that.***

“I was not born to star. I’ve just had a lot of practice.”

She opened the main door to the school, heading out into the late summer air, which was already hosting an undercurrent of cool, autumnal chill. The breeze intermingled scents of freshly cut grass, spearmint, and cooling pavement.

“I just hope...I just hope Bridgette is OK with me taking over the lead.”

Hailey was becoming distracted by the stadium lights below.

“Bridgette?” Juliana threw her head back and laughed. “Bridgette will be fine. Plus, she is still playing a major part. I actually think she is better in her new role, anyway.”

***I would love to play that role.***

Hailey kept her eyes on the emptying stadium as Juliana pranced ahead.

“I don’t know, Juliana. I just feel like, I don’t know, I feel like everyone treats me differently.” She stepped off the curb and into the parking lot. “I feel like they think I am weird, like...I don’t know.”

Juliana grabbed her shoulder and brought her close.

“Hailey,” she said, a smile on her face, “they’re just a little intimidated by you. I mean, let’s be real, girl. You are, well, you are a shock to this town.”

***Not what I needed to hear.***

Hailey could only shrug.

“You’re talented, you’re smart, and girl, you’re beautiful!”

***Jeez.***

Hailey could not help the embarrassed giggle that escaped as she tried to break free, shaking her head.

“The rest of them just don’t know you like I do...yet.” Juliana finally let her go. “But I promise you, once they get to know you and you get to know them, you’ll see.”

She skipped to her car and threw open the door.

“You’ll see they’re not that bad.”



***I guess.***

A car pulled up nearby, interrupting the conversation.

“Juelz!” Gunner’s voice spun Hailey around, and the butterflies returned in force.

“Gunner!” Juliana yelled, hugging him through the driver’s side window.

“You ready to do this?”

“Absolutely! I can’t wait to see the look on my brother’s face!”

***What’s going on?***

Hailey took a step closer as Juliana jumped into his car.

“Hey, Hailey.”

Just hearing her name come out of his mouth raised the hair on her arms.

***Pull yourself together.***

“Hi.” It came out much softer than she would have liked. “What’s going on? What are you going to tell your brother, Juliana?”

She was struggling to fight off a new tug that had entered her chest.

“We’re going to Tony D’s for a little after-game celebration.” Her friend snickered and punched Gunner in the shoulder. “To recruit.”

“Recruit?” Hailey came even closer.

“Just a little something Juelz thought of.”

Gunner leaned out the window, and his face was illuminated by the parking lot’s lights.

***Oh, wow, he is gorgeous.***

“Want to come?” His central Pennsylvania accent made her think more words were following, leading to a short, awkward silence.

“Oh, sorry, I can’t.”

He nodded, but his smile lingered.

“I understand. Last minute, but maybe next time?”

Her cheeks were starting to burn.

“I just—I have to get home to my dad and—”

He put his hand up and chuckled.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take a raincheck. Just rest up for practice on Monday.”

### ***Practice...***

He leaned over to speak to Juliana, and that new tug strengthened.

### ***What is going on with me?***

She realized she was feeling a jolt of jealousy, and she could not control it. She knew those two were just friends. Juliana had been very vocal about her relationship with Andy Green. This seemed to be known by everyone except her brother; Hailey was fairly sure he would kill Andy if he found out. But as she glanced into the car again, she could not help but wish she were the one in the passenger seat.

### ***This is not good.***

Just a few days ago, she was cursing his name, and now she wanted to be in the car next to him. The butterflies were back.

“And if you’re not busy, you should stop by tomorrow for the fundraiser.” His smirk widened as he shifted the car into drive. “It should be fun.”

He started to roll up the window, a more playful tone entering into his voice.

“Plus.” He stopped the window. “I think everyone would love to meet the girl who’s going to be the lead.”

### ***The lead.***

The car shot out of the parking lot.

### ***Right.***

Her legs were beginning to feel weak again as she walked back to her car and threw herself up against it. There were no longer butterflies in her stomach, just knots, and she was starting to feel sick.

*I am going to be the lead.*

# CHAPTER 10

**“This is Johnny May, live from the South Mountain Football Boosters Fundraiser! It is a beautiful September Saturday, and if you are out by Oak and Main, please stop by and check out the vendors and car wash. Proceeds for this year’s event will go to all after-school activities, including this year’s musical. Some breaking news here at WRXT: We have just been informed that our very own South Mountain football team will be participating in the musical in various roles. It should be something special, as Gunner Weston will be carrying the lead role...”**

\*\*\*\*\*

Gunner shook his head and walked away from the radio booth.

*I’m not the lead.*

He flexed his hands and moved through the vendor tents.

*Hailey’s the lead.*

“Gunner!” Tony walked toward him with a huge grin, instantly easing the fire that was growing in his belly. “Great game last night, Gunner! You boys played great.”

The smell of pizza sauce and cheese was redolent as the two came together in an embrace.

“Thanks, Tony. Thanks for sticking with us.” He pulled back, but Tony refused to let him go.

“Are you kidding me, kid? We would never give up on you guys.” The smile remained, comforting Gunner with its sincerity. “As long as we have you on the sideline, kid, I know we have a chance.”

*God damnit, Tony.*

Gunner’s smile faltered.

“Well, Coach Bianchi has done a good job too.”

Tony winced before his big Italian smile returned.

“Yeah, of course.”

Gunner stood quiet for a second before grabbing the man’s shoulder.

“Trust me, Tony.” They turned and faced the tents. “We’re all going to get through this.”

***Together.***

Tony sighed.

“I trust you, Gunner.” He hugged the boy again with one arm. “And if you trust him, well then, I trust him.”

***Better.***

Gunner knew that Tony had loved his father. They were like brothers and had started the football Boosters together. Like the rest of the people in town, Tony was still healing, and he was not going to trust Coach Bianchi easily.

***I understand that.***

They all had questions about his background and why he would just up and quit a great coaching job like the one he had in California. If he could only tell them the real story, they would understand. They would see the man Gunner saw in their meeting, broken and suffering, needing the support of this town. However, it was not his place to tell, and the only way he knew how to help right now was to win football games.

“Remember,” Tony yelled as he headed toward his tent, “you get whatever you want—on me today! My treat!”

Gunner flashed a thumbs-up before a hand on his back spun him around.

“Mom, Peyton!” he exclaimed, hugging them both.

“Baby, look at this!” His mother was smiling ear to ear. “Everyone came out!”

***They sure did.***

Gunner rested his arms on their shoulders, kissing his sister on the forehead as they peered out at the fundraiser.

“Yeah,” he agreed, taking it all in.

The large parking lot was already full of people. Smells of pizza, popcorn, and cotton candy were everywhere, reminding Gunner’s stomach that he had forgotten about breakfast.

“And what is this that I hear?” His mother had a sly grin that she directed his way. “You are going to be the star in the musical now?”

***Stop.***

Gunner shook his head.

“And you got your sister and all your friends in it, too?”

He kicked the asphalt in front of him.

“I’m not the star, Mom.”

Peyton squeezed her arms around his back.

“Of course you are! And the male lead in this musical is perfect for you!” She laughed. “I always thought you resembled a monster.”

***Right.***

He knew she was joking, but the words still hurt. The way he had acted over the last five months made him feel like a monster. One game was not going to change that, and he knew it.

“Well actually, Hailey Bianchi is playing the lead, I’m just—”

Peyton jumped and jabbed his chest.

“You mean the coach’s daughter?!” Gunner squinted up at his mom, who was still grinning. “Now I know why you got us all to do this.”

***Enough.***

His face was on fire as he stuttered through his response.

“Listen, it’s not that, it’s just...Ms. Summers said dad...and I—”

His mom rubbed his forearm.

“Your father would be so happy, Gunner. About all of this. I loved the theatre growing up, and we never missed one of Ms. Summers’ musicals.”

***Stay strong, Mom.***

He could see a hint of sadness in her eyes as she spoke about his father, the grin fading from her face.

“Yeah, well, Mrs. Weston, I hope he would be proud of us too!” Andy joked as he made his way over with JT and Emilio.

“Boys!” his mother shouted, a smile lighting up her face. “He would be so proud of all of you!” Gunner nodded to the approaching group. “I heard you have all joined in on the musical this year!”

Emilio clicked his tongue and peered up into the clear sky.

“Yeah, well, not like I had much of a choice.”

Juelz came sprinting up behind Gunner’s mother and embraced her.

“Mrs. Weston!” she yelled, spinning her around.

“Juelz! You look wonderful, sweetheart!” His mother’s glow had returned. “Juelz, are you going to take care of my Peyton for me on stage?”

She smiled and slid in next to Gunner.

“Well, Mrs. Weston. I think your daughter is going to be wonderful. I’m so happy that she was able to get some of the cheerleading team to join us and lend a hand.”

Peyton was now wrapped around Juelz as they started talking about the role she would be playing.

“Fellas?” his mother asked, pointing at them. “What are you going to be playing?”

***Oh boy.***

Gunner was unsure how they would respond. After all, he had only roped them into the musical late last night.

It was Juelz's idea to spring it on them at Tony D's after the win. While they had reluctantly agreed, he was worried that when the adrenaline of the game passed, they would come to their senses and back out.

"Well," Andy said, stepping up, "I'm going to be the candlestick." His eyes were on Juelz, who gave him a flirtatious grin.

### *The perfect role for Andy.*

It had been years now that Andy and Juelz had been together in secret. Gunner considered that a loose term at this point, as they were terrible at hiding it. He knew Andy was waiting for the right time to tell Emilio, but so far, that time had not presented itself.

"I'm playing the feather duster. Andy and I get a chance to dance together," Juelz said softly, her cheeks growing red.

"Yeah, well." Emilio shook his head and pushed in between them. "I'm playing the clock or whatever. Gunner said I have a pretty big part, so you know..." He shrugged his broad shoulders.

### *Safe for now, Andy.*

"And JT?" His mother looked over at the wide receiver, who was nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

"I am, umm, the dad, I guess."

His mother clapped loudly.

"That's a great part!"

JT smirked, a little embarrassed. He was never one to be the center of attention.

"Well, you know, Mrs. W—"

She reached up and grabbed his face, kissing his cheek.

"I know you all are extremely talented, and not just on the football field, JT. You are going to do a fantastic job." She



tilted her head over to Gunner. “What about Ty?”

***Yeah, Ty.***

Gunner hesitated. He had not seen his best friend since the pizza parlor the night before.

“I’m the bad guy, Momma Weston!” Ty glided around the corner, a bottle of water in hand.

“Ty!” she protested as he picked her up.

“Can you believe they gave G the lead part and not me?” He winked over at Gunner and set her down.

“Well, you have a big part too! As well as some fantastic singing and dancing. I cannot wait to see how you put your own spin on the character.”

“Yeah, I guess we will see.”

Gunner could hear the sarcasm in his best friend’s voice. The glare he exchanged with Ty continued until his mother broke the awkwardness.

“Well, it was great seeing all you kids. I am so proud, and I can promise.” Her eyes beamed at each teenager in the group. “Coach would be so proud, too.”

***I hope.***

Gunner gave one last hug to his mother, who then started away with his sister.

“So,” Ty mumbled, “what’s this really all about?”

***Come on, Ty.***

Juelz punched him in the shoulder.

“Don’t be a jerk. You know what this is about!”

Gunner appreciated the support and again locked eyes with his best friend.

“Just trying to do what I feel is right, Ty. Just trying to help out a little.”

The two continued their heated glare. The tension had grown, and the rest of the group clearly felt uneasy.

Gunner knew he was dodging the talk he needed to have with Ty. They were best friends, and Gunner had some explaining to do. But right now was not the time for this childish game.

“Hailey!” Juelz shriek diverted Gunner’s focus.

*She came.*

He took a step forward, unable to hide the wide grin that was creeping onto his face.

*Man, she looks great.*

Hailey moved with elegance everywhere she went. She always looked amazing, and today, he was instantly struck by how beautiful she was in the bright midday sun. Her hazel eyes were sparkling as she joined Juelz, and the yellow sundress she was wearing led his mind to wander again as his eyes followed each subtle movement.

*Stop it!*

He quickly inhaled, his smile faltering as he looked away.

He knew she was different, and it was not just the way she dressed or spoke. She had an easy confidence that intimidated every boy in school, and she was clearly one of the smartest students in their class. Most girls had given Gunner whatever he wanted. They knew he was the quarterback of the football team and a Weston. They would never have questioned or snapped at him like she had that night in the auditorium.

In that moment, Hailey had shown him who he really was, and even though it hurt, she was right. He knew she would never go for a guy like him, at least not anymore. A guy like him had destroyed her family. He could see that every time her eyes met his.

“I see,” Ty said next to him. “Just doing what is right, huh?”

*Damnit, Ty.*

Gunner could feel his hands clench as he glared back. The tense moment stretched until the voice of the radio DJ called Ty’s name.

“Sorry, boys.” He backpedaled with his hands out. “I have to give the people what they want!”

***Jerk.***

Gunner stared after his best friend until he sat down with Johnny May, who was about to do the interview.

“Guys...” Gunner said softly to the others.

“Don’t worry about it, G.” Emilio grabbed his shoulder tight. “We know.”

Gunner nodded and felt JT and Andy slap him on the back.

***They know.***

\*\*\*\*\*

“I just don’t think it will work.” Bridgette was obviously not on board with Juliana’s proposal.

***This is a fair, not a fundraiser.***

Hailey was trying to concentrate on the conversation at hand, but the mass of people moving around her was distracting. Her eyes flashed between the vendor stands, each thrumming with people. The smells of pizza and popcorn were making her hungry.

“Hailey?” Juliana said, grabbing her attention. “What do you think?”

***Me!?***

Hailey had just been briefed on this plan, and while she knew Juliana wanted this to work, it sounded downright crazy to her.

The football guys would never go for this, and quite frankly, the idea was uncomfortable for her. Not just because she hated football and her dad coached them, but because the thought of working closely with Gunner honestly frightened her.

She had not been able to stop thinking about his face when she went home the night before. Her dad had been so happy as he recounted all the great moments of the game. But every

time he brought up Gunner, her heart would skip, and she had spent most of the conversation struggling to catch her breath.

“I don’t know...” Hailey was trying to figure out how to put it into words. “I mean, I don’t know the boys like you do but—”

“They’re football players, Juelz!” Bridgette crossed her arms, agreeing with Hailey for the first time since she had arrived. “They don’t care about our musical!”

Brad, with whom Hailey had a few classes, approached from behind with a bag of cotton candy.

“Hi, Hailey!” He smiled and waved.

***Brad!***

Unlike Bridgette, Brad had warmed up to her quickly. He also seemed much happier since he had been told he no longer had to play the lead male role.

“I know these boys, and I know—” Juliana glanced over Hailey’s shoulder. “Gunner! Boys!” She jumped forward.

***Gunner.***

Hailey froze as Juliana ran past her.

“Juelz!” His voice made her squeeze her eyes tight. “I can only imagine what you’re talking about right now.”

She could feel him stop next to her, his silhouette blocking the sun.

“Well,” Juliana replied, now standing next to the group of football players. “We were just talking about how excited we are for the musical.”

Hailey peeked over at Gunner, who nodded, a sarcastic smile on his face.

***He’s not buying it.***

“I’m sure that’s what it was.” He gave a small wave to Hailey, who merely dipped her head. “Look.” He moved to the center of the group. “I know we’ve had our differences in the

past. But we would not have volunteered for this unless we were ready to give one hundred percent.”

Bridgette’s eyes were not on Gunner; instead, they had shifted directly to Juliana’s brother.

“Are you sure *they* volunteered?” she responded snarkily, but Gunner refused to waver.

It was clear that he was the leader of this group. He always seemed in control of the situation. As she watched him move, she realized Ms. Summers was right: He was not afraid of the spotlight.

***Amazing.***

“Boys?” He twisted around to them, his palms outstretched.

The other football players nodded in unison.

“Coach W. would have wanted us to do this.” Juliana’s brother had stepped to the middle, and Hailey thought that she saw Bridgette twitch. “So, we’re going to do this.”

“See!” Gunner chuckled and put his hand on Bridgette’s shoulder. The tug from the night before returned, and Hailey had to look away.

***Get over it, Hailey!***

“We can’t do this without your help.” He lowered his voice. “Bridgette, I have listened to you sing for the last three years. You’re extremely talented.”

***Oh man, he is good.***

“We may be just a bunch of dumb jocks...” Gunner smirked at Hailey, and her cheeks grew red. “But we know what it means to work hard. With your help, I think we can make this musical something special.”

***So good at this.***

The group went quiet. The sound of patrons shuffling by suddenly seemed very loud.

“I’m in!” Brad screamed, raising his hand and bringing a laugh from Gunner.

***God, he has a great laugh.***

“That’s the spirit, Brad!”

Bridgette seemed less convinced, but she appeared to be done with this topic.

“Whatever,” she said, flipping her black hair.

“It’s a start!” Gunner clapped.

***I hate that he’s so likeable.***

“Well, right now,” Juliana started pushing the boys away, “we need to work on this fundraiser before we start losing customers!”

Brad’s face was glowing as he shook Gunner’s hand; however, while Bridgette may have initially agreed with Hailey, the new glare Bridgette sent her way was more in line with what the typical interaction had been since her arrival.

***She still hates me.***

“Hailey.” Gunner’s voice snapped her around. “I have your books from the other night. If you want to grab them? My car is right over here.”

***My books!***

He pointed toward the parking lot, and her eyes widened.

“I am so sorry about that!” She clasped her hands to her face. “I, I totally forgot about them.”

He laughed and waved her toward the car.

“Don’t worry about it.”

They maneuvered through the crowd of people, everyone congratulating him on the game the night before like he was some type of celebrity.

“I just figured you would need them for class. It’s not easy to get your hands on a copy of *Troilus and Cressida* in this town.”

***He saw what I was reading.***

She looked down sheepishly as he confidently steered them through the tents.

“Well, it is assigned reading for AP English, and I figured I would get a head start with all the practices coming up.”

Gunner turned when they finally broke through the mass of people.

“I know.” He laughed again. “I’m in that class, too. I’m with the morning group due to the AP Chemistry class I had to sign up for.”

***What?***

She froze by his car.

“What?” He was smiling as he grabbed the books, her facial expression already telling him all he needed to know. “A football player like me can’t be in AP classes?”

***No! I mean...***

She shook her head, her face heating up even more.

“It’s not that, it’s just...I said some terrible things the other night, and I, well...”

Gunner came around the car, books in hand.

“Look, Hailey.” He leaned against his hood, his muscles bulging through his tight South Mountain Football shirt.

***Breathe, Hailey.***

“I deserved it. I said some terrible things that night too.”

He had locked her books in his biceps, and she was struggling to pull her gaze off them.

“You don’t know me, and I’ve been kind of a jerk. I’m constantly dropping in on you as you try to practice alone. It’s just...” he trailed off as he handed her the books. “You have an amazing voice, and I guess I was just drawn in, you know?”

***Are we doing this again?***

She bit her lip, grasping the books tightly as the two went silent.

“But,” he finally continued as he started around his car, “I’m glad you took those books. They’re really not for me.”

His response pulled her closer.

“So, what books do you like to read?”

Gunner had already pulled a slim volume from his back seat.

“This is what I’m reading for AP English.”

He held up a copy of *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

“Of course, a war book.”

He snorted and threw it back into the car.

“Well, it’s not really just about war. It’s about the toll that war takes on a man and how a person can lose sight of who they are.” He stopped and peered into the clear blue sky.

***There is that look in his eyes again.***

“But I have read some of the classics, too.” He was back to trying to hide the anguish but doing a terrible job. “My dad always preached that I should be well-rounded, so I read some Shakespeare, like you. But don’t get me wrong.” He slid over his car hood. “I still love a good Lord of the Rings.”

***He is good.***

She looked away and tried to cover the smirk that was spreading across her face.

***He’s so good at this game.***

“Hails?”

“Daddy!?” She twisted in surprise to see him approaching with her sister.

***She came!***

“Melissa!” Hailey rushed forward. She slammed against her sister and squeezed tight. “You came! I am so happy you came!”

She pulled away, noticing too late that an anxious expression was splashed all over Melissa’s face.



“Gunner.”

***Crap!***

Hailey twirled, her heart dropping as she saw her father moving toward Gunner’s car.

“Coach, I mean sir, I mean Mr. Bianchi...how are you today?”

Hailey grabbed her sister’s arm and pulled them closer to their father.

“Gunner!” She needed to intervene immediately. “This is my sister, Melissa.”

Gunner was clearly anxious with her father so close.

“Nice to meet you.” He extended his hand, which Melissa reluctantly shook. “You two are practically twins.”

He threw on his smile that Hailey wished she could frame, but Melissa’s protective grasp on her shoulder pulled her away.

“So.” Her father also seemed different—colder and more aloof than normal.

“Coach, I mean, sir. Hailey forgot her books on stage the other night, and being in the stage crew, I found them, so...I just wanted to return them.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, taking a deep breath as if he had just ran a mile.

***So cute.***

She had no idea why, but his nervousness was even more intriguing than his smile.

“Well, I hear it’s more than just the stage crew now for you boys.”

Gunner nodded.

“Well, yeah, sir.”

The four dropped into that awkward silence that Hailey hated.

***Someone say something.***

“I think it’s great,” her father finally said. “I can’t wait to see you boys singing and dancing on stage, that’s for sure.” Gunner merely smirked. “Hails, we should go make our rounds. Gunner.” The two held a momentary gaze. “It was good seeing you.”

Her father grabbed her shoulder and ushered her in the opposite direction without another word.

“You too, Coach! I mean, sir!”

Hailey had to use all her strength not to giggle at Gunner’s hesitant shout.

“So.” Melissa was a lot more relaxed now. “That’s the great Gunner Weston I’ve heard so much about?”

Hailey kicked a small rock in front of her and avoided her father’s eyes.

***Maybe. I really don’t know.***

# CHAPTER 11

“Wow!” she exclaimed under her breath.

*Not bad.*

The ensemble had just finished their number and split to different corners of the stage. A loud clap from Ms. Summers was quickly interrupted by a shout.

“Damn AG! Stop stepping on my toes!”

Hailey had already gotten used to the boys’ constant bickering.

*Not bad at all.*

She pushed away from the large dinner table she had been seated at, amazed. However, Juliana’s twin brother, Emilio, who brought an intensity to the stage Hailey had never witnessed, appeared dissatisfied with the last number.

“Me!” Andy was standing perplexed, with his arms out wide.

“Yeah, man, you! You’re supposed to cross upstage, and I’m supposed to cross downstage! How many times do we have to talk about this!”

*Oh my, these boys.*

Hailey laughed, then tried to turn it into a cough. While the recent practices had been very different from those in her past, she had actually begun to enjoy the brotherly arguments.

“Boys!” Ms. Summers was chuckling as she made her way up onto the stage. “You both were fantastic!”

The two stopped and turned to her.

“Really?” they said in unison.

“Yes!” She motioned to Hailey, who stepped forward.

“Actually,” Hailey flashed a grin to relax them, “you guys are great for these two roles.”

***Perfect for them.***

Emilio nodded and slapped Andy on the back.

“See! Now, if you just listen to me and counter correctly, we won’t have a problem, AG.”

It was Bridgette who laughed next. Her coy approach, how close she stopped to Emilio, had Hailey’s eyebrow raising.

***Well, would you look at that.***

“Emilio,” Bridgette playfully whispered as she locked her arms with his. “I noticed a few things in that last number we can work on. Follow me over here, and I can help you out.”

“Me?” He suddenly looked very unsure. “You want to help me out?”

Andy chuckled, but Emilio’s stern glare shut him up before Bridgette hastily pulled him away.

***Interesting.***

“Andy.” Hailey was intrigued by the young man’s performance. “You were fantastic. Where did you learn how to sing like that?”

He flashed an embarrassed grin.

“Coach W. had me stick out the chorus for a while, and Ms. Summers coached me through the number last week.”

***Such a sweet guy.***

“Well, I think you’re perfect for this. You are just so—”

“Charismatic and charming!” Juliana jumped in, grabbing his hand.

“Yes!” Hailey laughed as Andy’s face became red. His eyes instantly darted to Emilio, who was now turned away with Bridgette.

***Oh boy.***

“If you don’t mind, Hailey, I would like to borrow my candlestick so we can practice our dance routine.” Juliana was moving closer to Andy, but his stare remained on her brother.

***Watch it, Juliana.***

“Don’t you think you have worked on that enough?” Her best friend shot a playful glare her way.

“You can never be too careful with things like this.” She winked and pulled Andy to the corner of the stage, which just so happened to be out of her brother’s line of sight.

***Those two.***

They had spent hours working on the very short number they had together, but from what Juliana had told Hailey in private, it was not spent dancing or singing.

“Is something going on between my feather duster and candlestick?” Ms. Summers stepped across the stage and put her hand on Hailey’s shoulders.

“No idea,” Hailey teasingly lied. The auditorium was filled with the vibrant sounds of dancing, singing, and laughter.

***Unbelievable.***

She shook her head at the image. Football players were conversing with Theatre Club students and cheerleaders all over the stage. Each part of the cast seemed to seamlessly fit, and she could not help but exhale a sigh of relief.

“Well, it is slowly coming together, Hailey,” Ms. Summers said, beaming over to her. “It might not be perfect, but it will have character, that’s for sure.”

***Absolutely.***

“I love what they are doing with their characters. It makes it...special.”

“Very true, Hailey.” Her teacher’s words became secondary when Hailey’s eyes fell on Gunner, who was practicing one of his more difficult numbers. “I think it will have that special feel I was hoping for.”

Hailey only nodded. While she would have loved to continue the conversation with her teacher about the play, seeing Gunner in his cut-off football shirt, muscles tensing with every move, stole her attention.

***Wow, he looks—***

“Hailey!” A girl’s voice stopped her before she could make it over to him.

***Peyton Weston.***

The young cheerleader’s eyes were wide.

“Do you mind if the girls and I put a few new steps in the final number of that song? I know we are just the feather dusters, but, I don’t know, I think it would be fun!”

“I actually think it would be perfect if you put your own spin on it,” Hailey agreed. “I would talk to Ms. Summers about your ideas, and I am sure she could incorporate them.”

Peyton pranced away, giving a thumbs-up to her friends.

***Cheerleaders...***

It may have only been the underclassmen who joined in, but it was still a big help. From what Hailey could gather, Peyton did not get along with the senior cheerleading captain and Gunner’s old girlfriend, Charlotte. While many around the school still believed that Gunner and Charlotte were together, Juliana had made it very clear that it was over.

***It would be nice if she knew that.***

Hailey was not used to being a topic of gossip in the girl’s bathroom, but the late nights that she and Gunner had spent on the stage had spread around the school like wildfire. To her, it was common practice for the two leads to work together on their lines. However, the looks coming her way in the hallways had made her realize that others thought differently.

***I hate it.***

“Oh, and Hailey,” Peyton said, interrupting Hailey’s internal dread, “I saw the dress you will be wearing for the big dance scene. I can’t wait to see you in it!”

Hailey blushed.

“Thanks.”

“Just...” Peyton glanced over at Gunner. “Just take it easy on the poor Beast. He’s not always the most graceful.”

Hailey’s face was on fire as Peyton skipped away with a giggle.

***Not this Gunner.***

Based on what she had seen, he was a fantastic dancer. He was also a great singer. He would never star in a Broadway show, but for a high school musical, he was going to be great.

***He’s so good at everything.***

In fact, that was what was beginning to scare her. He was talented, and the more time they spent together, the more she realized just how smart he was. She had been so blinded by her rage at him that she had never realized he was in three AP classes. She knew how hard her father pushed his football players every day, yet Gunner always seemed in control, and he made it a priority to work with her on the musical while still succeeding at everything else he did.

“Hey!” Gunner’s voice surprised her.

***Crap.***

She had made her way toward him without even realizing it.

“Hey guys!” It took a second for her to steady herself. “How...is everything going between my father and his hideous captor?”

JT matched her sheepishness with a shrug.

“It’s...well, it’s going, I guess?”

Gunner shook his head and slapped JT on the back.

“JT, don’t be so modest! Sorry, Hailey. He is just worried that he won’t be able to fully portray his character. Which, I can tell you from working with him, is completely wrong!”

“Come on Gunner...”

JT smiled, but she could tell he still felt uneasy.

“JT.” He leaned in as she whispered. “The best part of acting is that you can put your own personality into any character.” His shoulders relaxed a bit. “Add a little Jefferson Taylor to it, and I promise you, it will start to come naturally.”

JT nodded just as Ms. Summers called his name.

“Thanks, Hailey,” he said, tapping her arm as he moved by. “For everything.”

***Such a nice guy.***

A quiet conversation behind her turned her around.

“So,” she said, grinning at Brad and Gunner, “what could you two possibly be discussing?”

Brad pivoted toward her.

“Gunner was just asking me about his entrance, and I was suggesting a few things.”

***Of course.***

Hailey bit her lip.

“Just, you know, trying to make sure I get this right.”

Brad jumped and almost fell off the stage.

“You kidding me, Gunner? You were fantastic the other night.” Hailey tilted her head, questioning. “Yeah, Hailey! Gunner and I stayed late and went over a few of his numbers. You should hear him sing!”

***Does he ever sleep?***

“Just working on a few things. I want to make sure I can keep up with our star.” Her face was getting hot again, and the butterflies were starting to flutter around in her stomach. “So, um, you coming to the game Friday night?”

She was jarred back into the moment.

***The game?***

“Yeah, Hailey! You should come! You can sit with us!” Brad jumped up and down on the stage, making it hard for Hailey to answer.



### ***Attend a game?***

She took a deep breath and thought back to the last game she had attended in California. It was no secret that she hated football after what had happened; however, the last few Friday nights, she had listened to every play on her phone, waiting to hear Gunner's name.

### ***I cannot attend a game.***

Her shoulders were tensing as she sheepishly kicked the wooden planks in front of her. Her mind was racing, trying to think of an excuse that she hadn't already used the weeks before. As the butterflies multiplied, the knots in her stomach began to give her a cramp.

"It's OK." Gunner's voice was soft and calm, but his face was splashed with disappointment. "I know you really don't like football, and I would never want you—"

"I'll go." The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them.

### ***What did I just say?***

"Really?" Gunner's eyes lit up, and the butterflies were now free in her stomach again. "Wow, that's great. I can't wait to see you at the game!"

He seemed sincerely excited that she was coming, and for a split second, she was too. This would be a chance to see her dad coaching again, a chance to support him.

### ***And Gunner.***

Selfishly, though, she really wanted to see him play. She had listened to the games and heard about how talented he was. Now she wanted to see it for herself.

### ***This is not good, Hailey.***

She took another deep breath and nervously crossed her arms in front of her.

"Wait." Gunner peered around the stage, looking uneasy. "Brad, where is Ty?"

“Well, he, um, he said he had to go do something, and he left. I mean, we did get to practice a few scenes together, but I didn’t want to keep him. He seemed in a hurry.”

Gunner clenched his fists.

“Gunner? Are you—”

“Hey, sorry!” He seemed to have fallen into another world, and he placed his hand on her shoulder as he slid by, causing her to flinch away.

It was just an unconscious reaction, but it rocked him from his trance.

“Sorry.” A look of worried disappointment was back on his face. “I didn’t—I mean, I have to go...do something. You think you can take care of the boys while I’m gone?”

She immediately nodded, trying to play off the awkwardness.

“Sure. Is everything OK?”

He took off down the steps, flashing a thumbs-up.

“Never better!”

He winked. Her heart skipped, and she momentarily forgot where she was.

***He winked at me...***

She could not stop grinning as he sprinted to the door at the back of the auditorium.

“I can’t wait to see you at the game on Friday!” he shouted, loud enough for the entire cast to hear.

***Oh, jeez.***

All the eyes in the room shifted to her. Her legs grew weak, and the piercing stares brought a blush to her cheeks.

***Look away. Please look away.***

\*\*\*\*\*

Gunner was seething when he stomped into the parking lot.

***God damnit, Ty!***

He had been trying for weeks to get Hailey to come to a game and had been hoping to talk to her more before he noticed that Ty was missing. He knew she hated football, but she had been working hard on the musical and deserved a night out. Juelz and Bridgette would make sure she had fun, but selfishly, he also wanted her to watch him play.

They had been spending more time together after practice. He was finally getting to know her and had quickly realized that she was more perfect than he had ever imagined. She was funny, she was smart, and she was beautiful without even trying. Her smile was engraved in his mind, and he went to sleep every night thinking of her. He knew she only wanted to be friends. The flinch every time he got close made that clear, but at least he could have that.

***Of course.***

He knew where to find Ty, and as he jumped over the curb and onto the asphalt, he was not shocked to see who his best friend was with.

***Charlotte.***

“Ty!” he yelled as his ex-girlfriend’s eyes widened. “Hey! Can we talk?”

“G! My man, what’s up?”

Gunner threw his arms out and approached the car they were sitting on top of.

“What’s this? Why are you not at practice?”

Ty laughed and shrugged to Charlotte next to him.

“Practice? Dude, practice ended a few hours ago.”

***Come on, Ty.***

Gunner’s eyes lowered at his friend’s sarcastic jeer. His hands clenched together as he tried to steady his breathing.

“You know what I mean, Ty.” His voice rose as his best friend turned back to Charlotte.

“You talking about that theatre practice?” The bulky running back’s sarcasm was gone. “Is that what you’re talking

about?”

He slid off the car, towering over Gunner.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

While Ty may have been taller than Gunner, he was not about to back down.

“Charlotte, can you go wait by your car? G and I have to have a quick chat.”

She snuggled against Ty’s arm.

“Why would a star player like Ty need to waste his time on some stupid play practice?” she hissed.

***Stupid play practice?***

Gunner was not in the mood, and his ex-girlfriend’s presence turned his stomach. In fact, the thought that he might actually have *loved* her at one point bothered him most of all. Her snarky attitude, along with the fact that she was the only one of his close circle who did not show up to his dad’s funeral, left him gritting his teeth.

“This is not about you, Charlotte! Not everything is about you!” Gunner could not hold it in. The venom came spewing out before he could stop it.

“Charlotte.” Ty’s voice was serious now. “This is between G and me. I’ll call you later.”

At times, Ty could be self-centered, but he was never cruel. He knew the history they had, and no matter how ugly this was going to get, Charlotte did not need to be there for it.

“Whatever.” She flicked her hair and stalked away. The two remained quiet until she was out of earshot.

“You really think I care about some theatre practice, G?” Ty said, inching toward him.

***Just breathe.***

Gunner shook his head and dipped away. He was not here to get into a fistfight with Ty, and if he were being honest, he knew he did not stand much of a chance.

“What is this, Ty? Huh? What, you just going to go solo now? Just do whatever you want?”

His best friend stomped over to the other side of the car.

“Well, sorry if I don’t jump every time Gunner Weston tells me to do something.” He leaned lazily against his driver-side door. “Excuse me if I don’t obey Gunner Weston whenever he speaks.”

***Really, Ty?***

“Is that what you think I want? Is that really what you think of me, Ty?”

“I don’t always have to follow you, G. It’s not always about you and some girl you like.”

***This is not about Hailey!***

Gunner shot off the car he had started to lean against. A jolt to his insides had him snapping his finger right at his best friend.

“You think this is about Hailey? You really think this is about her?”

Ty turned to face him, irritation twisting his face.

“Oh, come on, G! If it’s not, then tell me what it’s really about. Please enlighten me because I thought we were playing this season for your dad! Not doing some dumb play about clocks and candles!”

***Ty.***

Gunner felt his shoulders drop as he stared into his best friend’s eyes. His face remained harsh, but Ty now looked broken, a feeling that Gunner knew all too well.

“This season was supposed to be for him! To win for him!” Abruptly, Ty turned away.

“Ty.” Gunner made a point of lowering his voice. “You think my dad only cared about winning football games?” He tried to move closer, but Ty pulled away. “You knew my dad better than that. And you know that he would never want you

to think like that.” Gunner stepped closer to his friend. “Ty, you were not just another player that he coached.”

His best friend was still refusing to turn toward him, causing Gunner to hesitate before continuing.

“Do you remember that time when we were little when I was throwing rocks down by Mr. Chen’s hardware store?” Ty nodded slowly. “I launched one—” Gunner stopped, laughing at the image in his head. “I launched one right into the front window.” Ty chuckled hesitantly. “We ran straight home, man. I mean, we took off at a full sprint. But when we got back to my place, my dad was waiting for us outside. Mr. Chen had called him, and we knew that he had already told him.”

Gunner sniffed, a bit of tightness returning to his chest as he remembered his dad’s face.

“Before I could even say anything, though, you immediately jumped in. You told him that it was both of us. You told him that *WE* were throwing rocks. That *WE* both hit the window.”

Ty half turned; only the side of his face was visible.

“Man, my dad...” Gunner was finally able to draw near his friend. “After that day, my dad looked at you like a son. Like you were my brother. It’s always been us, Ty, and I’m sorry if I forgot that.”

***There, I said it.***

Gunner had been feeling the tension between them for weeks and knew it was finally time to address it. Ty had wanted to be there for him when he was hurting, and he had shut him out. He had been selfish, but even more, he had been a terrible friend. Gunner had been so absorbed in himself that he had missed the fact that his best friend was hurting, too.

“But I can’t do this without you, man.” Ty still hadn’t said anything. He was simply peering into the blue sky. “I need us. I need Tyquan Carter. I can’t do this by myself. I tried that already, and I...failed.”

Students got into their cars across the parking lot. Their slamming doors were unnaturally loud in the silence.

“You know,” Ty finally lowered his eyes back to Gunner, “you should leave the speeches for the field.” He yanked open the car door, got in, and started the engine.

“Ty?” Gunner begged through the window.

“You’re starting to sound a lot like our new coach, G.” Ty snapped the car into drive. “Maybe you should figure yourself out before you start giving advice.”

*Jeez.*

The car peeled away. Gunner exhaled, gently rubbing the back of his head as he watched his best friend squeal around the corner.

*Maybe he’s right.*

# CHAPTER 12

**“Well, folks, it has been smooth sailing the last few weeks against lesser competition that has led to a three-game win streak. However, the Pioneers are in a tough one tonight against the Racers of Maple Grove High. As we go into half-time, the score is tied 14-14...”**

\*\*\*\*\*

“I’m thirsty.” Juliana stood up and pointed to Hailey. “Want to come?”

Hailey continued to stare, waiting for her to complete the sentence.

***What? Where?***

She glanced over at Bridgette, who seemed fixated on the field.

“Well?” Juliana asked, laughing.

***Oh, right!***

She was still adjusting to the central Pennsylvania accent, which often left her confused.

“Yes, sorry! I’ll go with you.” Hailey smirked as Juliana shot her a condescending smile.

“I’ll watch your purse, Hailey,” said Bridgette helpfully. “Can you grab me one? I’ll save your spots and wait for Brad to get back.” She was keyed in on the band’s half-time performance.

***Maybe we are OK?***

Bridgette’s attitude had changed over the last few weeks, and Hailey was even starting to enjoy the time they spent together onstage. They had a lot in common, but the transformation might more so be attributed to the extra time Bridgette was spending with Juliana’s brother.



Bridgette had been finding reasons to help him during each practice. She had even gone over to his house last weekend for some more “one-on-one review.”

***Good for her.***

A smile spread across Hailey’s face as she peered out over the large stadium, the lights flashing down as the marching band played on. She had sworn off ever going to another game after California. However, Gunner’s constant requests had finally broken her. She could not bear to see the disappointment on his face after another rejection, and she thought, based on her father’s recruiting days, that it would just be a relatively small event. It was only high school football, after all, not college, like her father had coached before. Yet when she finally stepped through the gates, she immediately realized she was wrong.

***This is a crazy number of people for a high school game.***

“I hate when the score is close, I just hate it.” Juliana shook her head as they stepped off the metal bleachers.

Hailey struggled to stay near her friend; the half-time rush had begun. Parents and students were scattered all about, small clusters stopping to converse every few feet.

As she stepped around a group of laughing freshmen, her eyes flashed to the sideline, where her father had been standing a few minutes earlier. It was obvious that her attendance made him happy. Even though it was Gunner who had asked her to come, she made sure not to mention that when she told her dad about her plans. He had been smiling more lately, as not only were they winning football games, but Melissa was starting to more regularly get out of the house. Family dinner now consisted of talks about the musical and school, and she was beginning to enjoy the time they spent together again. Bringing up Gunner might unearth memories that her father and sister were not ready to face.

***I might not be ready, either.***

“Well, look who decided to finally show up to a game.” Charlotte’s sneering voice stopped them both. Juliana

immediately put a protective hand across Hailey's chest.  
"What, no 'practice' tonight?"

***Oh no.***

The venom in the girl's eyes was crystal clear.

"Fuck off, Charlotte, and go blow someone under the bleachers!" Juliana snatched Hailey's hand and pulled her away. Gunner's ex-girlfriend's mouth fell open as she stuttered around a comeback.

***Good.***

It was no secret who had started the gossip about her and Gunner. After class one day, Hailey had overheard some of the cheerleaders in the bathroom mention her name. The things they were saying were nowhere close to what was happening, but she knew no one would believe her if she denied them. Whether she liked it or not, Gunner had a reputation, and most of the girls around the school knew all about it.

***I hate that.***

She felt a lump begin to form in her throat at the thought of Gunner with someone like Charlotte. Hailey had only experienced a few short relationships before her mother passed, and they had amounted to nothing more than holding hands and a kiss on the cheek. The more she thought about it, the more uncomfortable and tense she became.

"She's just mad that Gunner has been looking at you every time he comes off the field." Juliana, expertly navigating through the crowd, led Hailey to the concession stand's line.

***I know.***

She was right, and it was hard to miss. Gunner had found Hailey the second she sat down and had waved immediately. It had awakened the butterflies in her stomach, and she had been unable to take her eyes off him since. She hated that football was such a physical sport, and the fact that Gunner was hit so much made it even worse. It also did not help that he never left the field, which, according to Juliana, meant he was very good.

“I thought they were together?”

***Stop it, Hailey!***

The question was more for her than anything.

***Why did I ask that?***

She knew the answer, but for some reason, she felt like she needed to hear it again. Hailey had not told Juliana, but she had been comparing herself to Charlotte for the entire first half of the game. She was the perfect cheerleading captain—the girlfriend every high school football player would want. Her blonde hair seemed to be professionally done, and she had the measurements of a fashion model. Hailey could not help but be jealous as Charlotte flaunted her body up and down the sideline.

“I would never let that slut near Gunner again,” Juliana responded coldly.

***Wow, what happened?***

Juliana saw Hailey’s questioning head tilt, so she went on.

“When Gunner’s dad died, they were dating...or whatever you want to call it.”

***Yeah...***

Hailey felt the lump again.

“She couldn’t even show up to the damn funeral because she said it was ‘too much.’ I mean, what kind of person does that? Says they care about someone but then just abandons them during that time?”

***What a bitch!***

She never liked using that type of language, but hanging out with Juliana made it hard not to.

“After that, Gunner spent some time at our house because he didn’t want to go home. I would hear him on the couch, talking to himself, and sometimes...” She stopped, looking up into the sky as if replaying it. “A few times, I even listened to him cry.”

***Oh no.***

Hailey's palms were starting to sweat. She lowered her eyes and tried to imagine the strong, caring, fun-loving guy that she had been hanging out with crying alone.

***He seems so in control.***

"Mrs. Weston!" Juliana yelled. Hailey froze.

***Gunner's mom!***

"Juelz! Sweetheart!" The woman's voice boomed over the crowd, causing heads to turn toward them.

***Oh god.***

Hailey kept her back turned. Her heart started to pump harder, and she rubbed her fingers against her thumbs to try to calm her nerves.

She had heard all the stories about Gunner's father. She had heard about all his accomplishments and his support of the community. However, during her short time in this town, she had rarely heard anything about his mother.

"Mrs. Weston, I would like you to meet Hailey Bianchi," Juliana said, practically presenting her on a platter as Hailey spun around.

***Wow.***

She was instantly taken aback by how beautiful Gunner's mother was. She had light brown hair that curled above her shoulders and was wearing a South Mountain Football shirt, like most of the other parents. However, unlike most of the other adults at the game, Gunner's mother was vibrant and glowing. Her smile was so bright that Hailey stuttered through an awkward greeting.

"I'm glad you two can finally meet! Hey, Mrs. W., I'm going to get a few waters before the second half. Do you mind watching Hailey?"

***I need to be watched?***

Gunner's mom nodded and moved in close. Juliana took off to the concession stand like she had planned this all along.

***OK, this is weird.***

“I’m glad we’re finally getting to meet.” Mrs. Weston’s soft brown eyes were exactly what Hailey needed at the moment. The crowd around them had now shifted focus to their small group, and she could again feel herself becoming the center of attention. “I have heard so much about you.” Gunner’s mom leaned in and extended her hand.

***Who from? Gunner?***

“Don’t worry about all these people,” she said as Hailey reciprocated the gesture. “They don’t get out much.”

Her smile lit up the entire area, and Hailey could not help but grin back.

“Thanks.” It was all she could muster in response.

“How is your family doing with the move? I am sure this is very different from California.”

***You have no idea.***

“Oh, well, yeah, it is a little different.” For some reason, Hailey let out a nervous giggle. “But so far, everything has been just fine.”

***What a terrible lie.***

“Here!” Juliana was already back. “We better get back before kickoff!”

“You mind if I join you girls on the way back? I am hoping to slip away from all the Boosters trying to run me down.”

Gunner’s mother laughed as Juliana stood in front of her like a bodyguard.

“You got it, Mrs. W.!”

This woman was not what Hailey had expected at all. She did not seem like someone who had just abruptly lost her husband five months ago in a tragic accident. She appeared in complete control. She held her head high, and she had no problem ignoring all the stares that were making Hailey uncomfortable.

“I hear the musical is coming along.” Mrs. Weston maneuvered Hailey through the crowd, similar to her son at the fair a few weeks back.

“You have been talking to Ms. Summers again, haven’t you?” Juliana stayed close, clearly not bothered by all the commotion.

“Well, if I can be honest with you girls,” Mrs. Weston leaned in as they finally made it to the front of the bleachers, “I would much rather talk about music than football.” She winked to Hailey, who could not help but smile delightedly. “But you know how it goes...”

*Actually, I kind of do.*

“Well, this is my stop. I guess I can only hide from everyone for so long.” She smiled. “It was great seeing you, Juelz, and don’t be a stranger.” She hugged her. “Same with you, dear. Any friend of Gunner’s is always welcome at the Weston household.”

*Friend?*

“Tell your father he is doing an amazing job.”

Her hug was just as friendly as her smile, and Hailey knew that this would draw the attention of the entire sideline. It was warm, it was tender, and it was motherly, something Hailey had missed and now wanted more than ever.

“Go Pioneers!” Mrs. Weston yelled before stepping back up into the stands.

Juliana grabbed Hailey’s hand as an explosion from the sideline jerked her eyes off the wonderful woman who had just embraced her.

*That was Gunner’s mother.*

She grinned as she turned back to the field. Her attention was immediately drawn to the green eyes and dark brown hair of the boy staring at her from the sidelines.

\*\*\*\*\*

**OK folks, here we go! The Pioneers are clinging to a 24-21 lead, and the Racers of Maple Grove High are moving down the field. They have first and goal from the nine-yard line with thirty-five seconds left. A touchdown on this drive would win it for the Racers. Timothy Derr has had a great night as quarterback for Maple Grove—he’s getting behind his offensive line. He calls out his cadence and takes the snap. Derr is going to run the ball to the right side and... WHAT A PLAY by Tyquan Carter and Emilio Cortez! They stopped Derr at the five-yard line, and the Racers will have to hurry, as they have no timeouts! WAIT... Tyquan Carter is still down! He is holding the back of his calf. The referee has stopped play, and the Pioneers will have to use their last timeout!”**

“Ty!” Gunner yelled as he ran to the sideline. “Ty, you OK?”

A scream from his best friend answered that question.

“It’s a cramp! It’s a cramp!” The muscle was flexing visibly, and the pain on Ty’s face was palpable. “Coach, it’s just a cramp!”

Ty tried to stand, but the muscle was still pulsating, forcing him back down.

***Damn, this isn’t good.***

Gunner’s head was spinning, and he could only helplessly peer at his coach, who was surveying the sideline.

“Bailey!” Coach Bianchi finally shouted. “Bailey, get over here.”

***Bailey?***

Gunner turned as his tall, lanky young teammate came sprinting into the huddle.

“Coach!” Bailey’s eyes went wide. “Is Ty OK? Can he play?”

“He will be fine, but not right now.”

***Shit.***

Gunner glanced over at Emilio, whose eyes were also wide.

“Coach!” Ty gasped. “I’m fine. Just give me some time to work this out.”

Coach Bianchi rested his hand on Ty’s shoulder.

“I’m not going to risk you going out when you’re not one hundred percent. You gave us everything you had tonight, Ty. Now it’s Bailey’s turn.”

***Oh boy.***

Gunner adjusted his facemask and tried to catch his breath.

“Coach, I don’t know if I can,” Bailey stammered softly. “I mean, maybe you should give Ty time to shake this off.”

“We don’t have time, son. You got this! Focus on your assignment. Just like we practiced.”

Gunner could see his young teammate’s limbs trembling.

***Damnit.***

This was obviously a terrible time for Ty to get hurt, as they had been struggling all game to keep the opposing team out of the endzone. However, Gunner knew Coach Bianchi was right. Ty would just be a hindrance on the field—that cramp was not going away anytime soon.

***Come on, Gunner.***

He tried to reset. The eyes of the entire team were on Coach Bianchi as he huddled them up.

“This is it. I need you all to play smart and concentrate. Focus on your assignments, and end this game!”

Coach Bianchi leaned over to Emilio and the defensive coach to make a play call.

“Coach—” Bailey was cut off by the whistle before he could say any more.

***Do something.***

Gunner pushed himself toward his teammate.



“You got this, Bailey!” he shouted, and he slapped the young man on the helmet. “I know you got this!”

The rest of the team took his lead. In an instant, the whole group was pumping up the young man before he took the field.

“Ty!” Gunner pointed to his best friend. “You gave us everything tonight. We’ll finish this for you.”

The pain in Ty’s eyes was clear as Gunner began to backpedal away.

***This is not good.***

Finally, Ty nodded and pumped his fist.

***We need to win this game.***

The scoreboard in the back of the endzone was too large to ignore, and Gunner could no longer fight looking at it.

***We really can’t lose this game.***

He knew a loss would mean they were out of the playoffs, but there was something else driving this feeling. Something that had him pivoting back to the bleachers, where he spotted a familiar face. He had been checking on her after each possession and, well, any time he could.

***I don’t want Hailey’s first game to be a loss.***

“Bailey!” Ty’s voice brought him out of his trance. “You got this, Bailey! You hear me? You got this!”

***There’s my best friend.***

Everything else dissipated as Gunner watched Ty limp toward the young cornerback who was about to take the field.

“I watched you in practice, and you are ten times the corner I am! You understand the position, baby. You were born to play it.” Bailey seemed to be in shock. “They have no timeouts, and they have no kicker. They’re going to try and win this game.”

A loud shriek from the referee’s whistle sent the Maple Grove team into position.

“One of these plays, he is going to try and beat you to the endzone. Trust your feet, watch his hips, and explode.”

Ty glanced over at Gunner and smiled.

“You got G behind you. Trust him, and let your moment come to you.”

*Perfect.*

The two friends locked eyes until the second whistle blew.

“Get it done, boys!” A final slap to Bailey’s helmet sent them on their way. Gunner could not help but smile as he made his way into the defensive huddle.

*Absolutely perfect, Ty.*

**“Well, strap in Pioneer fans because here we go. Maple Grove has twenty-eight seconds and no timeouts. They can run a play and kick a field goal to tie the game or run two plays and try to win it. What a time for young Malcolm Bailey to get his first snap of the season. The sophomore will replace Tyquan Carter, who looks to be cramping on the sideline.**

**Derr, the Maple Grove quarterback, gets behind his offensive line and calls out the cadence. He takes the snap and tries to run around the right side again! Derr dives for the endzone and...WHAT A PLAY by Malcolm Bailey! He stopped Derr short of the endzone and kept him in bounds!**

**The clock continues to run! Derr is scrambling to get his offense set. He gets behind the center and looks at the clock. This will be the last play of the game! The Racers get the snap off in time. Derr rolls to his right. He is going to throw to the endzone! Cortez is putting pressure on him, but he gets it away. The ball is fluttering to the endzone and...”**

Gunner never had to help Bailey. It was perfect coverage, and the quarterback threw it right to him. Gunner never even had to leave his own endzone—Bailey took off down the sideline all alone.

Sure, he could have just run out of bounds. The game was over; they had won. But Bailey was going to take this one back for a touchdown, no matter what.

***That was close.***

Gunner could feel the pain setting in from the hits he had taken earlier. The adrenaline that had been pumping through his body began to flag, and even the crowd noise was no longer helping.

“Hell of a game, Weston.” His coach was grinning ear to ear as they met on the sideline.

***Nice smile, Coach.***

The rest of the team was already mobbing the young cornerback in the endzone, and Gunner paused to watch the moment unfold. Bailey deserved to be happy; it was only going to get better for him once he got the chair treatment from Emilio tonight at Tony D’s.

***Good luck, Bailey.***

Exhaustion was taking hold, and as Gunner removed his helmet, he once more glanced over to the bleachers to find Hailey.

***Beautiful.***

Her face was glowing as she waved her arms with Juelz. The sheer excitement of her celebration returned some of his flagging energy. He hoped he was not too obvious every time he found her in the crowd. He was having a tough time keeping his eyes off her.

***Come on, Gunner.***

He quickly glanced away, making sure her father was no longer nearby.

***Pull it together.***

Coach Bianchi had just begun trusting him with his offense, and he was sure that doing anything with Hailey would break that trust. The bigger problem, though, and what scared him the most, was what he saw every time he looked into Hailey’s

eyes during musical practice. They were gentle and poised but also held a strength that he knew he could never match. He would never be able to be the person she deserved, and as he stood by himself on the sideline, he knew exactly what that meant.

*Shit.*

He inhaled and kicked the grass at his feet.

*This sucks.*

# CHAPTER 13

**“That will do it for our post-game coverage of tonight’s game, Pioneer fans. A fantastic 30-21 win for our young men was capped off by Malcolm Bailey, who returned his first career interception for a touchdown! I can only imagine how that kid is feeling!”**

\*\*\*\*\*

“Tony D’s tonight, Bailey! It’s your night! We’re putting you on the table, baby!” Emilio screamed as he ran around the lockers.

***Poor Bailey.***

“Great game G.” JT was grinning as he stepped up to his locker.

“Nice catch on that touchdown.” Gunner slapped his hand.

“Well, I couldn’t let AG show me up tonight,” he chuckled. Andy gave a thumbs-up while getting dressed. “Hey, um, G?” JT’s voice had dropped to a whisper. “Did you, um, did you get a chance—”

“He still in there?” Ty’s locker remained empty, and Gunner did not need JT to finish.

***Shit.***

Gunner clipped his watch to his wrist as he moved around the wooden bench in the middle of the room.

“Hey, why don’t you and AG get the boys down to Tony D’s. I’ll take care of this.”

Andy had already sprinted from his locker and was trying to calm down Emilio, who continued to swing his towel.

“Yeah, sounds good to me.” JT nodded and joined the group.

***Is he still cramping?***

Gunner walked toward the showers where his best friend had headed after returning from the trainer's room.

"Ty?" Gunner could see him quietly standing in a towel, facing the tiled wall. The shower was off. "Hey Ty, you OK?"

***What's going on?***

Gunner pulled his shirt over his head and slowly entered.

"I'm...I'm fine, G." Ty turned away, and Gunner knew he was lying.

***He's crying.***

In all the years they had been friends, Gunner had never seen Ty cry. Even at his father's funeral, Ty had been right next to him and hadn't shed a tear. Since Charlotte didn't show up, he was Gunner's rock that day.

"Yo, Ty." Gunner grabbed his friend's shoulder. "Hey, Ty, come on, man, talk to me."

After a few seconds, Ty turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, G." He dove into Gunner's chest. "I'm so sorry, G!"

***Ty!***

He squeezed his friend's shoulders. The two remained in their embrace as the locker room emptied out on the other side of the wall.

***Come on, say something.***

"No, man," Gunner finally whispered. "I'm sorry."

"G, don't do that!" Ty broke away and started pacing through the showers, his flip-flops echoing off the wet ceramic floor. "I'm sorry you couldn't talk to me, man. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

***No, Ty, it was me!***

"What...what do you mean?" Gunner stammered softly.

"You needed me, G." Ty took a few steps back. "You needed me, and I was too damn focused on football and...and on Charlotte!"

***What!?***

Gunner put his hand back on Ty's shoulder.

***I don't care about Charlotte.***

"Ty," Gunner inhaled. "I was the one who screwed up. I should have told you how I was feeling. You're my best friend, Ty, and I was the one who forgot that. I mean, you're right. I am still lost, man. I have no idea what I'm doing or what is going to happen next. I still need you, Ty."

He chuckled a bit, bringing a small grin to Ty's face, too.

"Well..." His best friend wrapped him up in another hug. "You could have fooled me, G. The guy I've been playing ball with seems to know exactly what he's doing."

***Really?***

Gunner perked up as they started out of the showers.

"You know, G, your dad...you were right about what you said." The locker room was empty when they entered. "He was like a father to me. I mean, you know I love my pop, don't get me wrong. But with my dad in the military and traveling so much, Coach W. was always there when I needed him."

***I know, Ty.***

The mention of his father made Gunner take a deep breath. The memories of the two friends spending nights together, as his father told football stories, were enough to bring on a small headache.

"Like, growing up, your family...I mean, living across the street from your family was everything, man. Your mom always helped out my mom while my pops was gone. You and me fighting off all those guys trying to talk to P!" They both laughed. "Now, man..." They both sat down on the wooden bench. "Man, with him gone, I guess...I guess I just miss him."

***Me too.***

The two sat in silence. A fan kicked on in the background.

"Yeah, Ty, I know."

***Believe me, I know.***

“Your dad would be pretty pissed at me if he saw how I’ve been acting lately, wouldn’t he?”

Gunner stood and opened up his locker.

“I think he would have been proud of how you helped Bailey tonight.”

Ty nodded and joined his side.

“The kid can play, G. He’s a better corner than I am.”

Gunner shut the door and began to swing his keys.

“We couldn’t have won this game without you, Ty.”

His best friend quickly got dressed. The two didn’t say anything else until they stepped out of the locker room.

“Thanks for sticking by me, G. I know I haven’t been the best teammate or friend—”

“Look.” Gunner stopped. “There is no playbook for this. For what happened, for what’s going on.” Ty’s eyes hit the floor. “I have no idea what I’m doing, but I know as long as I have you guys, my teammates, my brothers, I know we’ll figure it out.”

His best friend slowly raised his eyes to him and grinned.

“And Hailey.” The name froze Gunner. “I see it, G. The way you look at her.”

***What!?***

Gunner could feel his face getting red, and he immediately started for the exit.

“I...don’t know what you’re talking about.” He tried to move faster, but Ty grabbed his shoulders.

“Why don’t you just ask her out, G?” The words sounded so simple and easy.

He had thought about it. In fact, he had thought about it every night since he met her, but asking Hailey on a date could put the play and his relationship with his coach in jeopardy. He knew his reputation around school, and he had heard the



rumors that were already going around about the two of them. The thought of the embarrassment Hailey must be feeling was making his chest tight again, and he had to flex his hands just to get a good breath.

***She doesn't need me.***

She needed friends, not some monster like Gunner trying to fulfill a stupid teenage crush. Plus, she had made it very clear that night in the auditorium that she would never be able to trust him.

"I can't," he finally mumbled. "You don't understand. She has been through so much, and her family...I just can't do that to them right now, Ty."

The hallway was silent for a moment.

"Well, look at this." Ty laughed. "My boy finally took the plunge."

***No way!***

"Ty, that is not—"

"Look, G," Ty interrupted as they pushed out the door. "Maybe the old Gunner wasn't right for someone like Hailey. I mean, look dude, she's different."

***So different.***

"But you're not the same guy either, trust me. The old G would have just given up on this game and went back to Charlotte or some other cheerleader who was ready to jump into your car."

Gunner's skin crawled at the thought of Charlotte in his car.

"But this Gunner..." Ty leaned back against his car. "This Gunner has already put her first, above himself. G, I think you already know what that means."

***Shit.***

Gunner's throat was dry, and he was unable to swallow. He did know what that meant, and he now knew what had been frightening him most of all. He had never felt this way about

any girl before, and, of course, he had to pick Hailey as the one.

***I am an idiot.***

“I screwed up as a best friend once, G.” Ty opened the car door and allowed Gunner to slide in. “But I’m not going to do it again. I got the perfect idea. You just let Tyquan Carter handle it, and you just be Gunner Weston. The new and improved Gunner Weston.”

***New and improved?***

“Where are we going?”

Ty jumped into the driver’s seat.

“We’re going to make a pit stop before Tony D’s. Trust me.” He flashed his patent smile. “I got this.”

Gunner’s mind raced as he thought back over their conversation and what Ty was going to do next.

***I can be a friend.***

Gunner nodded to himself as the car kicked into drive.

***I can be a good friend.***

He could be a friend to Hailey. He could be there for her onstage when she needed him, and if she needed to talk, he could listen.

***How hard could it be?***

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“Come on, Hailey!” Juliana shouted as she made her way to the pizza parlor.

***Why did I say yes?***

She was mumbling under her breath when they opened the door and the noise from inside the restaurant practically knocked them over.

“BAILEY! BAILEY! BAILEY!” The chant got even louder as they stepped inside.

***WOW!***

Students from every grade were packed into the room, laughing uproariously. Pizza littered the tables. She immediately recognized most of the football team and was shocked to see them all together, holding someone up on a chair.

“My brother is so dumb!” Juliana screamed over the noise.

***This is insane.***

She tried to play along and laugh. She followed Emilio and the other players holding the chair around the room as the player on top gripped tight with a mix of pure joy and fear.

***Absolutely insane.***

She had never noticed how large the pizza parlor’s dining area was. The sprawling space was lit by small chandeliers. The booths against the back walls were now filled with laughing students, and a few others danced by the large tables in the middle. In the past, she had been so set on getting out that she had missed just how homey it felt.

“Juelz!” said the owner, sprinting around the counter.

“Tony!” She kissed his cheek and gave him a hug. “Did my brother break anything yet?”

Tony snorted and shook his head. “Tell me again, how are you two twins?”

Juliana flicked her wrist teasingly.

“Remember, Tony, I got all the good qualities.”

The man chuckled. His eyes had now found Hailey, who was trying to shrink down behind her friend.

“Hailey, right?”

***He knows my name?***

His grin widened, and he extended his pudgy hand.

***OK.***

She forced a grin and returned the shake. The warm tenderness of his hand helped ease some of her growing angst.

“Sorry about all of this.” He had to lean down so she could hear him. “I normally run a calm and clean establishment. However, Coach Weston always wanted a safe place for the students to go after games, so...” He waved his arms around, his dirty apron flapping against his bulging stomach.

“Well, it seems like everyone is having a good time,” Hailey said as JT and Andy flashed by. Their excited screams brought a genuine smile to her face.

“So.” Tony pushed the boys away and leaned back down. “Juelz tells me you are going to be playing the lead in this year’s musical.”

*Oh boy.*

Hailey inhaled sharply before nodding.

“Well, let me tell you.” He pointed at the football players, who had started to dance in the middle of the room. “I cannot wait to see how you get these boys to perform. But I am sure, between you and Ms. Summers, you will get the best out of them. Juelz has told me great things about you, and to see what your father has done with this football team...” He collected himself before finishing. “We are just really glad your family picked this town.”

*This is new.*

Hailey’s face was getting red as the man in front of her beamed. He seemed different from when she had come in earlier in the semester. He was happier, and his eyes were less tired. She could tell why she had heard so much about him. His face was gentle and caring, like an uncle who would sneak cookies to you when your parents were not paying attention. Keeping his restaurant open late for all these students seemed like it would be a burden, but his joyful grin made her believe that he truly loved it.

“But Hailey,” he said, putting his finger up in the air, “your father always comes in and orders the salad. So, before you leave,” Tony yelled over the commotion as he went behind the counter, “I will whip you up one of my world-famous pies. You can take him one home on me!”

He winked, and she blushed even more.

***That is so—***

A crash in the dining room caught everyone's attention.

“God damnit, Emilio! This isn't your house!” Tony was yelling, but his grin showed that he was enjoying every minute of what was going on. “Now I am going to make you—”

“Hailey!” His voice, ringing out from the other side of the pizza parlor, pulled her away.

***Gunner!***

She pressed her shirt down against her jeans as he maneuvered through the crowd. A few students parted so he could wiggle by.

“Juelz!” he said, hugging her friend when he arrived.

“Gunner! What a game today!” Juliana smiled slyly.

“Yeah, well, closer than we were hoping for, but a win is a win.”

“Is Peyton here?” Her friend was already making her way toward the other students, as if she had planned this escape well in advance.

“Yeah,” Gunner said, pointing to a booth in the back.

“I'm just going to say hi.” Juliana winked at Hailey and took off into the crowd of students.

***Wait!***

She knew what Juliana was doing, and by the smirk on Gunner's face, so did he. Her insides were beginning to swirl, and as she watched Gunner nervously shift in front of her, she could not help but do the same.

“So,” he said, slapping his hands together, “you came tonight.”

She shifted from one foot to the other, holding on to the hem of her shirt for dear life.

“Yeah, Juliana picked me up, and, well, it was fun.”

***Stop fidgeting with your shirt!***

She was breathing quickly, her palms becoming sweaty.

***Wait, what is going on?***

His friend Tyquan had started motioning something to Gunner from a distance, and she could not help but try to get a better look.

“Does he want something?” She tilted her head, noticing that Brad had joined him, along with a few cheerleaders. “And is he talking with Brad?”

“Yeah, well, Ty is something. But I actually think they’re trying to catch up on the practice that he missed last week.” Gunner laughed. “Hey, do you think we can go somewhere quieter to talk?”

***Talk?***

It was as if her body was on autopilot. She nodded, and he led her further from the crowd.

***I shouldn’t be doing this.***

“Sorry about that. Just...just a little noisy over there.”

He was anxiously fiddling with his fingers. He was a little taller than her, and his deep green eyes caused a shiver to run up her spine when they locked down on her.

“So, um, hey, tomorrow night.” His face was getting red. “Tomorrow night, the drive-in is having a special showing for the musical. I was wondering...”

***No way, Hailey!***

“I thought, since we’ll be, you know, together on the stage, that maybe we could watch it together, and you know, take notes.”

***Take notes?***

She ducked her head, giggling nervously.

“Ha, yeah. Dumb, I guess. But look, I understand if you’re busy, and I know things are different in the movie, but Ty thought it would be a good idea to get them to show it for

everyone so, I don't know, we could build excitement for the play."

***Tyquan?***

"Yes." It just came out before she could stop it. "I don't think I have any plans."

***What are you doing!?***

"Should I bring a notepad and pen?" she joked. The butterflies were floating around in her stomach again, and she had to bite her lip hard to prevent another giggle from escaping.

"Well, I mean." His face was growing nearly fire engine red. "You don't really need a notebook, I just—"

"HAILEY!" Emilio's shout interrupted them. "Watch these new dance moves that I'm going to put into that final number!" The two laughed as Emilio stomped on a table. His bulky body nearly tipped the wooden base with each move. "I'm going to make them remember the day Emilio Cortez became a clock!"

***What a crazy guy.***

Emilio grabbed Bridgette and pulled her up beside him.

"Will you look at that," she said, spinning back to Gunner.

"Yeah," he said distractedly. He seemed uninterested in the rest of the room. His eyes were fixed squarely on her.

"Hailey?" The voice made her jump in surprise. "Can a father have a dance with his daughter?"

***JT!***

The music was now blaring, and Andy and Juliana had begun dancing nearby.

She playfully questioned Gunner, who tipped his finger and bowed.

"I would never want to get between a daughter and her father."

She dipped into a soft bow and then allowed JT to lead her into the dining area, which was full of dancing students.

***What am I doing?***

Instead of the typical dread, she was giggling as they hopped up on a table. Even though the entire room was now watching them, she could not help but continue to laugh.

“What is that!?” she shrieked as JT broke into a dance.

“Just putting a little Jefferson Taylor into it!” Again, she could not control her laughter. She peered out into the crowd and found Gunner standing with his sister, still staring directly at her with a large grin.

***He looks so happy.***

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Tyquan jumped onto the table beside her. He put his hand around her shoulders and pulled her close. “For those of you who may not know, I present to you our fearless onstage leader.” He dipped and kissed her hand. “Our lead!”

He spun her as a loud cheer echoed through the pizza parlor.

***Our lead...***

Hearing that had brought her so much anxiety over the last few weeks. The thought of going out on a stage again, without her mother and in this strange town, had seemed unbearable. But as she was spun once more by Tyquan, those anxieties melted away.

***This is fun.***

When Juliana and Andy joined them, the table nearly buckled. The entire group broke into laughter as they froze and held each other.

“I told you that you would have fun!” her best friend shouted, and they all waved to Gunner, still watching from below.

***Fun.***

The grin on her face now matched his.



*I'm having fun.*

# CHAPTER 14

**“What a game last night, Pioneer fans. Four straight wins have South Mountain right back in position for a playoff spot. Another fantastic performance by Tyquan Carter and Gunner Weston, but the real story was young Malcolm Bailey. Coach Bianchi has already said that the young sophomore will be playing more to give Carter a rest. With the way Weston, Andy Green, and Jefferson Taylor are playing, a rested Tyquan Carter will only add to opposing teams’ nightmares. You have to believe that Coach Bianchi is smiling at home, knowing that his seniors are setting the example for this team to compete for the championship.”**

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“Why does everyone listen to that guy?” Hailey asked plaintively. Gunner glanced back at her as he grabbed the popcorn from the carhop.

“Honestly,” he said, handing the money over, “I have no idea.” He laughed and turned off the radio.

“Keep the change,” Gunner said to the young man.

“Thanks, Mr. Weston!” The carhop sprinted off so fast that the gravel of the parking lot kicked up into the air behind him.

*Mr. Weston?*

Gunner paused.

*Me?*

He put the sodas into the cup holder.

“I hope this is OK?” he asked.

“Are you kidding!?” Hailey snatched the bag Gunner extended to her. “I love popcorn!”

He enjoyed the giddy excitement she sometimes showed over small things, and he struggled to pull his eyes off her, even as the screen started to flash up front.

***Man, she looks great tonight.***

Gunner was used to girls wearing ridiculous outfits or too much makeup when they went out.

***She's so different.***

Tonight, Hailey was wearing a tee shirt and jeans with the Converse sneakers he had become accustomed to seeing on her. She seemed comfortable, relaxed, and in control.

“When you said we were going to take notes,” she coyly pointed to the back seat, “I didn’t think you were serious.”

***Shit!***

“Oh, sorry!” He threw his body over the center console, tossing the notepads to the back floorboard. “That’s actually from the film session this morning. Your dad,” he tilted his head toward her, “likes to walk through the tape with me before we go over it with the team.”

She cocked her head at the mention of her dad, and he could tell that she had been waiting to tease him.

“Oh yeah?” Her tone was now extra playful, and she glanced away after putting a piece of popcorn in her mouth. “How was that today?”

***Awkward!***

Coach Bianchi had not mentioned the time Gunner had been spending with Hailey; however, his comments about trusting Gunner with his most precious plays, as well as his warnings about living up to expectations, had been crystal clear.

“Well, you know—”

She broke into a laugh before he could say any more.

***Man, that laugh.***

“My dad really is a nice guy, he just...” He watched her eyes flash in the dim lighting of the parking lot. “He is just not a fan of me going anywhere with a boy.”

***I knew this was a bad idea!***

Gunner choked and took a quick sip of his drink to clear his throat.

“Well, I’m sure he’s been fighting them off for years, so he’s probably a pro by now.”

He coughed softly and turned his attention to the screen.

“Actually,” she said quietly, “this is probably the first time I have been out alone with a guy, ever.”

***What!?***

He froze, his drink still cradled in his hand. That had to be a lie. No way had a girl like Hailey never been on a date.

“You don’t believe me?” she asked, her voice going a little higher as she again read him like a book.

“I just...” His heart sped up as she bit her lower lip.

***Oh, please don’t do that.***

“Gunner!” He jumped at a knock on the front window, sloshing soda on his leg.

“Mr. Chen,” he exclaimed, hastily setting down his drink. “How, um, how are you?”

“Please, Gunner, call me ‘Todd.’” The man smiled wide and leaned against the car. “But I am good. Well, we are all good, but I wanted to see how your mom and sister are doing?”

“They’re doing well, Mr. Chen–Todd. Better by the day.”

***And I really mean that.***

The man nodded but remained standing by the car, seeming to prepare himself for a conversation.

***What is going on?***

Gunner leaned a little closer to the window. While Mr. Chen always offered a warm smile, he was typically soft-spoken and rarely said much, even though he was one of the main faces of the Football Boosters Club. Lately, though, he had looked tired. The night they discussed the fundraiser and

scoreboard had led to a few disagreements that Gunner was hoping had blown over.

“Gunner, I just wanted to say how proud I am of you.”

***Woah.***

Gunner took a deep breath and peered up at the man who had once scolded him for breaking his window.

“What you and the team have done, you guys have been a beacon of light for this town.” Gunner’s mouth was becoming dry and grainy. “And this!” Mr. Chen exclaimed, pointing to the screen. “The fact that you got the drive-in to play this movie! My daughter is so excited!”

“Thank you for saying that, Mr. Ch–Todd. We’re just trying to take it game by game and see what happens. The movie, well, that was Ty’s idea.”

The innocent face of Mr. Chen’s son, sporadically lit by the movie screen, was now running full speed toward the car.

“Gunner! Gunner!” yelled Timmy.

“T-unit!” responded Gunner, smiling. He leaned out to high-five the little boy. “How are you, dude?”

The boy grinned, showing a few missing teeth.

“Good! Hey, guess what!? I made a pass like you today, Gunner! You should have seen it!” The young boy was strangling his South Mountain Football tee shirt. “I made this pass to the endzone—it was so cool.” Gunner reached out for a quick fist bump. “I mean, we didn’t score the touchdown, but it was still cool.”

Gunner leaned out toward the boy.

“Well, at least you went for it. Like my dad used to say, it’s not about the result, only the fact that you took the chance in the moment.”

Mr. Chen, who appeared less interested in this conversation, was now peeking into the car toward Hailey.

“Todd, this is Hailey Bianchi,” Gunner said.

“Well.” Mr. Chen was now smirking. “Nice to meet you, Hailey.”

She waved from the passenger’s seat.

“Hailey,” he said, drawing nearer to the window, “I have heard a lot about you. My family is extremely excited to see you star in the play.”

“Aww, thank you so much.” Her voice, soft and kind, twisted Gunner into a pretzel. His eyes stayed on her as she insisted on Mr. Chen’s daughter coming over for a quick chat.

***Stop staring!***

The little girl, who joined her brother, helped distract Gunner a little.

“Sarah.” Mr. Chen paused and shushed her down before she leaped through the window. “This is Hailey, and she is going to be playing the lead in the musical this year!”

The little girl’s eyes went wide.

“Really?” she said, leaning toward them.

“Really,” Hailey said softly, pushing closer so her face became completely illuminated in the drive-in light.

***My god, she is gorgeous.***

His eyes were wandering out of control, and he had to fight with all his energy to pull them back up to her face.

“Are you going to wear the fancy dress and dance?” Sarah squeaked.

“I am, and I cannot wait for you to see it,” Hailey responded kindly. Gunner gripped the steering wheel for support.

***That voice...***

“Well...” Mr. Chen realized the previews were ending. “I think it’s time we get ready for the movie. It was great seeing you, Gunner.” His daughter waved, even as she fought to stay next to the window. “And Hailey, it was such a pleasure meeting you as well.”

She nodded back politely, saying the same.

“Oh, and Gunner.” Mr. Chen spun as his daughter ran back to their car with her brother. “I spoke with Ms. Summers the other day. My hardware store will be supplying all of the materials for the props and set this year.”

***Really?***

Gunner tilted his head in surprise.

“I didn’t know that was an option.”

“It should have been a long time ago. Your father always wanted me to join in as a sponsor, and for years I pushed it off. Now,” he offered a soft smile, “I think it’s my turn to step up and take one of those moments he always spoke about.”

***Jeez.***

All this talk of his father had taken Gunner slightly aback.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Chen,” he finally responded quietly.

“Please, Gunner! ‘Todd’ from now on.”

He remained still for a few seconds, as if he wanted to say something else, before he finally turned back toward his car.

“He seems nice,” Hailey said.

“Oh, yeah, he’s great! But I’m, I’m sorry for that. I, um, it’s just hard to get any privacy and I—”

“Yeah, I think you said that before.” She cut him off, but her grin was playful. The movie title flashed across the screen, and music began to play. “I actually thought it was quite cute.”

He watched her slide back in the seat as the movie began to play.

***Cute?***

He smirked to himself, no longer thinking about his father or Mr. Chen.

***Who would have thought?***

She dropped a piece of popcorn into her mouth, quickly darting her eyes between him and the screen.

*Cute.*

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*He's different tonight.*

Hailey's mind was all over the place. The interest Gunner was showing in the movie and the character he would portray in the musical were unexpected topics for this date.

*Wait! This is not a date!*

She inhaled sharply, her smile wavering.

"Sorry." He must have recognized her change in demeanor. "I'm rambling."

He nervously lowered his head and put a few pieces of popcorn in his mouth.

"No, it's OK." She tried to play it off. "I just can see why my dad likes to watch the games with you first. You are so..." He turned back to her, his face pink, even in the dim light.

*Cute.*

"Detail-oriented."

She had blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. Well, the second thing. She grabbed her soda and took a sip for support. There was something that kept bringing her back to his green eyes, even as the screen continued to dance in front of them.

*What is it about him tonight?*

She took a deep breath, trying to collect herself after the near slip-up.

*I mean...*

Hailey waited until he was distracted by another carhop. This young boy was waving so hard to him that he nearly fell to the pavement.

*He really never gets time alone.*



She was starting to understand how much pressure this town put on Gunner and the rest of the football players. The way that man spoke earlier, it was like the town needed them to win every game or the world would end. It just seemed unfair to her that they were turning to Gunner for answers at this time.

***He needs his space.***

“So,” he said, adjusting closer to her after the boy left, “I have to ask. Where did you learn to sing?”

***Oh boy.***

Her hands gripped the armrests.

“I mean, I’ve been working on the musicals for the last few years,” he continued. “You, though, you’re amazing. No way you learned how to do that in some performing arts school.”

She looked out the passenger window, unsure what to say.

“I’m sorry,” he continued lamely. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

***Just tell him it was your school.***

She exhaled shakily, readjusted her legs, searched in the darkness outside the window for courage.

“It was...” she said slowly and quietly. “It was my mom.”

***What are you doing?***

“My mom taught me how to sing.” The seat squeaked as he twisted more fully toward her. “She was the one who put me in the Performing Arts Academy in California, too, when I was young.”

***Why did I tell him that?***

Her converse sneakers were bouncing against the floor, and she stiffened her legs to stop the movement. The images she had held tight began to run free in her head.

“Wow.” His voice was soft. “She must have been talented as well, if she taught you to sing.”

***She was so talented.***

Hailey swallowed hard; the memories of her mother moving about onstage, glowing and graceful, outperformed the movie they were watching.

“She was.” Hailey had not spoken to anyone outside the family about her mother since she had died, but for some reason, tonight, she felt like she needed to talk. “She actually performed on Broadway in New York when she was younger.”

Gunner’s mouth dropped open.

“When we moved to California before she got sick—” Hailey cleared her throat. “She performed in the Broadway Theatre District, and she was...she was amazing.”

***Just stop talking.***

She could feel a tear welling in her eye. She grabbed her soda again.

“I see.” Gunner played briefly with the steering wheel in front of him. “I’m sorry about your mom.” She stiffened. The straw remained against her lip, but she didn’t drink. “I’m sure it was tough on your family. She sounds like a wonderful woman.”

***She was.***

Hailey finally found the strength to turn toward him, still fighting back tears as she nodded.

“My dad...was the one that kept us together when it happened.”

His green eyes locked onto hers and did not let go. This time, however, she did not look away. His gaze, which in the past had made her uncomfortable when it was this direct, was a welcome distraction from her feelings.

“Your dad is a great coach and, from what I’ve seen, a great dad.”

***He sure is.***

“Well,” she could feel his tension growing, “from what I hear, your dad was great too.”

His leg began to shake, like hers had done a few minutes before, and he turned his head away. The two sat in silence, the movie playing on in the distance. Hailey watched his shoulders rise as he took two deep breaths.

“My dad.” He finally turned back to her. “My dad would have liked you.”

***Wow, OK.***

She finally took a quick sip of her drink, trying to process what he had just said.

“My dad liked people who were kind, who always wanted to help,” he continued. She shifted in her seat. “I can see what you’re doing for everyone in the musical. How you have patience with us, even though we’re not really very good at this whole thing. I know, I know it’s probably tough for you—”

“Gunner,” she instinctively interrupted him, “you’ve all been great! A little unorthodox, sure, but you guys have so much confidence, and you work so hard.”

She watched him peek up at the screen, a smile returning to his face.

“And whether you want to believe it or not, you and the rest of those guys are talented.”

His eyes softened, and his shoulders straightened.

“Can I ask you something?” He leaned in closer, making her heart pick up speed. “Why didn’t you want to be the lead until I joined?”

***Oh crap. Just move on—talk about the movie.***

“I, umm...” She could see the uncertainty on his face when she glanced at him.

***I hate this.***

She searched for a way out, a way to move past this subject without hurting him.

***But he is just being nice.***

His eyes were apologetic when she glanced back at him again. When he eventually turned to the screen, his question unanswered, she could see that thing in them that was so familiar.

***Pain.***

He was good at hiding it, but the hurt was still evident. Talking about his father was hard, and it was probably too much for him right now. It was raw, and she knew how that felt. She wished she could say something to make it better. Tell him how much of a difference he was making, not just by playing football but by bringing joy to everyone around him.

This town was smiling again. She could see it when she went to school. She could see it on Tony at the pizza parlor, Ms. Summers at musical practice, and Mr. Chen by the car. Her father was smiling, her sister was smiling, and she was smiling. She knew he would not believe her. He was not ready for that, and she understood.

***Do something.***

“My sophomore year in California.” It all just started to come out. “I was picked to play the lead in our school’s musical.”

***Just say it.***

“A sophomore had never done that at my school, so I was so excited. I went out, and I sang and danced my heart out.” She actually smiled, remembering her mother in the crowd with a wide grin on her face. “And then...and then my mom took a turn. She, um, she passed a few months after the performance.”

His head lowered, and he groaned quietly.

“My mom, she got to see me perform, and that was all I ever wanted. I got to star in front of her, and I knew she was proud of me.” Hailey couldn’t help the tear that fell down her cheek. “I guess, I guess I just wanted that to be my last performance. A performance for her, one that I could keep with me. So I quit theatre the next semester.”

She had no idea how he would process everything she had just told him. She really had no idea why she had just blurted all of it out, but she felt like she had to finally tell someone. Gunner would at least understand a little, and that made it easier.

“Ms. Summers spoke with a few of my old teachers and wanted me to take the role here. I guess I was just being scared and selfish.”

***There, I said it.***

The car was silent as the onscreen figures danced on.

“Yeah, well,” he finally broke in with a soft mumble, “I guess I kind of know what that’s like.”

At first, she tilted her head toward him. Her mind replayed his words a few times before a laugh escaped.

“I guess you do.” Her body loosened as she settled back into the seat.

“You know, you didn’t have to do it.” His green eyes had returned to her. “But I’m glad you did.”

***Me too.***

She bit her lip, trying to prevent a large grin of relief from spreading across her face.

The two fell back into a comfortable silence as the movie played.

***I did it.***

She relaxed even more into the leather. The sense of dread, the swirling hole in her stomach, that she had feared would appear when she spoke about her mother and why she had refused to go back on the stage had not arrived.

Hailey knew all along that she was being selfish, but it was the thought of losing the vision of her mother in the crowd that haunted her the most. She wanted that image of strength, not the one of her in bed, sick and unable to move.

***I was wrong.***

Her mother's beautiful smile was still crystal clear. Her pride as she applauded the final number percolated in Hailey's mind. Talking about it, facing the reality that she was gone, had not taken that away.

"So." Gunner shifted and played with the steering wheel. "What's going on at this part? They're reading books and stuff?"

The scene on the screen moved into a courtyard, but Hailey was more focused on the young man by her side.

***He is so different tonight.***

He was anxious and nervous. The normally in control, confident quarterback was suddenly unsure.

"Well," she said, leaning on the center console, "this is the point in the movie where she is starting to see him for more than just his appearance. She is starting to see his other qualities: how sweet and kind he can be."

He nodded, but his eyes remained on the screen.

"I guess they both are, really, at this moment."

He smiled wider and turned toward her.

***He has such an amazing smile.***

"So, he's starting to change too?"

"Well," she couldn't help but giggle, "he is starting to feel something that he hasn't felt in a long time. Something he probably thought he wouldn't ever feel again."

***Why am I doing this?***

"I guess..." His full attention shifted to her, and she once more froze under his green eyes. "I guess I'll have to find a way to put my own spin on this scene when we practice."

***He is so good at this.***

Her face went hot, and her stomach fluttered. As she reached for her soda, she felt something warm brush against her hand.

“I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, his face full of panic. “I wasn’t paying attention and went for my drink. I didn’t mean...”

While his apology rambled on, his hand remained on hers.

“It’s OK,” she whispered, not pulling away.

***It’s really OK.***

It took him a second, but he finally tightened his grasp. The heat on her cheeks intensified as she sank deeper into the seat of the car. Even though she looked back at the screen, she knew she could not play it off. Her ears were ringing, and her heart was pumping so fast that she thought it might come out of her chest. Tomorrow, she would probably laugh at the irony of the song that was playing on the screen, but not tonight. Tonight, her entire body was weightless, dancing, and the only thing that kept her from floating out of the car was his hand on hers.

# CHAPTER 15

**“It is homecoming weekend, and tonight, we are so excited to bring you the final regular season game for the South Mountain Pioneers! After a tough start, the Pioneers now ride a seven-game winning streak, and with a win tonight, they can guarantee themselves a spot in the district playoffs. They will be playing winless Grove City, who sits at 0-9 and should be no problem for this red-hot Pioneer team. However, before kickoff, we have a special surprise ceremony on the field: The local Boosters have created a memory plaque for Coach Weston. They intend to have the plaque placed at the entrance of the stadium so we can all remember Coach Weston’s contributions, not just to this football team but also to the surrounding community.”**

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“G.” Ty punched Gunner in the shoulder and snapped him out of his trance. “You’re up.”

***Right.***

Gunner exhaled and peered out to where his mom and sister stood in the middle of the field. The plaque they held glistened in the lights, and it took every ounce of strength he had to walk out to them.

***Let’s just get this over with.***

He locked eyes with his mom as he moved into a slow jog. Her smile, while vibrant, held a stillness that he knew meant she was forcing her cheeks to stay wide.

***Just smile and wave.***

He followed his internal instructions. His sister did the same with her pom poms as he finally drew up next to his family.

“Hey guys,” Gunner said softly. “Was this you, Mom?”



A tightness in his chest was making it hard for him to catch his breath.

“No, sweetheart, this was all the Boosters.”

***Of course.***

Gunner stood quietly as the ceremony continued and some of the local Boosters spoke about his father’s accomplishments. Near the end, he glanced up into the crowd and found Hailey, who was sitting with Juelz and the rest of the musical cast. They were surrounded by other students, but the matching musical shirts made them easy to spot.

***I wish I was up there with her.***

Her eye caught his as the ceremony finished, but he quickly looked away.

“Gunner.” Principal Davis leaned over to him with the microphone. “Would you like to say anything?”

***No.***

He froze. The face of his father stared back at him, making his mind go completely blank.

“I’ll say something.” His mother ran defense, moving the microphone away from his face.

***Thank you, Mom.***

The stadium lights were roasting him, and even though the air was cool and brisk, Gunner could feel sweat trickling down his forehead. His mom’s voice was nothing more than a murmur in his ears, and as he looked down at Peyton, he could see her starting to tear up by his side.

***Be strong.***

He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her close just as Principal Davis’ voice began to project over the speakers.

“Thank you to the entire Weston family. You are truly a pillar of this community. We know that as long as you are with us, Daniel’s legacy will live on!” Gunner’s arms were shaking, and his sister’s eyes peered up at him as he tried to play it off. “Now, let’s play some football!”

The roar from the crowd sounded muffled.

*What's happening?*

“Gunner...” His sister tried to say something to him, but he cut her off with a hug.

“Got to go.” It was all he was able to say.

“Gunner—”

“Love you, Mom.” He was not about to let his mother say anything. The tightness in his chest was so intense that he thought it might strangle him.

The jog to the sidelines seemed like it took hours. Each step was like quicksand, and he fought to drag his cleats closer to the group waiting for him.

“Gunner.” Coach Bianchi was the first to greet him. “You OK, son?”

*Just breathe.*

Gunner nodded and threw his helmet on. While the stares of his teammates were hot on his neck, it was his coach’s pre-game speech that tightened his muscles even more.

*It's always the same speech.*

“G?” Ty slapped his helmet as they finally took the field. “You good?”

*No.*

A tear he had been fighting back since he saw the plaque finally escaped onto his cheek.

**“Well, Pioneer fans, if you thought this homecoming game was going to just be a celebration and easy victory, you were wrong. The Raiders of Grove City have played hard and are pushing the Pioneers. South Mountain holds a slim 21-17 lead. Tyquan Carter has had a fantastic game, running for three touchdowns while carrying this offense. Gunner Weston, meanwhile, has struggled tonight, looking more like the early-season quarterback we thought was in the past.”**

**Coach Bianchi has his team huddled for what will be a pivotal fourth down and two. He can punt the ball and see if his defense can close the game out, or he can go for it and win it on this play. The Raiders have no timeouts left, and the ball is at the South Mountain forty-five-yard line. It is decision time for Coach Bianchi.”**

“Let’s go for it!” Ty shouted next to Gunner. “It’s only two yards, and I know I can get it.”

***We should punt.***

“Gunner?” Coach Bianchi turned to him, as did all the eyes in the huddle. “What do you think?”

***Why are you asking me?***

He tugged on the inside of his shoulder pads. The bright lights made him squint as he shrugged and refused to make eye contact.

“Coach.” Ty jumped forward. “We got this. Just give me the ball. I’ll get it.”

***Stupid.***

A hush fell over the huddle, and Gunner continued to avoid his coach, who was clearly waiting for him to speak up.

“OK.” Coach Bianchi’s voice was less than convinced. “Let’s win the game. Ty, we are going to run Gun Right 22 quick trap.”

The rest of the team fell in line.

“Gunner!” His coach grabbed his facemask.

“I got it, Coach. I’ll get it to Ty.” He jerked away, leaving no time for any other conversation before he pressed onto the field.

***Get it to Ty.***

The Nike cleats on Gunner’s feet were a blur as he willed them toward the ball. He forced himself to look up and find Emilio, who had just set into position. He was struggling to focus. The silver and black jerseys of the other team were

shifting in and out of his field of vision as they shouted out signals.

***Just give the ball to Ty.***

Gunner's heart started to beat faster. A final deep inhale gave him enough breath to call out the cadence. His hands shook in front of him.

**“OK, ladies and gentlemen, Coach Bianchi is going for the win. You have to love the aggressiveness, but if they do not make this, Grove City will have a chance to knock South Mountain out of the playoffs!”**

**Weston calls out his cadence and looks over the line. He takes the snap—Oh no! Weston fumbles the snap! The ball is on the ground! Weston picks it up and runs to the right side. He has two Grove City defenders chasing him. Weston looks down the field and just throws one deep! What is he doing!?! He takes a huge hit as the ball flutters down the field, and it is...CAUGHT! It is CAUGHT! Andy Green, with a fantastic catch! Andy Green just saved the game and Gunner Weston! What an incred—hold up folks. Gunner Weston is still down on the field as the Pioneers begin to celebrate. He is rolling around in pain, and it looks like it's his shoulder. This is not good news for South Mountain, as they may have won this game but potentially could have just lost their starting quarterback.”**

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Hailey shifted nervously. The hanging lights reflected off the linoleum tile under her feet.

***Please be OK.***

The rest of the boys were arguing nearby, and Tyquan was pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself, almost out of control.

“We should have just punted the ball, man. I mean, we would have stopped them! Why did I have to open my mouth? He didn't look right tonight! I knew something was wrong!”

He banged his fists against the wall, causing Hailey to jump in her seat.

“Hey, Ty, come on, man.” JT moved in close and wrapped up the bulky running back, who was breathing heavily.

“Man! If, what if, man, what if he’s done?!”

Her heart was in her throat as the concern spread to each of the faces in the waiting room.

“We...we will make it work, Ty.” Emilio’s normally upbeat nature was somber as Andy put his arm around him.

“This is what we have worked for since we were six, man! He put everything into this!” Tyquan turned to her. “He gave everything for this chance!”

*Is he crying?*

She had been at the hospital since the end of the game. The entire team had shown up, but her father had sent them all home, except the four captains.

She had a feeling, like Tyquan, that something was not right. Gunner had not played like his normal self, and when he started rolling on the ground in pain, she knew something was seriously wrong.

“This can’t be how it ends!” Tyquan was up against the wall now, tears streaming down his face. “We were supposed to do this together! We were supposed to win state!”

She buried her head in her hands and took a deep breath.

*Please be OK, Gunner.*

Maybe to her, it was just a stupid game. To these boys, though, it was something different. They were playing for something so much more than just a trophy.

Her father once said that a football team was like a family. Now, after moving to this town and getting to know them all, she was starting to understand. These guys were Gunner’s brothers, and just like her, they had watched him writhe on the ground, screaming in pain. They had been together since they were little kids, working toward one common goal. A goal that might now be taken away from one of them.

“Gentlemen,” her father’s voice boomed into the waiting room, making them all jump.

“Coach!” Tyquan ran over to him. “How is he? Is he going to be OK? Can he play?”

Her father straightened and paused.

“Well, it’s a pretty bad sprain to his shoulder—his non-throwing shoulder.” He glanced over at Hailey briefly. “He’s in a lot of pain right now, and we may have to limit his defensive snaps, but,” the rest of the boys leaned close, “he should still be able to play quarterback for us in the playoffs.” A collective sigh of relief filled the room. “As long as,” her father continued, trying to hold back a smile, “he can play through the pain and we keep him from getting hit too much.”

Emilio quickly launched himself to the front.

“I promise, Coach, the boys and I up front, we won’t let anyone touch him!”

Her dad laughed.

It was easy to see how much her father cared about the players in front of him. His smile, the way he spoke to them, and the genuine concern he showed made that clear.

### ***Family.***

However, it was the way the boys were reacting that widened her grin. The fist bumps and laughter, the inside jokes, allowed her to relax in the plastic seat she had been hunched in all night.

“Can we see him?” Andy’s question brought Hailey to her feet.

“He’s pretty shaken up. I think this scared him a bit, and he’s still in pain. He told me to tell you guys to go home, and he’ll text you later.”

Their eyes turned to her as Tyquan made his way over.

“You take care of my boy for me, OK, fearless leader?”

***Wait!?***

“We’ll see you at the dance tomorrow.”

He tapped her shoulder, and the others did the same before Emilio pulled her tight.

“Thanks for being here for him.”

***Me!?***

She tensed slightly. A weight fell on her shoulders as the boys walked out together.

“Hails.” Her father motioned for her to follow.

***Oh boy.***

She made her way down the hallway, trying to collect her thoughts after the crazy night. She had not mentioned anything to her father about the time she and Gunner were spending together, but he had seemed OK with the drive-in and the late practices.

***Did Gunner ask for me?***

Gunner’s mother and sister greeted them when they arrived at his door.

“Hailey!” Peyton shouted before nearly tackling her.

“Hey.” She had to steady after nearly toppling over. “How is he doing?”

“I don’t know.” Peyton peered up at her with tears in her eyes. “The doctor is just finalizing some things, and Gunner wanted to get dressed.”

“Hailey.” Mrs. W. waved. “Thanks for sticking around.”

She nodded. A nearby nurse gave them the OK to step in.

“Gunner, sweetheart?” His mother’s voice was soft as she opened the curtain.

***Oh my!***

Hailey spun away. Gunner was lying on the bed. His shirt was off, and a big bag of ice sat on his left shoulder. She took a deep breath before turning back to an image that she had thought about many times since they had started their late practices.

***Gunner.***

Well, not exactly. Any other time, she would have been drawn to his toned, athletic body. However, right now, she was pulled directly into his eyes. His blank, lost stare into the overhead lights was a familiar one.

***So much pain.***

“Gunner, sweetie. You should put your shirt on so we can go.”

Hailey had forgotten about her father, who was now leaning against the door, clearly uncomfortable.

“Gunner!” Peyton screamed. She sprinted over to hug him.

“Jesus, Peyton!” He lurched forward as the bag of ice shifted under her.

“Sorry!” She jumped back.

He stood up slowly, moving toward the window while holding the bag of ice to his shoulder. He tried to laugh, but it sounded more like a groan.

“It’s okay. You damn near hit me harder than that guy on that field tonight.” He paused, staring blankly out the window.

“I’m sorry, Gunner. I just...” Peyton took a step closer, trying to make her way around the bed.

“Look, just, just be careful.” He shook his head, and his voice sharpened. “Doc says I need to rest up for a bit. You can’t just be running up and hugging like you always do.”

***Oh no, Gunner.***

Peyton’s shoulders instantly dropped.

“Gunner, now I know you are hurting, but that is no way—”

“What, Mom? She is always leaping at me like a crazy person. I just can’t have that right now with my—”

Peyton stomped her foot, startling Hailey. She pushed forward angrily, her light brown hair whipping as she shouted.

“Well, excuse me, Gunner!” Hailey nervously started playing with her fingers. “Excuse me for worrying about my



brother! A few hours ago, you were lying on the football field, not moving! I'm sorry if I was scared and just happy to see that you were OK!"

She twirled and stormed to the other side of the room, huffing loudly as she crossed her arms.

***I should not be here for this.***

Hailey's father quietly exited, but for some reason, she remained.

"Gunner, you need to apologize to your sister. Now. She was just worried about you. I mean, we all were."

His mother came close and put her hand on his bare back, causing him to flinch.

"Yeah, well." He turned toward them and finally made eye contact with Hailey. "I'm fine, so everyone can just, you know, stop worrying."

***He is not fine.***

He threw his shirt on the bed, leaning down while trying to remove the ice.

"Sweetheart, let me help." His mother grabbed the bag, the pressure making him grimace in pain.

"Damn, Mom!"

Hailey jumped back at his loud, echoing shriek.

"I'm sorry, Gunner! I just—"

"Stop talking to Mom like that." Peyton had taken a step in their direction, and the two locked eyes.

"Whatever, P. Let's just go home." He appeared to have understood the warning from his sister. "I'm tired, and I don't want to be in this damn place anymore."

He leaned against the side of the bed, working hard to get his shirt over his head.

"You know, Gunner," Peyton's voice went cold as she stomped to the door, "no matter what happened in the game, whether he won or lost..." Gunner's eyes shifted to the floor,

as if he knew what was coming. “Dad never acted like you. He never acted like a selfish jerk, like you.”

***Oh no, Peyton.***

Hailey gritted her teeth. Her father was motioning from outside for her to join him.

“Peyton!” Gunner’s mother took off after his sister, sprinting through the door and leaving them behind.

***Say something.***

“You should go,” he finally said. “No need to stick around anymore.”

Her heart dropped.

“Hails.” Her dad motioned again for her to join him.

***Right.***

She did not speak. Instead, she merely took one more look at Gunner, at the pain still washed across his face. She wanted to stay. In fact, it took every ounce of energy that she had to walk out of that room and not say anything to him in response. However, staying would mean that they were something more than just friends.

***And we are not.***

Hailey knew now that she wanted more. She wanted to help, to show him how strong he really was, but he was clearly not ready for it.

An overwhelming sensation of helplessness hit her as she made her way down the hallway with her father. The rotating hole in her stomach returned in full force, and she had to inhale sharply to prevent a tear from running down her cheek.

***And he may never be ready for it.***

# CHAPTER 16

**“A very happy Homecoming Saturday evening to all of our listeners as we recover from what has been a wild twenty-four hours of Pioneer football. Some good news from Coach Bianchi today, as we were just informed that Gunner Weston only has a sprained left shoulder. He is expected to remain at quarterback but unfortunately will be held out of defensive snaps moving forward.**

**This new development will be yet another hurdle for this team to face as they prepare for the Pennsylvania State Playoffs and what will be a difficult path to the state championship. While we have been locally following our beloved South Mountain Pioneers, the rest of the state has been in awe of the powerhouse that is Allegheny Prep. The favorites to win the western side of the bracket and reach the state championship in Hershey have walked to an undefeated regular season. The starters for the Crusaders of Allegheny Prep have yet to play in the fourth quarter.....”**

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Gunner shook his head and turned off the radio. He adjusted in the seat, watching his friends as they arrived around the grove. They were all smiling, dressed in a rainbow of suits as they danced on the lawn.

“Gunner, sweetheart. Are you coming for pictures?”

His mom’s voice surprised him, and he jerked forward. A small grimace of pain flitted across his face as he grabbed at his coat, his shoulder still tight.

*Apologize.*

He kept his head down as his mother opened the driver-side door.

“Gunner, why didn’t you tell me about Emilio and that girl from the musical? They are so cute together.”

She sat down beside him, leaving the door open.

***You can do this.***

Gunner glanced out the window at Emilio, who was gingerly putting a corsage on Bridgette's hand.

"I think the bigger question is, why hasn't Emilio knocked out AG for asking Juelz tonight?"

He actually made himself snicker with that comment, and his mother joined in, pointing out that Ty had brought two girls tonight instead of one.

"Well, you know Ty." Although he wanted to join in on the fun, Gunner was unable to hold his voice steady. The tightness in his chest was making it difficult to take deep breaths, and he was not sure if it was the pain in his shoulder or the guilt from the night before that was making him struggle.

"I also know my son." His mom read him like a book and turned in the seat toward him. "And I know when he has something on his mind."

***OK.***

His face began to heat up, and he started to replay everything that had been said in the hospital the night before. He briefly caught a glimpse of his sister. He exhaled as he took in her radiant smile and grown-up appearance.

"I wanted to apologize for last night, for everything I said, Mom. I was an idiot and jerk. Peyton was right."

***That felt better.***

His mom's eyes were soft and nurturing as she put her hand on his cheek.

"Oh Gunner, I think everybody said some things last night that they didn't mean."

He straightened his jacket, another grimace twisting his face.

"No, Mom. Peyton was right. I just, I mean, how do you do it?"

She squinted, confused by his question.

“How do you move on every day? How do you go through every day and stay so strong?”

At first, she didn't answer. It was as if she were playing out what to say in her head. However, after a few seconds, she sighed and leaned toward him.

“Gunner, I will never move on from your father.” She grabbed his hands, causing his shoulders and chest to relax. “Your father was the man I loved, the man who brought me both of my babies. My two wonderfully strong babies that have grown up so much.”

***I'm not strong, Mom.***

He shook his head in disagreement.

“I don't know, Mom. I mean, some days I feel like...I feel like I'm fine, like I'm figuring this all out.” She squeezed his hand. “But then other days, like yesterday, seeing his face on that plaque, I just...I just feel like I'm lost again.”

He squeezed back.

“And what is wrong with that, Gunner?”

***What!?***

“You think I don't have bad days? Do you think Peyton doesn't have bad days? Sweetie,” she laughed and squeezed again, “I have more bad days than good days.”

He tilted his head, a shimmer overtaking her eyes as she continued.

“Most of the time, you are either at school, football practice, or musical practice. But,” she took her hand away and wiped her cheek, “I still cry.”

***Mom.***

“And that's OK, sweetie. It's OK to still miss him because you always will.”

***Always.***

“That means he will always be with you.” Her voice was steady, and he slumped back in his seat. “Gunner, I want you to look out into that grove right now. I want you to look at all of your friends, your sister.”

He stared out through the windshield. The people he had known his whole life were joking and dancing around in the grass.

“No matter what day you are having, no matter how bad it gets, they are there for you.” He felt her hand move his chin to face her. “Now, look at me.” Her soft, caring brown eyes were starting to overflow with tears. “Gunner, you can have bad days, bad weeks, bad months. That’s what makes you human.”

***I am human.***

“But never forget the people that are there for you, the ones that would help you no matter what.” Her voice went a little higher as she peered out into the grove. “Those boys would follow you anywhere; they would help you with whatever you needed.”

He chuckled quietly and glanced down at his shoes, which were glowing in the sunshine that leaked into the car.

“Trust me, I have seen you all get in trouble because of that. But they care about you very much.”

He took a deep breath, squeezing his mother’s hand again.

“And sometimes...” Gunner caught a glimpse of Juelz running away from Andy as a car pulled into the parking lot. “Sometimes, when you feel like everything is crumbling around you...when you are lost and can’t figure out who you are...”

***Hailey.***

He watched her move around the corner of the car and into the grassy grove.

***Wow.***

He swallowed hard, admiring how her golden dress fit her perfectly. The thin white sweater she wore lay smoothly over

her shoulders, and the fabric of her gown flowed gracefully to her knees.

***Beautiful.***

A matching ribbon was tied behind her ear, and as he watched her laugh, he could not help but admire her hazel eyes, which shimmered between strands of her brunette hair.

“...sometimes you find something you were not expecting.”

Gunner was trying to stay connected with his mother. However, Hailey’s necklace—her neck in general—drew him in as it flashed in the sun.

“I have watched my Gunner talk to a lot of girls, but never—” He jerked around in his seat. “But I have never seen you like this.”

***I know, and I hate it!***

His mother slid out the door.

“Gunner,” his mother said solemnly, “last night that girl waited at the hospital for you after everyone left. She watched as you suffered in that room and broke down. Today, she is still here for you.” He swallowed hard. “You are not dumb, sweetie. You know what that means.”

***That’s what scares me.***

He opened the door slowly. Hailey waved to them.

***It’s what REALLY scares me.***

He knew that had to mean something, and at that moment, he was sick and tired of guessing what it was.

***Enough of the games.***

He buttoned his jacket without grimacing and grabbed the corsage from the dashboard.

***I need her.***

He needed to be around her. If a friendship was all she wanted, then he was ready to accept it. He would accept whatever she wanted because, as he made his way toward her, a smile broke across his face. Not the forced smile he had

learned to put on over the last few months. A genuine smile. One that only Hailey could bring out of him, one that had his stomach warming with each step he took.

*I love this feeling.*

All his friends were ushering him in, but Hailey was all he could focus on as he approached.

*And I don't want to lose it.*

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“Hailey?”

*Shoot.*

“I’m sorry I was—”

Juliana put up her hand. She clearly recognized why Hailey was so distracted.

“I totally understand. He looks good tonight.” She smiled and tipped her head toward Gunner.

*Was I that obvious?*

Hailey blushed and grabbed the bottom of her dress, crossing her legs.

*But he does look—*

“Well, I’ll tell you who else looks good tonight...”  
Bridgette interrupted.

“If you say my brother, I’m going to scream.” Juliana jutted out her jaw. “Look, you can do whatever you want. But just so you know, my brother is an idiot and—”

Bridgette slapped her gently on the shoulder.

“He is not an idiot!” She chuckled as she moved to the other side of the table. “Your brother is actually quite sweet, and he is really cute when we work together. He tries so hard, and he really is getting good at his part. I love that—”

Juliana cut her off with a noise of disgust.

“Please.” She inhaled slowly, clearly annoyed. “I don’t want to hear this about my meathead of a brother.”



Hailey could tell the moment Juliana spotted Andy on the dance floor. Her whole demeanor changed.

“However, since you seem to love talking about him, I guess I’ll just have to step aside. If you will excuse me.” Juliana stood and winked at Hailey. “I think it’s time I start working on my dance routine with that hot-looking candlestick over there.”

Hailey and Bridgette both laughed as she sprinted away.

“I’m pretty sure they have like a ten-second dance routine.” Bridgette sat down and put her elbows on the table.

***If that!***

Hailey giggled once more. The music was loud, and she took a second to collect herself with a scan of the giant gymnasium. She found Gunner again. This time, he was talking to his sister near the drink table.

***I hope they are OK.***

She had not yet had a chance to speak with him about last night. And while Hailey and Peyton had taken pictures together in the grove, most of their conversation had been about the amazing outfit Gunner’s sister had picked for tonight.

The dark blue dress was a perfect complement to her eyes, and the way she had her light brown hair done was so tasteful that Hailey momentarily second-guessed her own choice.

“You look very pretty tonight,” Bridgette said, grabbing a cup of punch she had set down on the table.

***Me!?***

Hailey nervously smoothed out the cotton tablecloth and smiled.

“Thank you, Bridgette. I love your dress. The purple is wonderful on you.”

Bridgette’s face flashed a light pink.

“Coming from you, Hailey, that means a lot.”

***What!?***

“From me?”

Bridgette lowered her voice.

“You are so pretty, and you always look so amazing. And tonight, that dress and your hair. I mean, it just means a lot coming from someone like you.”

***Wow.***

Hailey was struggling to respond.

“Well, thank you. That means a lot, but you really do look amazing, Bridgette.”

Another song started to play, and the dance floor in front of them began to fill up.

“You know...” Bridgette seemed to be building up courage before she continued. “I wasn’t the most welcoming when I first met you.”

***Not really.***

Hailey glanced at the floor, thinking about the first few interactions they’d had.

“But I’m glad I got to know you. I’m glad your family moved here.”

***Oh, wow.***

Hailey exhaled. The bass of the song rocked the wood of the basketball court under her heels.

“Bridgette.” Hailey leaned over the table. “I never apologized to you for taking the lead. I should have spoken with you first, I just—”

“Please, Hailey.” Bridgette threw her head back, flicking her wrist. “That part was made for you. I have learned so much from watching you. And, to be honest,” she chuckled softly, “I was petrified to play that part.”

***Me too.***

Hailey let out a nervous laugh.

“I mean, all the lines and the dancing. And that dress!”

***Right.***

Hailey shifted in her seat and adjusted her own dress.

“But I know you will be great. Plus,” Bridgette’s eyes moved to Emilio, who was approaching the table, “you will have all of us with you on the stage.”

The bulky linebacker smiled and puffed out his chest. His suit was practically painted onto his muscular body.

“Excuse me.” He extended his large hand to Bridgette. “Can I please steal this beautiful senorita for a dance?”

Hailey bowed gracefully.

“Senorita.” He stuck out his arm, and Bridgette instantly grabbed it.

In seconds, they were out on the gym floor. More of the football players and musical cast began to join them, and Hailey could not help but grin as she watched the entire group together.

***You will have all of us.***

She repeated Bridgette’s words and pushed a strand of hair back from her face.

“I have to admit.” Gunner’s voice made her jump. “It’s still weird seeing Emilio with Bridgette. I wouldn’t have put those two together.”

He sat down, trying to hide the pain in his shoulder when he unbuttoned his jacket.

“Well...” She bit her lip and tried to prevent a girlish giggle from escaping. “I think it’s cute.”

She heard him chuckle as a new song kicked on, bringing more students to the floor.

“You coming?” Tyquan’s hand touched her shoulder as he ran past. “I need another partner out here that can dance!”

***How many dates does he have?***

She merely smiled and waved. A shrug was the last she saw of him before he was swallowed into a mass of students.

“Did he bring multiple dates tonight?” Hailey playfully questioned Gunner.

“Well, you know, it’s Ty.”

He leaned in closer as the music got louder.

*Oh boy.*

She took a deep breath. She could feel his stare.

“I’m sorry my mom wanted to take so many pictures at the grove,” he said, adjusting gingerly once more in the chair.

“Please!” She tried to keep the conversation light. “I don’t know who took more, your mom or my sister!”

He relaxed a bit, and a genuine smile as bright as the gymnasium lights grew across his face.

*That smile.*

“It was good seeing her tonight. I’m glad she came out.” His voice was soft, much different from the night before at the hospital.

“Yeah, I am glad she is going out more.”

*Very glad.*

He moved his hand over to hers without warning.

*Here we go.*

“I wanted to apologize for last night.” He squeezed gently, causing a tremor of electricity to run up her arm. “I was...I was not me, and I was a total jerk. I’m sorry.”

His eyes lowered, and she squeezed back.

“I know it was scary, with your shoulder, and how much football means to you. With this being your senior year, I can only—”

He squeezed tighter and moved in even closer. Her mouth snapped shut. She could smell the aroma of mint coming from his lips.

***He is so close.***

“It wasn’t that.” He was staring directly at her now, his green eyes dancing like grass in early spring. “I mean, I love football, and I would give anything to win with these guys.” He pointed out to the dance floor, where JT had pulled off his jacket and was twirling it around. “But last night, I just, I guess I’m trying to figure this whole thing out, trying to make it to the next day, you know?”

***I definitely know.***

She nodded and turned to face him so she could give him all her attention.

***Believe me, I know.***

After a brief pause, he put his hand on her knee, sending a chill through her body from his touch through the fabric.

“I guess I just had a bad day yesterday. I shouldn’t have taken it out on my family and, and you.” He looked down, now avoiding her eyes.

***Stop that, Gunner.***

She could not explain how, but her insides actually got hot. The fact that he was blaming himself, again, was something she could not bear.

***Help him.***

Hailey grabbed his hand again, moving her thumb over a fresh scar—one he must have picked up in the last game. Her worries from last night were gone. He was asking for help. And while he might not be particularly good at it, he was opening up to her and being vulnerable.

***Do something.***

“I know what it is like. To have bad days.” His eyes returned to her. “You will have more, but it gets easier.”

He stared for a few seconds before grabbing both her hands. He squeezed tightly, and she felt a warmth wash across her body.

“Well.” He came almost nose to nose with her. “They have gotten a lot easier since I met you.”

***Oh boy, he’s smooth, even when he’s being authentic.***

Her cheeks went hot, and she felt like she had just stepped out into a humid summer day.

There was no denying what he was saying to her at that moment, and as he squeezed her hand tighter, she felt the butterflies take over her body.

***I know what that look is.***

She had finally figured it out. What had pulled her in right away when they had met.

***He has so much strength.***

It was crystal clear now, and she could not believe she had missed it. She would do anything for him to see it himself, no matter how long it would take or how much he would fight it.

“I’m sick of playing this game, Hailey.” His face was determined, making her palms sweat. “I can’t do this anymore, and I’m too all over the place to be any good at it.” Hailey could feel her heart pumping faster. “I struggle each day to figure out what my next steps are and where I’m supposed to go. But as long as they lead to you, I know it’ll be a great day.”

***He lied; he is great at this.***

“If it’s friends that you want to be, I can be friends. I can be a great friend, and I can listen to you. I can be there for you when you get on that stage. I know how hard that is going to be, and I will not leave your side—”

She stopped him with another squeeze. And while her face was scorching hot, the butterflies pushed the words up her throat.

“Any day that I get to see you is a great day for me too, Gunner. However long it takes, I promise I will be here to help you figure everything out.”

***Wow, that was intense.***

It was as if the room stood still. He appeared to need time to take in what she had just said.

***Was that not right?***

She was about to adjust in her seat when he began to smile. His body relaxed, and at least for a few seconds, she felt like she was able to help with some of his pain.

***Wait!?***

Her head twisted as the next song started to play. She had been listening to this song on repeat for months, practicing.

“Did you do this?” she asked him, her cheeks burning.

The grin did not leave his face as he pointed to the DJ booth.

“No, but I have an idea who did.”

***Peyton Weston!***

His sister was giggling as she skipped away with her friends.

“Well.” He stood up and straightened his jacket without a wince. “I may not know where most of my steps will go each day, but I sure know the next few that I want to take.”

He bowed and tipped his finger toward the dance floor.

“Can I have this dance?”

Her legs were weak, but she slowly stood. She nodded, following him in step as they made their way out.

“I am assuming this is for practice purposes, possibly to take some notes?”

He laughed but did not answer as the lights began to dim, the song slowly getting louder. Even though the gymnasium was full of other students, it felt as if they had the whole building to themselves.

The music started to play louder as he extended his hand, making her blush even more as she intertwined her fingers with his. She had practiced the movements over and over in

her head, but tonight was the first time they were moving in-step together.

***He's been practicing.***

Their eyes locked as they began to step slowly around the wooden gymnasium floor. The smile refused to leave her face as they moved faster, his steps leading her. Finally, she felt her body release, and he spun her, never letting go of her hand.

“I hope you don't mind,” he whispered as he brought them together again. “But I think I'll only use my good shoulder tonight.”

She couldn't stifle a schoolgirl giggle, and he gently spun her again, grabbing her hands tight before she brought her head to his chest.

***Perfect.***

He smelled so pure, like a crisp autumn morning, and as she exhaled, she felt his chin rest on her head.

***This is perfect.***

She had sung the song over and over in her head while practicing, but not tonight. Tonight, she just let it play over them. The stares all around them were meaningless as they moved slowly together across the floor.



# CHAPTER 17

**“Well, Pioneer fans, the whole season comes down to the next twenty seconds. South Mountain has steamrolled through the first two playoff games, but tonight we have watched two evenly matched teams go head-to-head in the district championship. The Pioneers will have the ball on the Eagle Rock High thirty-yard line, with a fourth down and trailing 28-24. Coach Bianchi has relied heavily on Tyquan Carter, who has been spectacular in the playoffs, including two more touchdowns tonight. However, it looks like Gunner Weston will have to make a play or two if this season is going to continue.”**

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“Gunner!” He twisted to his coach. “Gunner, what do you think? We have no timeouts and only twenty seconds. I need to know what you’re seeing out on that field, son.”

*Deep breath.*

He peered around the huddle as his teammates looked on. The glares from the stadium lights stung his eyes.

*Focus.*

His body was hurting. His shoulder was starting to throb with each movement, but most of all, he was frustrated. He knew he had struggled all game to be consistent, as the protective padding under his shoulder pads was throwing off his balance.

“Gunner!” He snapped back to his coach, who was adjusting his visor. “I need to know what you’re seeing out there, son!”

Gunner’s breaths were coming fast and quick, the sweat rolling down his neck causing a chill when it hit the crisp November air.

*They know I can’t make the throw.*

He shook his head and glanced down.

“Coach.” Ty’s voice cut into his helmet. “They’re bringing pressure every play. They want to hit G, make him throw on the run with his shoulder.”

***They’re succeeding.***

“Gunner.” He kept his head down. “Gunner, I need you to look at me.” His coach’s voice was stern but encouraging enough to bring his head up. “Son, can you make the throw?”

***Maybe.***

The sharp bursts of pain in his shoulder with each breath said otherwise.

“G!” Ty grabbed his facemask. “G, I know you can make the throw! I know you can make it, G.”

Gunner inhaled, staring directly at Ty, who nodded at him.

***I can make the throw.***

He shifted to each player in the huddle, all of them nodding to him in agreement.

***I can.***

“I can make the throw.”

Andy slapped Gunner on the helmet as the team started to shout.

“OK!” Coach Bianchi’s voice brought everyone closer. The crowd erupted at the referee’s whistle, and the whole stadium shook. “We need to get the ball to the sideline so—”

“Coach!” Gunner jumped forward. “They’re going to expect us to throw something short, to try and get the first down and stop the clock!”

He was acting on sheer adrenaline and instinct. Gunner got down on a knee, staring up at the rest of his teammates.

“I think we play to that and run JT straight down the middle. It will pull the defense, and we can sneak Andy out toward the sideline.” He threw his helmet over his head, feeling the steam roll up around him. “JT has been killing them all night, and that safety doesn’t want to let him get

behind him. AG, run right to the pylon, and I'll put it on you. Just remember, if you're not in the endzone, get out of bounds!" Gunner pushed his helmet back on and pointed at Andy, who nodded at him. "Coach, what do you think?"

Coach Bianchi had moved away, allowing Gunner to go over the play.

"Sounds like you know what's going on. Make it happen, Gunner." He adjusted his visor one more time.

***I got it, Coach.***

Emilio's yell pulled everyone in, and as they broke the huddle, Gunner grabbed Andy, who was buckling his chinstrap.

"AG!" His yell echoed over the frenzied screaming of the crowd. "I've been high all day with my throws. I don't know—"

"You just throw it." Andy slapped the side of his helmet. "I'll go get it."

The referee blew his whistle again, and Gunner peeked up to the scoreboard.

***Just throw it.***

**"Here we go, folks, fourth down on the Eagle Rock thirty-yard line. Gunner Weston gets behind Emilio Cortez, who bends down, grabbing the football. Weston calls out the cadence and surveys the defense. He takes the snap! Weston drops back to pass and immediately has pressure from an Eagle Rock defender off the left side! Weston moves to the right, and what a block from Tyquan Carter! Weston now has some time and is going to throw deep down the right side. He is looking for Andy Green and...OH MY! WHAT A CATCH! Andy Green went up and got it! He was able to get his feet down before getting shoved out of bounds at the two-yard line. What a spectacular throw and catch by Gunner Weston and Andy Green!"**

***Finally!***

“Yeah, G!” Emilio sprinted with Gunner down the field.  
“Nice throw!”

***Not really.***

He shook his head and watched as JT and Andy celebrated ahead. Ty quickly joined Gunner as they drew near.

“Hell of a block, Ty. Thanks for giving me time.”

“I told Coach you could make the throw,” he smirked. “I had to at least give you the chance to throw it.”

The two celebrating wide receivers joined the rest of the team in a huddle.

***It’s not done yet.***

Gunner immediately turned to the sidelines to get instructions.

“Gunner! Five seconds! You have one chance.” Coach Bianchi was motioning the play in, calling for a run to Ty up the middle.

***He can get it.***

The crowd was screaming, the noise reverberating all around him as he nodded to his coach.

“Got it!” He shot a thumbs-up and ran back to the group—all eyes on him.

“OK, one play, guys, no timeouts.”

Gunner peeked at the opposing team, which was getting into formation. All their hands were on their hips as they gathered around the football, which sat two yards from the endzone.

***They know the play.***

He leaned over Emilio, hitting Ty on the helmet.

“Look, these guys think we’re going to run Ty right at them. In fact, this entire stadium thinks we’re going to do that.” Ty was staring forward, focused. “So, let’s mix it up. How about we run Tight 22 wham with a boot action right.” Ty’s eyes shot to Gunner, questioning. “Don’t worry.” He

smiled at his best friend. “You carried us this whole game, Ty. We got you...I got you.”

He called the play again and sent the team to the ball.

“G!” JT caught him before he could fully spin around. “I can get you a block, but the corner...if he doesn’t bite on the fake to Ty, well, he might be waiting for you.”

Gunner threw on a smile.

“I’ll take care of it—I’ve got this.”

He winked and sent JT on his way.

***Just breathe.***

Gunner set behind Emilio, watching the entire defense clutter to the middle of the field. He smirked at all the green jerseys pointing and screaming at Ty, and as he shifted his attention to the sideline, he saw that his coach’s head was down, not watching the play.

***One chance.***

He inhaled and looked toward his sister, who was no longer in line with the other cheerleaders. She looked nervous.

***One moment.***

Finally, he found his mother, who had her arm wrapped around someone in front of her.

***Hailey.***

She was clasping her face, eyes glued to the field.

***I’ve got this.***

**“Here we go, first and goal from the two-yard line. This is the last play of the game. Weston settles behind Cortez. He calls out the cadence and looks over the defense. Weston takes the snap and hands off...no, it’s a fake! Weston is heading around the right side! He gets a block from Jefferson Taylor! Weston has one man between him and the endzone! He runs toward the pylon and dives...”**

The force of the ground knocked the wind out of Gunner’s lungs. The second bounce brought shooting pain into his left

arm. He could feel the ball still sucked tightly against his chest as he peered up into the black sky.

***Did I get in?***

Screams were echoing all around, but he could not tell which sideline they were coming from.

“He’s in! He’s in!” The referee was next to him, shouting and throwing his arms into the air.

***Touchdown.***

Gunner exhaled, and the stadium exploded. The ground shook underneath him like a tremor after an earthquake.

“G!” JT was standing over him. “You did it!”

He tried to speak but was still gathering air in his lungs.

“G! You crazy ass!” Emilio picked Gunner up. “I knew you could do it! I knew you could do it!”

The force of his friend ripping him off the ground brought another wince of pain.

“Be careful with him!” Andy was screaming as Emilio lifted Gunner higher, almost throwing him into the lights.

“I’m fine, AG!” he finally shouted, the sideline emptying as the whole team ran onto the field.

***I am so fine!***

“WE’RE GOING TO THE STATE SEMIS!” Ty was yelling by his side, repeating the phrase over and over.

“Damn straight!” Gunner’s lungs finally filled as he screamed, throwing his head back.

His whole body began to ache, but as he collapsed into Emilio’s arms, he felt a wide grin stretch across his face.

***That was for you, Dad.***

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Hailey waved to Gunner as he pulled out of her driveway. The headlights of his car slowly disappeared as he rounded the corner. There was no question what was going on now, and it

was getting harder and harder to say goodbye to him each night.

Originally, she was worried about her father and how he would handle the time they spent together. However, he hadn't brought it up, and he even seemed to trust that Gunner would have her home by curfew each night. And while this was something she appreciated, it also appeared that Gunner really wanted that trust and would do anything to keep it. They were always together, but he was taking things slow.

*So slow...*

That thought made Hailey pull her coat tight. The hug of the leather helped slow her heart rate. While she knew Gunner was still piecing his life together and needed time to figure it all out, when they would practice close, she could not help but be a little selfish and want more.

By the time she got to the door, her pulse had normalized. She took one more final breath to steady herself before entering, and she let her mind settle back on that day's practice. It was amazing how far they had all come. The musical was falling into place perfectly, and even though the boys continued to win football games, they never missed a day on the stage.

*I guess it's all up to me now.*

Focusing on the rest of the cast was a nice distraction. However, as the performance approached, it was becoming harder for her to envision herself right in the middle of it all.

She fidgeted with her keys, thinking about the lights. She could feel their heat gleaming down, could imagine all eyes settling on her the first time she stepped onstage. She pictured the young girl from the drive-in.

*Are you going to wear the dress?*

Hailey tried to push the memory away. She unlocked the door and stepped inside to a warm greeting from Ellie, who jumped on her leg. Even though it was late, she figured her father was probably still at school, preparing for the game. It was, of course, the state semifinal.

***Melissa?***

Hailey inched in. The reflection in the TV showed her sister sitting on the couch.

***She is still up.***

Hailey laid her keys down softly and dropped her backpack by the door, wincing at the accidental thud against the hardwood.

“Hey sis,” she said, as quietly as she could, while removing her coat. “What are you doing up so late?”

While things had been going better recently, she could not help the concern that crept into her voice.

“Just watching some TV,” Melissa whispered.

***OK?***

Hailey maneuvered through the darkness of the rest of the room and took a seat on a chair near her sister.

“Did Gunner drop you off tonight?” Melissa sounded fine now and shifted to face her.

“Yeah.” Hailey switched on a nearby lamp, illuminating the room and her sister’s face.

***She is smiling.***

“We stayed a little late after practice to rehearse a few things.” The dry warmth of the house made Hailey’s mouth feel cottony.

“Fun. How’s everything coming along?” Melissa crossed her hands over her knees and regarded her with attentive eyes.

***Well.***

Hailey glanced down at the floor.

“Good, I guess. Almost everything is coming together.”

“Almost everything?”

***Crap.***

Hailey turned, trying to avoid the conversation and hide her obvious uncertainty.



“Hails?” Melissa was not going to let it go—she could always read her in situations like this.

“Yeah, well, I mean...we just have a few things we need to take care of. And, of course, the walkthrough and all.”

She was rambling. Her hands strangled the plush cushion on the chair.

“Hails, come take a seat with me,” Melissa said calmly.

***I don't want to.***

The hesitation was met with a defiant head nod from her sister, and Hailey knew she really had no choice.

“It's nothing...” Hailey finally stood and made her way over.

“Really?” Again, Melissa read her so well that Hailey could only curl up against the arm of the couch.

***Ugh, I hate this.***

She took a deep breath as the steps of each number replayed in her head.

***I know this musical.***

In fact, she knew every line, every step, and every particular place she and the rest of the cast needed to be at every second of the performance.

***But I do not know if I can do this.***

Being onstage with Gunner was easy; he made it easy. But she would not always have him on the stage with her. She had no idea how she would react the first time she stepped back onstage, by herself in front of everyone.

***And that dress.***

“I don't know. I guess, I guess I am just...I haven't been on a stage since...Mom and—”

A warm, calming sensation engulfed her left hand. Melissa had moved over next to her and was now holding tight.

“Hails.” She squeezed. “Mom would be so proud of you.”

Melissa laid a photo, one Hailey did not remember packing in California, between them. Their mother's smiling face after one of Hailey's performances shined brightly, even in the dim room.

***I miss her so much.***

"I don't know, Melissa. I just—"

"I do, Hails. And do you want to know how I know?" Her sister rubbed her shoulder. "Because I'm so proud of you."

***Really?***

The words soothed her tension. And while she wanted to respond immediately, her mouth was still dry, and she was worried she might burst into tears if she spoke.

"Hails." Her sister nestled next to her with the picture. "When we first moved to this town, I was...I was not in a good place."

In a split second, Hailey's unease returned.

"I've made some bad choices in my life. And for the longest time, I was, I was afraid to talk to you. To try and explain everything to you."

***You don't need to explain, Melissa!***

While Hailey wanted to speak, a mounting sob blocked her voice.

"Out of all the mistakes I made, though, the one that I regret the most..." She paused and looked down at the picture. "Was not coming home after Mom died. Not being there for you when you needed me. To help you get back on that stage and do what you were born to do."

Her sister's eyes lowered, filled with regret and sorrow.

"You see, Hails, when Dad asked me to come home, I was—I didn't know what to do. He told me you were struggling, and I felt like he was turning to me for answers."

Hailey was frozen. She had wanted to have this conversation for years but really had no idea how it would actually go.

“You needed Mom. She always had the answers, and I, I just couldn’t be her. I’ve regretted that moment for a long time. I started partying and drinking, just trying to forget about it all. But deep down, I blamed myself for you quitting theatre. I blamed myself for a lot of things.”

***No, Melissa!***

Hailey wanted to scream it at the top of her lungs, as she knew exactly where her sister was going with this.

***It was not your fault!***

It was something Hailey had been wanting to tell her since everything had happened. Since the night her sister had been raped by someone her father had trusted. She knew the weight her sister still carried from that night. The blame she placed on herself, no matter how many counseling sessions she had attended.

“Melissa! It was not—”

Hailey felt a tight squeeze, then her sister threw her legs off the couch and hugged her.

“I know.”

That simple statement meant more to Hailey than any curtain call or award. It was something she had wanted to hear for years, and now, as she pulled back and stared at her sister, she knew it was something she wanted to hold on to forever.

For the first time since it all happened, she actually felt like she was seeing her sister again. Sure, she was older and sported a different hairstyle, but her eyes were the same. It was her sister. The one who, when they were young, had let Hailey sleep in her bed when she’d had nightmares. The one who would secretly eat her broccoli when their parents were not paying attention. This was her sister. The one she had laughed with, the one she had cried with.

“I know now that all you wanted was me, your big sister. No matter how many mistakes I made. No matter how screwed up I can be sometimes.”

***Yes!***

Hailey could no longer hold back the tears.

“But sometimes...” Melissa was now also tearing up as she grabbed an envelope from the table nearby, “sometimes the big sister also needs the little sister. She can be the one who shows the big sister how to forgive. How to be strong.”

Tears ran down both their cheeks.

“Watching you get back onto that stage, Hails. Watching you make all these friends and how happy it makes you. I know how hard it has been.” Melissa pulled a piece of paper from the envelope. “You took back your life, Hailey. You’re the strongest person I know, and it’s time that I start trying to be more like my little sister.”

She handed the paper to Hailey.

“So, I decided to take my life back, too. I’m going to start taking classes again.”

***What!?***

Hailey moved the paper into the light of the lamp, reading through it and smiling wider with each word.

“Is this...is this real!?”

“I was so angry, Hails. Angry at what happened to Mom. Angry at what happened to me. I forgot who I was. I forgot who Mom and Dad had raised.” Hailey lunged at her sister and wrapped her arms around her. “I’m ready to take my life back,” Melissa continued, muffled by Hailey’s shoulder. “I want to be like you, Hailey. Strong and proud of who I am.”

***You are strong, Melissa!***

Hailey was fully bawling now but refused to relax the hug.

“I will not let one moment define who I am. I will not let someone take my life from me. I’m going to be strong, like my little sister.” Hailey abruptly began to hiccup, making them both laugh. “My sister, who is a star. Who was born to be under the lights; I want everyone to see the Hailey that I see every day!”

Hailey sat up slowly, looking directly into her sister’s eyes.

“I’m so proud of you!” she yelled, just as the door started to open.

***Daddy!***

Their father’s face instantly stiffened, and Hailey realized that he was probably experiencing a rush of anxiety at seeing the tears on his daughters’ cheeks.

“Girls!” He rushed over to the couch, his voice drenched with concern. “Is everything—”

Melissa stood up and hugged him.

“Dad.” Her voice was soft but steady. “I want to show you something.”

His eyes jumped to the paper that Hailey held out to him.

“Read it, Daddy,” Hailey said, grinning.

He eased onto the couch, and his daughters watched as he began to read.

# CHAPTER 18

**“Happy Thanksgiving Eve to all of our listeners. This is Johnny May, covering everything you need to know about South Mountain Pioneer football. A dramatic last-second win for our young men last week has propelled them into a second straight state semi-final. Awaiting them will be another powerhouse in Philadelphia Catholic, who rolls into this game with only one loss.**

**Coach Bianchi will have his hands full, as he will not only have to find a way to stop the Eagles’ top passing offense, but will also need to erase the memories of a disappointing semi-final loss last year. The memory remains fresh, as not only did it end the Pioneer season, but it was also the last time Coach Weston stood on the sideline. While both teams have been fantastic, the winner will punch a ticket to what can only be described as a monumental challenge. Allegheny Prep continues to dismantle opponents, winning their quarterfinal match-up 52-0 last week...”**

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“JT! Turn that damn dude off,” Hailey heard Tyquan shout from the other side of the stage. “I can’t stand his voice.”

*Agreed.*

JT did as he was told with a shake of the head.

“What do you think, Hailey?” Ms. Summers’ voice brought her attention back to the paper they had been studying. The distractions appeared to have been tuned out by her teacher.

*Right.*

She glanced down at the final design they had been given.

“I think...” Hailey glanced up at the man she had met at the drive-in. “I think it is just magical, Mr. Chen.”

He grinned widely.

“Please, Hailey, call me ‘Todd.’” She laughed as he fired up his drill.

“Well, Todd, you are doing a fantastic job, and I cannot wait to see how it all comes out.”

He nodded and laughed, beginning to whistle as he returned to work.

***It is quiet today.***

Ms. Summers’ page flipping was the only noise accompanying Mr. Chen’s drilling. Hailey took a few seconds to scan the auditorium. She found Emilio and Andy sitting in silence, their eyes locked on one of the props in the corner that they were supposed to be helping move. Peyton and the cheerleaders were all sitting in a corner on their phones, not saying a word.

***That is a first.***

The tense, soft tone of the auditorium was a vast difference from the normal jubilant laughter. The practices leading up to this one had been a constant commotion of singing and dancing.

“Ms. Summers.” Her teacher was still muttering to herself, talking over her notes. “Ms. Summers!”

“Sorry, Hailey. Do you need something?”

Hailey started walking slowly across the stage, Ms. Summers now following closely behind.

“Does the room feel different today?”

She came to an abrupt stop when she saw Gunner. He was sitting on the ground, staring blankly ahead as Juliana tried to speak with him.

***I hate seeing him like this.***

“Yeah,” Ms. Summers whispered. She moved in close. “I guess everyone is just a little distracted with the big game coming up.”

***Maybe.***

Mr. Chen yelled from the ladder, and Ms. Summers jumped into motion. She patted Hailey on the shoulder and ran back to him for support.

***Something is different.***

Hailey started to pace around the stage. Even Tyquan, who had lately been working tirelessly with Brad to catch up on their lines, seemed anxious.

“Hey, JT.” She was comfortable enough with the young wide receiver to start with him. “I really don’t know why you all listen to that guy. I think he just likes to hear himself talk.”

She tried to smile and sat down on the floor next to him.

***It is very quiet.***

He chuckled but did not smile. As she folded her dress over her knees, she noticed him shy away slightly.

From the beginning, JT had been one of her favorites to work with. He was sweet and had been trying hard to perfect his character. She loved the little nuances that he had added, and he was even becoming more vocal during practices. Today, though, he seemed detached and extremely anxious.

“Everything OK, JT?”

The only noise in the room came from Mr. Chen’s drill.

“I guess, Hailey.” He finally looked up to her, his eyes a mix of restlessness and discomfort. “I’m sorry if I’m not myself today.”

***I hate this.***

She moved a little closer.

“Well, it seems like most of you are not yourselves today. Normally, I have trouble getting a word in, but today!” Again, she tried to lighten the mood. A wave of her arms around the auditorium actually made him smirk a bit.

“I guess,” he shook his head, “it’s just, you know, the game and everything.”

***Coach Weston.***



She took a deep breath and scanned the boys again, including Gunner, who was now standing, wincing as he stretched his shoulder.

“Yeah, well, it’s a pretty big game, I guess. But I know all of you will do great.” She pressed on his shoulder and stood up.

“Yeah. I guess.” JT paused for a second. “Hey, Hailey,” he said softly, his eyes trying to hold back the angst she saw on his face, “thanks for helping me with all of this. I don’t know where you learned how to sing and dance, but I’ve learned a lot.”

Her heart swelled, and she pursed her lips.

***I cannot stand seeing them like this.***

A few months ago, she couldn’t have cared less if the football team won or lost a game, but now her heart broke for them. It was not just the game that weighed heavy on them, and she knew that. They loved her father, and her father loved them, but this was about Coach Weston. This game would bring back all the memories they had with him, good and bad.

***I know what that is like.***

As JT walked away, she strode to the middle of the stage. Mr. Chen had adjusted the ladder and was working on some of the lights at the far end. She caught sight of Emilio and Andy again, both still staring blankly ahead, even as Bridgette tried to walk through a few steps of their dance.

***Do something.***

She twisted around to JT, who was fidgeting with his fingers by a prop.

“Hey JT!” she shouted so the whole auditorium could hear her. “You want to know where I learned how to sing and dance?”

She twirled on the stage, feeling everyone’s eyes lock onto her.

***Strong and proud.***

It all started to come back to her. Not the classes or instruction she had received—a voice that had always been in her head when she performed.

“At that school, right? In California?”

“Actually...” She took a second to squeeze her eyelids tight. “My mom taught me almost everything I know.”

***Well, everything, really.***

She giggled to herself. She flowed through a few steps on her own, twirling around the stage, and when she stopped, she locked eyes with Gunner.

“She performed on Broadway, you know?”

Gunner flashed a smile to her, the first one she had seen on his face in days.

“Really?” JT took a few inquisitive steps forward.

“Todd,” she yelled, spinning again, this time bringing her arms close to her chest, “why don’t you see how those lights work?”

***Strong.***

He gave a thumbs-up from the corner. She passed Bridgette on her next turn and could feel the entire cast start to fill in around her.

“For the longest time, I never understood how a football coach like my dad could end up with a Broadway performer like my mom.” Hailey paused, the lights in the auditorium dimming as she dipped low by herself. “I thought they had very little in common, Broadway and football.”

She slowed down, visualizing her steps as the crowd watched.

***Go slow, stay in rhythm.***

Next, she pushed up like a ballerina and landed on her toes, moving up onto the dining room table prop where Andy and Emilio had been sitting.

“But I guess I finally realized...” She took a deep breath, feeling the lights warm her as she brought her hands back to her chest. “I guess I finally realized they have a lot more in common than I thought.”

“How so?” asked JT. He took a seat at the table Hailey was standing on.

“Well, my mom used to tell me that she never cared what anyone wrote or said about her performance. She only cared what her family and castmates thought.” She jumped down, the light following as her feet echoed against the wooden stage. “No matter what the outcome of the performance, good or bad, she just wanted them to know that she performed like it was the last time she was ever going to be onstage.”

Her mother’s voice was soft in her ear as she peered out into the dark of the auditorium.

“And I think...I think that’s how you guys feel about football, too.”

The room was hanging on her every word. The feeling of bringing a large group into the moment, the intoxication of making them all come together as one, was more fun than she remembered.

“You work hard on the field, just like we do on the stage. You have to trust each other, or the play doesn’t work. My mother said that everyone plays a role, from the lead to the extras to the stagehands. That every one of those roles is just as important as the next.” She turned and found Gunner, who had moved to stand near the table. “Just like a football team.”

He nodded at her last comment, his grin much wider than before.

“Well,” JT said as he leaned back in the chair. “Your mother sounds like a very smart woman.”

*She was.*

Hailey lowered her head and nodded.

“Hey, JT—” Gunner said as Hailey started to step across on the stage, the light still following her.

“It’s OK, Gunner,” she said as she passed by him, spinning and throwing her hands out. “I never told everyone what happened to me in California. About the last time I performed or—” She cleared her throat. “The time I quit.”

Gunner tilted his head when she stopped, but she gave him a reassuring nod.

***I got this.***

“Two months after my last performance, during my sophomore year, my mother passed away.” JT shifted his eyes from hers. “I was so upset. I had worked my whole life to perform in front of my mother, to show her that I could be the lead. So, I decided that would be my last performance. I quit. I told myself I had no reason to ever step foot on a stage again.”

She closed her eyes and pushed into the lights. Her shoulders felt completely relaxed, her legs strong beneath her. The warm rays of light were directing her around the stage and melting her into the moment.

“And then I met all of you.” She walked toward the table where JT still sat. “I know I probably sound crazy, some new girl dancing around onstage by herself telling you her story, but—” she jumped back on the table, “meeting all of you showed me that my mother was right.”

Gunner pulled out a chair and joined her, extending his hand.

“Performing wasn’t about showing my mom that I could be a star. It wasn’t about how well I did or if everyone liked it.” She grabbed his hand, and he twirled her.

***Perfect.***

“It’s about the people you do it with, the friends you make. It’s about all the support you get from family and the community, about putting on a show for them.” She flicked her wrist out and moved back toward him as she continued. “Just like a football game.”

The entire cast had crowded around the table.

“Friday night, the whole town will be supporting you guys, including us.”

She pushed away from Gunner and jumped down, waving her arms around the room.

“I know what it is like to be scared. To think it might be the last time you could be doing something you love.” She moved to the front of the stage as the lights came back on. Everyone in the auditorium was looking at her. “But we got your back.” She put her arms around Juliana and Bridgette. “Just like you have ours.”

Tyquan strolled up behind JT and rubbed his friend’s shoulders.

“You see why I call her our fearless leader?” The bulky running back pointed at her and laughed.

Ms. Summers and Mr. Chen were also grinning.

“Nah, Ty,” Gunner said, jumping down from the table, his eyes locking with hers. “That’s our lead.”

### ***Our lead.***

It sounded natural, and this time, she refused to run from it. Instead, she stood upright and firm, squeezing her two friends against her as the rest of the cast began to cheer.

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**“What a football game this has been, Pioneer fans! A back-and-forth game between two evenly matched teams with a trip to Hershey Stadium on the line. South Mountain has fought hard and now has a chance to take the lead, trailing 20-14.**

**Gunner Weston gets behind his center, Emilio Cortez, and calls out the cadence. He has been hit hard all night, but you have to admire the toughness he is showing in what must be an emotional game for him.**

**Weston takes the snap and drops back to pass. He is under pressure from the Eagles defense! Weston moves to his left side and...he breaks a tackle and is still on his feet! Weston is looking for an open receiver and throws it to**

**Carter before taking a huge hit! Tyquan Carter has the ball at the twenty. He cuts inside to the fifteen. Tyquan Carter spins through a tackle at the ten. Carter dives for the endzone and...TOUCHDOWN! TOUCHDOWN PIONEERS! What a play by Tyquan Carter, and what a throw by Gunner Weston to keep the play alive!"**

*Not good.*

Gunner ran directly to the bench as the screams from the crowd became deafening.

*I can't catch my breath.*

He tried to inhale, but pain was shooting from his shoulder to his chest.

"Gunner!" The trainer came running over as he threw off his helmet.

"I can't..." He was struggling to speak. A jolt that felt like knives digging into his shoulder blade took his breath away.

*Shit.*

"Look at me. Hey, look at me!" The trainer was yelling and trying to get his attention. "Gunner, I need you to look at me and tell me where it hurts."

*Everywhere.*

He tried to take another deep breath, but exhaustion was clogging up his lungs.

*It's getting worse.*

"Gunner, Gunner, are you OK?" Coach Bianchi ran over just as the trainer began to remove his shoulder pads.

"Coach, I need to get his pads off and get him back into the locker room. Now. We need to get his mother from the bleachers, and I need to get him to the hospital for an X-ray."

*Like hell!*

Gunner shook his head, tears now running down his face.

"I'm not leaving. Just take it off."

Their eyes stayed on him for a second, and he was unable to hide another jolt that shot from his shoulder.

“I understand, Gunner. But I need to see if it is dislocated. I need to get you to a doctor.”

Once Gunner threw the shoulder pads to the side, he felt less constricted. The cold, biting air hit his overheating body, sending an immediate chill down his back.

“G!” Ty pushed through the crowd that was gathering. “G...” His best friend’s face shifted from excitement to horror.

***Do I look that bad?***

“Ty!” their coach shouted. “I need you to get everyone back, now. Get them away from the bench, and let the trainers do what they have to do.”

Ty and a few others began to argue, but the pain was making it difficult for Gunner to concentrate.

“Did we make it?” Gunner asked the trainer, who was pressing gently on his shoulder, bringing a red-hot jolt of pain with each touch.

“Yeah.” The trainer glanced over at the scoreboard. “We made it.”

***At least we’re winning.***

Gunner held his breath as another push sent shock waves through his body. He was becoming weak from the constant pain, and when he tried to stand up, his legs wobbled.

***I need to be out there with my teammates.***

“Gunner, I am going to grab your mom so we can get you to the hospital for an X-ray. I don’t think it is dislocated, but I need to make sure—”

“I’m not leaving this sideline until the game is over!” His scream turned the heads of everyone nearby.

“G!” Ty dove in for support and propped him up against his body. “G, man, are you sure you’re OK? Maybe you should listen—”

“I knew you were going to score.” Gunner grimaced but forced a smile. While the pain was sapping his strength, he refused to leave the sideline before the game was over. “I just knew it, Ty, as soon as I let it go.”

Ty kept him close, practically holding him up. After a moment, he smiled to himself and half-carried Gunner to the huddle that was forming in front of them.

“Come on! Bring it in! We need a stop!” Coach Bianchi was trying to project over the rising screams of the crowd.

***What’s going on out there?***

Gunner had missed a few plays, and he now realized that the other team had made it close to their own twenty-yard line and was in position to score.

***Three seconds left.***

His eyes went from the scoreboard to the field, where his teammates were sluggishly making their way over.

“They have to kick it here!” Coach Bianchi was shouting at Emilio. “We know this guy can kick, but he likes to keep them low. Remember the scouting report.”

***We need a stop.***

Gunner winced but broke through the crowd. Steam was coming off his undershirt, which was drenched in sweat.

“Gunner.” Emilio’s eyes were wide. The normally emotionally charged linebacker appeared all out of sorts.

“Emilio, look at me!” his coach yelled. “We are going to run a twist, right next to the center. I want you to come right next to him, son.” Coach Bianchi grabbed Emilio’s facemask and brought him close. “I want you to jump as high as you possibly can with those big arms, you hear me?”

The bulky linebacker nodded. The defense started a slow run back onto the field at the referee’s whistle.

***We got your back.***

Through all the pain, it was Hailey’s voice that straightened Gunner’s spine. A momentary surge of adrenaline, spurred on



by the roaring crowd, drove him right out onto the field.

“Emilio!” Gunner shouted, a small shriek breaking through at the end as he fought off another jab of knives in his shoulder. “I’m a big chocolate bar fan.” His bulky friend tilted his head slightly. “I would love to get a few fresh ones in two weeks. You think you can help with that?”

Another explosion from the stands did not deter the two, who were locked in a stare.

“I think you need a ticket to get in.” Emilio pointed to him and smiled. “Let me see if I can get you one really quick.”

Gunner did his best to pump his fist before Ty brought him back to the sideline. The teams came together.

*Here we go.*

The whole sideline leaned forward. A collective inhale rushed through the stadium as both teams came to the ball.

**“This is it, Pioneer fans. The winner punches a ticket to the state championship game in Hershey, Pennsylvania. The Eagles line up for the game-winning field goal trailing 21-20. Both teams are in position. The holder calls out the cadence. Here is the snap...”**

Gunner closed his eyes right when he heard the pads smashing against each other.

*Wait for it.*

The first thud of the kicker’s foot against the ball.

*Wait.*

He heard a second thud.

He felt a lurch behind him and an arm wrapping him up. His head was still cloudy from the pain, but he could hear screams all around him. As he opened his eyes, he saw his teammates sprinting onto the field and the referees running off.

***WE BLOCKED IT!***

Emilio was galloping around, his helmet off, a trail of steam chasing after him.

“We’re going to Hershey, G!” He twisted to Ty, pure elation on his face. “We’re going to the STATE CHAMPIONSHIP!”

His best friend’s voice broke, and they embraced.

***Oh shit!***

The knives shot back into Gunner’s arm and chest, making him wobble.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Ty yelled and pulled back, panic painted across his face.

Gunner took a deep breath to steady himself, but then immediately wrapped his good arm around his best friend.

“Damn straight we are, Ty!” he screamed with all the energy he had left.

***We’re going to Hershey!***

# CHAPTER 19

**“We are one week away from what will be an historic night of South Mountain Pioneer football. The state championship looms on the horizon, and while many in town are preparing for a trip to Hershey Stadium, questions remain about the health of Gunner Weston.**

**The Pioneers will need everything they can get from him, as they will be taking on the number-one defense in the state. This Allegheny Prep team boasts five All-State players on defense, including All-American safety Riley Davis. The defensive line averages over thirty pounds more than the South Mountain offensive line and is led by All-State defensive ends Ricardo Sampson and Benjamin Bishop. The offense for the Crusaders is engineered by State Player of the Year Tyrell Whitworth, who has set multiple state records. On paper, this game seems like a mismatch at every position—it’s not a surprise that the Crusaders have dominated every opponent they’ve met this year.”**

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Hailey glanced over at Gunner as he settled into the passenger seat.

“Sorry,” he said as he flipped off the radio. “I was listening to you, I swear.” He motioned to the bags in the back seat, clearly trying to change the subject. “I think we got enough treats, though. I just hope both our sisters will be willing to help us out.”

He laughed and reached over with his right arm, patting one of the bags they had placed on the floor.

“I hope so,” Hailey said. “I am so excited to see the lights tonight. I hear they’re beautiful.”

She noticed a small wince when he sank back into the seat.

“Yeah, me too.” He took a second to catch his breath. “My family has always loved the Hershey Lights.” He let out an

audible exhale, adjusting the sling under his letterman jacket. “But I swear I was listening to you.”

She turned on the car. The heat immediately kicked on to combat the chilly air outside.

“I think it’s great that your sister is going back to school. I know how difficult that has to be for her, but I also know how proud you must be.”

***So proud.***

Even the cold breeze that whipped around her car couldn’t wipe Haliey’s smile away. The thought of her sister enrolling in classes and getting her life back together had been a constant topic of conversation lately—she hoped she had not bored Gunner with it.

“Should I turn down the heat?” She noticed that he was struggling to take off his letterman jacket.

“It’s fine,” he said. “Just, you know, with this stupid sling, it’s hard to get comfortable.” He threw the jacket into the back and took another peek at the candy. “But, for your first time up this way, I actually think you showed some restraint with the chocolate. I’ve watched my mom and sister come out with way more.”

Hailey giggled under her breath. A slight pause for him to readjust allowed her time to admire the sprawling building behind them.

***What a magical place.***

The large glass windows sparkled in the sunset, and she could not help but smile at the thought of how wonderful the day had been. The tour through the chocolate factory, the endless shopping for sweets, and, of course, the pictures she had in her back pocket from the photo booth were a perfect complement to each other.

***So much fun.***

She slid back into her seat and exhaled. Another gust of wind shook the car. The cold, crisp air in her lungs brought back memories of Saturdays shopping on Fifth Avenue in New

York with her mother and sister. She could see them now, laughing and enjoying a cup of hot chocolate as they strolled through Times Square. It had been different in California. The warmer winters made it easy to stay outside, but this frosty chill felt more familiar. It reminded her of a simpler time in her life.

***Home.***

She opened her eyes when a car door slammed nearby. She noticed that Gunner's attention was being drawn away from her, into the distance.

***What is he thinking about?***

"Hey," she said softly. "What are you looking at?"

She followed his gaze to a large stadium structure, which was lighting up the night.

"Sorry. I was spacing out again. It's just..." he flashed a timid smile before lowering his eyes. "That's Hershey Stadium. That's where we'll be playing Friday night."

***Wow.***

The large, vanilla-colored pillars reached high into the sky, propping up bleachers that stretched from one end of the field to the other. The lights spread four-wide, spotlighting whatever was being showcased below. The front parking lot spanned at least a mile and led to multiple ticket booths.

"That is big for a high school stadium." She leaned closer, still admiring the coliseum architecture of the venue.

"Well, they host concerts and other large events in it as well." He sniffed and cleared his throat. "But every December, they host the football championship."

He painfully propped himself on the center console, right next to her now.

"Have you ever been inside?" She put her hand on his leg, trying to avoid his injured shoulder.

"Yeah." He started to play with the sling. "I have." He glanced back at the stadium. "My dad...my dad and I used to

go to the state championship games every year.”

***Stupid Hailey, why did you bring it up?***

She pulled away sheepishly and began to take off her own coat to buy time.

***Stupid!***

While they had spent a lot of time together over the last few months, he had rarely mentioned his father. She knew what that was like. The first year after her mother passed, she had difficulty even speaking her name. For him, it was still fresh, and he would tell her when he was ready. But now she had accidentally rushed into it, possibly ruining the special day they had together.

“Gunner, I’m—”

He waved his hand, shifting in the seat to face her.

“You know...” His green eyes were particularly vivid today. “You have told me so much about your mom and your sister. I feel like, I don’t know—” He widened his eyes, exhaling through his pursed lips. “I haven’t really told you anything about me or my dad.”

***Is he ready?***

She steadied herself as he pointed down to the stadium.

“Every year, my dad and I would go to the state championship together. We would climb to the top of those high bleachers and stand against the concrete slabs at the back.” He closed his eyes. “We would analyze every play. I mean, we would really analyze them, like, go over what each player did right and wrong on every snap.”

He laughed to himself, opening his eyes and peering back down at the stadium.

***I love it when he laughs.***

The butterflies were twirling as she watched a more genuine smile grow on his face.

“After the game, we would stop and get something to eat. We would talk even more about the games, and we would

laugh and joke.” He exhaled, his minty breath dancing in front of her, almost teasing. “Last year...” He rubbed his hand against the sling. “Last year, after we lost in the state semi-final, I couldn’t bring myself to go to the game with him.”

***Oh no.***

Regret and sorrow spasmed across his face.

“I wish...” He shivered, but she knew it was not from the cold. “I guess I wish I would have gone now.”

Hailey wanted to say something. She wanted so badly to be able to let him know that she understood what he was feeling. She had felt the same way about her mother.

“What you said the other day...” His face still held sorrow, but now she could see strength breaking through in his eyes. “I know it’s not easy for you to go out on the stage, to be the lead without her here.”

***He knows.***

He rotated further toward her, grabbing her hand.

“But seeing you up there—” He looked back over at the stadium.

“Gunner.” She finally pushed the words out. “When I am onstage, I know she is with me.” She brought his hand up and kissed it. “That field, that is your stage.” She squeezed his hand tightly, and he returned the pressure. “And I know your father will be with you.”

His head fell back against the seat. He paused for a second before a warm, bright smile joined his whisper.

“And so will you.”

***I cannot do this anymore.***

She jumped across the center console, trying to avoid his injured arm. She cupped his face and pushed her lips against his.

***Wow!***

She had dreamed about this moment for so long, about how it would feel and what his lips would taste like.

***This is better than I thought it would be.***

A tingle percolated throughout her body as he wrapped his right arm around her lower back. And when he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, a low whimper escaped.

***So much better!***

Back in August, she had hated Gunner Weston. She had hated the monster that he represented and the arrogance in every step he took. But now, after everything they had been through, he was all she could think about. He was in every dream she had and every thought that popped into her head.

***I can't stop.***

His lips moved to her neck. The butterflies had disappeared, and a new feeling overtook her body. A fiery desire in the pit of her stomach brought a chill up her spine. She entangled her fingers in the shirt he wore.

***I don't want to stop.***

He had finally done it. Gunner had finally opened up to her and found the strength she knew he had. The strength that had helped heal his town, his football team, and her family.

“Hailey,” he puffed.

***Did I do something wrong?***

She had absolutely no idea what she was doing and instantly began to regret moving so quickly.

***Does he not want this?***

“I’m sorry, I...” She was embarrassed, her face hot, as she slid back over the console.

***I am so stupid!***

Before she could settle into the seat, he gently grabbed her chin and lifted her face to his.

“That was the greatest first kiss I’ve ever had.”

***Man, he is good.***



Her heart skipped multiple beats as he brought her close. She could feel his heart pounding, his grip on her back, a mix of emotions that were fighting each other.

“This has been one of the greatest days of my life.” He was so sure of himself that she could not help but pull him tighter. “You deserve something much more special than this.”

*Oh.*

Hailey knew what he was talking about, and looking around, she realized this was probably not the best place for their first kiss. They were in a parking lot—people were moving back and forth between the cars.

*OK, maybe a little stupid.*

“I’m sorry.” She blushed, leaning away and smoothing out her shirt.

“Don’t be,” he said, not letting go of her hand. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time.”

*Me too!*

She took a few seconds to catch her breath, then put the car in drive and slowly inched it out of the parking lot.

“The light show is going to be perfect,” he said, never taking his eyes off her. “Just like you.”

Her face was burning again, and she fought the urge to pull the car over right then and there and kiss him some more. She knew the feeling she had inside her now, what it all meant. She could not fight it anymore. She didn’t want to. She wanted to scream it to everyone who drove by, every person in the parking lot.

***I LOVE GUNNER WESTON!***

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“Ten minutes, guys!” Coach Bianchi’s voice rang through the bus, knocking Gunner out of his trance.

*Focus.*

He had been thinking about Hailey again. Every night before he went to bed and every morning when he woke up, she was on his mind.

***That kiss...***

It was unlike any kiss he'd ever had. He had felt so many things while it was going on, and he was still trying to make sense of them all.

“When we get to the stadium, grab your bags and go to the locker room. We'll head out for a quick walkthrough to get used to the turf before suiting up.”

Coach Bianchi's eyes moved to where Gunner was sitting at the back of the bus.

***Does he know we kissed?***

That was all they had done, and even though it took every ounce of strength for Gunner to stop himself, he knew he had to. Maybe in the past, he would have let it happen in that car, in that parking lot. It had been getting dark, and the crowd had been dispersing.

***But Hailey deserves perfection.***

She was special, and if these mixed-up feelings inside his stomach were what he thought they were, then he was going to make sure he took it slow.

***But not too slow.***

“Gunner.” His coach started to make his way to the rear, steadying himself as the bus hit a bump. “Gunner, when we get to the stadium, I want you to get with the trainer immediately.”

***OK.***

The eyes of his friends jumped to him.

“Start stretching it out, and let me—”

“Coach,” Gunner interrupted, “I'm fine. I'll get it stretched out and be on the field for the walkthrough.”

He adjusted the sling, the tightness bringing an uncomfortable grimace to his face.

“I need you to be honest with me, Gunner. I am not putting you out on that field unless—”

“I got this, Coach.” Gunner stood up, leaning forward so only his coach could hear him. “I have never felt better.”

*Well...*

The two stared at each other in silence, their eyes locked, even when the bus hit another bump.

*Maybe I lied a little.*

While his body felt fresher than before the season started, this miraculous recovery had nothing to do with his shoulder or football.

“Alright then.” Coach Bianchi nodded. “I’ll see you on the field.”

He started back to the front, spinning to face Gunner one more time with a slight smirk on his face.

*What was that?*

Gunner sat down, throwing himself against the seat.

“I haven’t seen him smile like that before,” Ty noted, turning to look out the window.

*Yeah, me neither.*

“Hey, G.” His best friend flexed his arm as if he were preparing to say something extremely important. “We want you to do something tonight.” Emilio and JT were peeping over the seat in front, and Andy was leaning into the aisle. “We want you to walk out on the field with us tonight for the coin toss.”

*Guys.*

“What?” He knew what they were asking, but given the circumstances, he was uncomfortable with the request. “Look, guys, we have won every game since I gave up being a captain and—”

“To hell with that superstition shit, G.” Ty slapped the glass window behind him. “We want you out with us. You earned it; you’re the captain.”

Emilio smacked his hands against the back of his seat. “El capitan! Forever, G!”

His friends all nodded enthusiastically, appearing to expect an answer right away.

*I don’t...*

They had all gone quiet. He was searching for the words, but all he could hear was his father’s voice in his head.

*Moments, Gunner, life is about moments.*

“You know,” he said, moving his eyes up to meet theirs, “playing with you guys all these years, all the moments we’ve had on the field together...” He laughed quietly and rubbed his neck. “I think I’m going to miss this the most.”

Gunner began to scan the bus, sensing the calm but quiet anticipation of what was ahead of them.

“Just hanging out, being with you guys. I know, I know. That probably sounds super sappy for this moment but—”

“I’ll miss your mom’s pregame meals.” Ty interrupted. “The pancakes and the spaghetti dinners.”

He was grinning now, his teeth flashing in the afternoon sun.

“I’ll miss you guys wrecking my house every weekend,” Emilio chuckled as he grabbed the back of his seat again. “But I guess I’ll really miss just having you guys over.”

*Agreed.*

“The feeling after a win but also just hanging out after a loss. Either way...”

Gunner squeezed his friend’s shoulder, barely making a dent in his letterman jacket.

“Your house was always chill, Emilio.” The whole group leaned in together. “I know we all—”

“I’m dating your sister, Emilio!”

***Shit.***

Andy’s shout caused Emilio to tense under Gunner’s grasp.

“You what?” The burly linebacker tried to hop through JT, who pulled Andy away.

“Hold it, big boy!” Gunner needed some assistance from Ty, who jumped in.

“Not a good time, AG! We talked about this shit, and we said we would do it at the right time!” Ty yelled as he struggled to keep hold.

“Wait!” Emilio stopped and shot a piercing glare at them all. “You all knew about this?”

He had a perplexed and shocked expression on his face.

“Well,” Gunner said, smirking, “it was pretty obvious, man.”

Emilio now twisted to Andy, who had scrambled back into his seat.

“I just thought...” Andy hesitated. “I thought we were telling each other everything. I thought we were having, like, a moment.”

Gunner could not help but laugh, even though Emilio’s glare remained.

“I’ll miss that one moment...” JT said, now staring up at the roof of the bus. “That moment before you step on the field. When you take one last deep breath, block all the noise out.” Emilio had relaxed back into his seat. “You go over everything in your head—the first play, the last play—and you just... exhale.”

JT returned his eyes to his friends. Some of the players further up the bus had turned to listen.

“At that moment, when you let out that exhale, you just feel so free.”

Gunner tilted his head, the image clear in his mind.

“You do it with all your teammates next to you, and you can feel them all do the same thing.” JT took another deep breath before peering around the bus. “That’s what I’ll miss the most, I think.”

***Yeah.***

A quiet nod, shared between all the boys, led to a moment of reflection.

***Me too, JT.***

The bus began to slow, the pillars of the entrance to the stadium growing larger as they approached.

***OK.***

The bus fell completely silent.

***It’s not about the outcome, Gunner.***

He closed his eyes, listening to the breathing of his teammates.

***But the fact that you took it.***

He stood up, feeling the eyes of the bus move to him as he undid the clip to his sling.

***Tight, but not too bad.***

Walking to the front, he caught the eyes of his coach.

“Go get that thing tested out, Weston.”

He nodded and turned, smiling at his teammates.

***Moments.***

This was the last time he would ever play with this team. This was the last time he would ever wear the uniform that he had grown up idolizing. As he glanced to the back of the bus, he locked eyes with each of his friends. The ones that he had played with since he was six years old.

“We do it together, boys.” He leaned over and smacked the front of his coach’s seat with his left arm. “We take our moment together!”

He slapped it again, over and over, refusing to grimace at the pain that was daggering through his shoulder.

“What do you say, boys?” He came to a stop and waited for an answer.

“How about...” Ty stepped into the aisle. “How about we go win state!”

His best friend’s scream sent the bus into a frenzy. One final spin brought Gunner eye to eye with his coach.

***Let’s go win.***

# CHAPTER 20

**“Welcome, sports fans, to The Sweetest Place on Earth! This is Johnny May, coming to you live from Hershey, Pennsylvania, for the Pennsylvania High School Football Championships. We have a real David versus Goliath match-up tonight, as we have the Western Champions of Allegheny Prep taking on our very own South Mountain Pioneers.**

**Allegheny Prep will look to complete an historic season in which they have defeated all of their opponents by double-digit points. On the other side, the underdog Pioneers will look to cap a fairytale season of their own as they play in memory of the late Coach Weston. Our young men were able to right the ship after a rocky start, and they now sit only four quarters away from the ultimate prize: the state championship.**

**We will be with you the whole way from the press box, so sit tight, grab a tasty treat, and prepare for what should be a classic in Hershey.”**

\*\*\*\*\*

Hailey glared up to the press box, where she could see the radio announcer screaming into his headset.

“Here they come!” Gunner’s mom yelled next to her. The team began to run out from the tunnel beneath them.

*I’m so nervous.*

The blue jerseys and white pants cascaded across the sideline like a wave hitting the beach. Her father came out last, smiling as he pointed to her and her sister in the bleachers.

*He belongs out there.*

No matter how much she had hated it, no matter how much she did not understand the sport, she could see it—the way he moved down the line, talking to each player, watching them smile and nod back. The cloud that had been lingering over



him the last few years was gone, replaced by a happiness that she had feared she would never see in him again.

***You deserve this, Daddy.***

“Ms. Summers!” Gunner’s mom shouted.

Hailey turned to see her teacher hustling down the concrete steps.

“Thank you, thank you for saving me a seat! Traffic is incredible out there, and I cannot believe how packed it is!”

***It sure is full.***

Hailey took in the impressive visual of the stadium. Both sides were full, and banners and streamers hung from the metal railings that ran along the front of each side. As she scanned their section, she could see faces from all over town. Julez and the rest of her castmates were packed alongside other students in the bleachers.

“Jesus, Hails!” Her sister squeezed her arm and pointed to the other side of the stadium. The opposing fans erupted as the other team entered. “Is that...is that the other team?”

***Those are not high school boys.***

Hailey held her breath as the black and gold uniforms began to dance onto the field. She gripped her sister’s hand tighter and watched the herculean players make their way onto the sideline.

“Those boys are very big.” Ms. Summers said, squinting across the field. An uncomfortable silence fell over their side of the stadium.

“Hailey!” Gunner’s mom grabbed her shoulders. “They made Gunner a captain again!”

Gunner’s mom swelled with pride as she waved to his sister and pointed at her son. Peyton gave them both a thumbs-up, her pom poms swaying by her side in the bitterly cold air.

While Hailey had no idea what that comment meant, she quickly locked arms with the woman by her side. Her warmth was welcomed on the chilly December night. She took a deep

breath, the same sense of pride building in her stomach as she watched Gunner walk out onto the field surrounded by his friends.

*Taylor, Cortez, Weston, Carter, Green.*

She read the backs of the uniforms of the five boys with whom she had become so close.

*Oh my.*

In an instant, the feeling of joy flipped to unease. The five stopped in the middle of the field and were greeted by the opposing group of players, all of whom towered over them.

“Those don’t even look like high school boys, Hails.” Her sister said what Hailey was thinking. “Those are men.”

*Stay safe, boys.*

She squeezed both her arms tighter, trying to fight off the anxiety creeping into her stomach.

*Stay safe, Gunner.*

The referee blew his whistle. The five captains turned and sprinted back to the sideline as the crowd erupted in cheers.

**“Well, folks, if you thought the papers were lying about the size of this Allegheny Prep team, then you are in for a surprise. I did not think it was possible, but they seem even more massive in person.**

**The Pioneers will have the ball to start the game, and Gunner Weston comes to the line of scrimmage. He sets behind Emilio Cortez and calls out the cadence. Weston takes the snap and tosses the ball to Tyquan Carter, who tries to go around the right side. WOW! What a hit by the All-American safety Riley Davis! He hit Carter and knocked him back almost two yards.**

**OK, it will be second down for the Pioneers as Weston lines up five yards behind Cortez in the shotgun. He takes the snap and is going to hand it to Carter again. Oh no! Carter is immediately tackled in the backfield by Ricardo Sampson and Benjamin Bishop! They were in the backfield as soon as Carter got the ball!**

**Third down now, and Weston takes the snap. Weston is going to pass and roll to the right side. He is under pressure from Bishop! He gets the pass off but is hit hard! Andy Green makes the catch...NO! Green was hit by Riley Davis when he caught the ball, and he dropped it. It will be fourth down, and the Pioneers will have to punt.”**

*Get up.*

Hailey jumped to her feet, her hands over her mouth.

*Please get up, Gunner.*

He was lying on the ground, rolling in pain.

“Gunner...” Hailey heard his mom groan as she shot up as well.

Hailey held her breath. Emilio helped Gunner up off the ground, and both Hailey and Mrs. W. gave a small sigh of relief.

*That team is so big.*

The massive opposing team was celebrating on their sideline. A hush from the students below was encapsulated by a nervous shake of Juliana’s head.

“I think he’s OK,” Melissa said, pointing to the sideline, where Gunner stood talking to their father.

*Please be safe.*

She grabbed her sister’s hand as the opposing crowd exploded again, black and gold jerseys running down the field before a whistle blew.

**“Well, after a fantastic return, the Crusaders will have the ball first and ten from the Pioneer’s thirty-five-yard line. This is not the start that Coach Bianchi would have hoped for.**

**Tyrell Whitworth stands back in the shotgun. The Pennsylvania Player of the Year looks over the defense and takes the snap. Whitworth hesitates but is now going to run to the left side. Cortez is running after him! Whitworth...runs over Cortez and is into the secondary!**

**He is finally knocked out of bounds by Malcolm Bailey, but only after he picked up twenty yards! Emilio Cortez thought he had the big, six-foot-five, two-hundred-and-fifteen-pound quarterback, but instead he just got run over.**

**First down again for the Crusaders, who line back up in the shotgun. Whitworth looks over the defense and takes the snap. He rolls to the right side and throws it to the endzone! He has a man and...TOUCHDOWN CRUSADERS! What a pass by Tyrell Whitworth to find his man in the endzone, and in two plays, the Crusaders have taken the lead."**

The wind was immediately knocked out of the entire Pioneer side of the stadium. The student section below Hailey was now quiet and full of shaking heads as the uneasiness quickly shifted to a rising tide of concern. The band across the field was playing some new pop hit from the radio, and the entire side of their field was dancing along.

"It's OK." Ms. Summers' voice did not match her face. "It's early. We have a lot of time to get that back."

*Maybe.*

Hailey nodded, trying to smile, but she could not muster the strength.

She spotted Gunner on the sideline, where he was getting more padding put on his shoulder. He slammed his helmet against the bench after a whisper from the trainer.

*This...*

Another triumphant scream rose from the opposing side, and when she spun back to the field, she saw Tyquan being helped up by two of the opposing players.

*This is unfair.*

The godlike Crusaders started to take their positions, waving their arms to the opposing bleachers. Loud shrieks rose into the air.

*This is just unfair.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**“Well, Pioneer fans, a tough first half has finally come to an end. Our boys have shown a lot of fight against what can only be described as a superhuman Allegheny Prep team, but they still trail 21-0. Coach Bianchi has to be proud of his team’s effort but must wonder if there is anything they can do against what looks like unbeatable opposition.”**

“Take it off!” Gunner yelled as he dropped to the floor of the locker room. “I can’t throw with it on. You need to take the padding off now!”

The trainer stared at him, shaking his head.

“Gunner, I can’t take that off. It’s the only thing protecting your shoulder from impact.”

***Who cares!***

Gunner threw his head against the steel locker in disgust. The rest of the team started to slink in behind them.

“I need some damn room out there, Emilio!” Ty threw his helmet to the ground.

“We’re doing the best we can!” Emilio came nose to nose with the muscular running back. “You see how big and fast these damn dudes are? It’s like there are fifteen of them out on that field.”

Gunner took a deep breath as the trainer started to reset the pads. A shout from Andy at one of the assistant coaches, who was trying to walk him through release techniques, only added to the noise.

***Shit.***

It was all moving so fast. JT fell down beside him on the bench.

***What are we doing out there?***

His eyes began to tear up as the trainer pushed down on his shoulder. His head was spinning, and the shouting match between Emilio and Ty was only making it worse.

“It’s just...it’s just unfair man. They are so goddamn big and fast!”

Emilio pounded his fist against a locker, quieting the room.

***It is unfair.***

Gunner’s shoulder was starting to spasm. The adrenaline had exhausted his body, and he took a few more deep breaths before trying to stand. His legs shook beneath him.

“Here.” Coach Bianchi extended his hand, pulling him up.

***Thanks, Coach.***

Gunner nodded, noting that Coach Bianchi’s normally stern and rigid in-game stare was soft and unfocused.

***We let him down.***

Any strength Gunner had left faded away. He adjusted his shoulder pads and watched his coach walk slowly to the front of the room.

***I hate this.***

Coach Bianchi took a second to adjust his visor. A deep exhale spun him around to the group.

“You’re probably right, Emilio.” He paused and surveyed the room. “It probably is unfair. I mean, I’ll tell ya, boys, I have coached college teams that didn’t have that type of size and speed.” He lowered his head and propped his leg up on the bench in front of him. “But hell, I think most of us have already realized that life...well, that life really isn’t fair.”

He peeked over at Gunner, who took a step forward.

“Because if it were, you would have a different coach standing in front of you right now. A great man, a great leader, and a great father.”

***Dad.***

Coach Bianchi dropped his leg and grabbed a football. He remained silent for a few moments, and when he continued, his voice was quiet.

“You know, when I first moved to this town, people kept talking to me about a saying you had. A saying about moments and not letting them slip by.” He tossed the football in the air and caught it. “And for a while, I had a hard time figuring out what it all meant.” He smiled and slapped the pigskin. “Don’t get me wrong. I’ve had moments in my life, gentlemen. I married the woman of my dreams. I watched the two most beautiful little girls be born and grow.” He pointed the football out across the room. “And I won a lot of football games.”

Gunner’s feet continued to inch forward, his coach’s voice drawing him in.

“But I’ve also had a lot of bad moments in my life.” He bowed his head. “I lost the strongest person I had ever known. A woman I loved more than anything in the world. I watched as my own flesh and blood struggled, and lost, and were injured by the world. By people I had believed in.”

***Damn.***

Gunner took a knee, ignoring the knives digging into his shoulder and chest.

“And I thought to myself, why would anyone want to live or even remember these moments?” He laughed under his breath and looked back up. “But then I met you young men. Young men who know all too well how cruel and unfair life can be.” He took a few steps across the front of the room. “I watched as a town, lost and scared, turned to a bunch of high school students to heal them. Now.” Coach Bianchi chuckled. “Now tell me, how unfair is that?”

He outstretched his arms and shook his head.

“A bunch of grown men and women turning to all of you and asking for help? How the hell would you know what to do?” He was gripping the football tighter as his eyes lowered. “But you know what I found out, gentlemen?”

Gunner’s leg was starting to shake, and his blood was flowing a little faster.

“I found out that even in the darkest moments, the moments when all seemed lost...that you were willing to stand up. You

were willing to accept the challenge, even against everything stacked against you.”

Coach Bianchi took a few steps in Gunner’s direction.

“You took a scared town. A town that was lost, and you put it on your back, against all odds. YOU became the leaders. YOU became the ones who showed us how to heal, and YOU did it together!”

*Yeah, we did.*

Gunner nodded, and his coach’s voice rose a bit more.

“Did you make mistakes? Of course. Did it go the way you planned? No, it never does.” He locked eyes with Gunner. “But that’s just life. It’s unfair. It’s not a fairytale that always has a happy ending.”

Gunner took a deep breath, his blood pounding in his ears.

“Our life is a story, gentleman, one that we do not read but live. One that is lived in moments that shape us for the rest of our lives. This...this is something that each and every one of you have taught me.”

Coach Bianchi paused briefly and then moved toward the door leading to the tunnel.

“So, maybe it is unfair. Maybe they are bigger, faster, and stronger.”

Gunner stood without realizing that he had moved.

“But maybe, well, just maybe, the next two quarters aren’t set in stone. Maybe the next two quarters are not about how fast someone can run or how much they can bench press. Maybe we make the next two quarters about something else... something like this!” Coach Bianchi pivoted around and pointed to his eyes. “And maybe, just maybe, we make it about this!” He balled up his hand and pounded his chest.

*Maybe.*

“The eyes tell you everything you need to know about someone, and I can promise you...” He peered across the room, pointing the football at each of them in turn. “I can



promise you: That team in the other locker room has never looked into the eyes of anyone like you.”

The assistant coaches propped the door open. The sound of the marching band’s half-time show penetrated the room.

“The next two quarters will be the final moments that you play together as a football team. What happens next is up to you. Don’t let anyone else decide these moments for you. Live it; breathe it.” He stepped through the door. “TAKE IT!”

The two words echoed behind him. The door slammed shut, and the team was alone. Alone and together.

**“Well, folks, we are ready for the second half of play, and it looks like Coach Bianchi is going to be pulling out all the stops. Gunner Weston is going to be heading out with the defense to see if he can help slow down the Crusaders’ potent offensive attack.”**

“Gunner! What the hell are you doing?” Coach Bianchi had caught him before he could get onto the field. “I can’t let you get on this—”

Gunner tapped his coach’s shoulder just as the referee blew the whistle.

“I’m living my own moment, Coach.”

The tension was palpable as the two stood, staring each other down. The bands dueled in the background. Screams and noise echoed around them, but neither budged.

*Please.*

Gunner was not about to back down. After their coach left, the team made this decision together.

“Gunner...” Coach Bianchi was clearly fighting himself. “This, I mean, I can’t—”

“I got this, Coach. Trust me.”

He never gave his coach a chance to make the decision. Gunner immediately took off to the huddle and joined Emilio, who was calling out the defensive play.

“Are you sure about this, G?” asked the bulky linebacker.

“If these boys want a fairytale ending, let’s make them earn it.” Gunner slapped Bailey’s helmet. “We know this guy is going to bring the ball right at us. Bailey, take on the blocker. Let me and Emilio clean it up.”

The young cornerback nodded, and in seconds, the whole team had broken into position.

***Life is about moments, Gunner.***

He took a deep breath and set at the back of the defense, scanning the offense as they aligned.

***Perfect.***

He smiled and placed his mouthpiece between his teeth.

***Let’s see how you like it when someone hits you back.***

**“It will be first and ten for the Crusaders as they come to the ball. Whitworth looks over the defense and sets in the shotgun. Whitworth takes the snap and hesitates. He is going to run to the left side. He has a blocker, but here comes Gunner Weston...”**

The jolt took Gunner’s feet off the ground. The massive quarterback’s heavy exhale filled his ears.

***Wait for it.***

The turf was unforgiving as he landed on his back. The second hit was a direct impact on his shoulder.

***That felt...***

He inhaled and peered up into the night sky. The lights above illuminated the black and gold helmets that now looked down at him.

***Not bad.***

He gathered his strength and pushed up, now noticing that he was surrounded by opposing players on their sideline.

“G!” Emilio pressed through and pulled him out. “You OK?”

The gigantic player that Gunner had just hit got slowly to his feet. He was gripping the ball tight as players from both

sides tried to separate the group.

“Nice hit, Weston.” The quarterback cracked a grin and slapped his helmet. Both sets of players dispersed as the referee blew his whistle.

***Yeah.***

“Second and twelve.” The referee’s announcement was the final push Gunner needed.

***It was a good hit.***

“Never better, Emilio!” He exploded off the sideline and joined his teammates. “Let’s go, boys!”

# CHAPTER 21

**“Well, folks, we have seen a completely different Pioneer team come onto the field in the second half. This has got to be one of the hardest-hitting games I have witnessed over my years of broadcasting. South Mountain has refused to quit, standing toe to toe with the number-one team in the state. However, Coach Bianchi is going to have to find a way to put points on the board, as the Pioneers still trail 21-0.**

**The Crusaders will have to punt again to begin this fourth quarter, after a spectacular defensive play by Emilio Cortez. Tyquan Carter is back deep to receive the punt, with Andy Green staggered further up the field.**

**Here is the punt, and it is a low one. It bounces at the twenty-five-yard line and is grabbed by Carter. Tyquan Carter starts up the field. Carter is at the thirty; he cuts to the thirty-five. Carter gets a huge block from Andy Green at the forty! Now he is at a full sprint up the sideline! Tyquan Carter is at the other forty, the thirty-five, the thirty! It’s going to be a foot race to the endzone!”**

The vibration from the crowd reverberated under Gunner’s feet as he ran, full sprint, toward the endzone. Ty was already in Andy’s arms, and the entire team was screaming as one.

“That’s how you do it, Ty! That’s how you do it!” Emilio picked him up, throwing Ty into the lights.

“Ty!” Gunner finally got a chance to grab his best friend. “That’s you, Ty! That’s you!”

That patent Tyquan Carter smile lit up the field, and the noise from the PA announcer was quickly drowned out by the screaming of fans.

“They can’t stop us, G! They’re scared! Look at them!”

Gunner peered toward the other sideline, where the heads of a few players were now drooping.

*I see it.*

“We got this!” Ty had skipped away, shouting it over and over. “They ain’t no different than us!”

Andy, on the back bench, began shouting it now, too. A surge of cheers echoed from the cheerleaders and the student section.

*Yeah.*

The stadium was in a frenzy, and as Gunner joined his teammates, he got a thumbs-up from Peyton, who was immersed in the frantic celebration.

*They are no different than us.*

**“For the first time all season, the Crusaders of Allegheny Prep have their starters in during the fourth quarter—and for good reason. This game has become a street brawl, hard hit after hard hit, and now, late in the final quarter, the Pioneers have the football. It will be third down on the forty-yard line, with only four minutes to go in this Pennsylvania State Championship. The Pioneers have shown a tremendous amount of heart and determination; however, if they are not able to score on this drive, that may be all she wrote for this game.”**

“What do you think?” Gunner glanced over at JT, who was peering across the field.

“I don’t know, G. That dude is tough. I mean, he is an All-American.”

*Come on, JT!*

Gunner grabbed his friend’s facemask.

“But he isn’t you, JT! And he’s just a football player.”

The noise of the stadium was rising with each passing minute, and it was becoming almost impossible for the entire huddle to hear his play calls.

“Look!” Gunner was shouting so his teammates could hear him. “That safety has been creeping up all night. He wants to end this game and make the big play. If he wants it,” Gunner

slapped the shoulder pads of his offensive lineman in front of him, “then let’s make him earn it!”

It took a second, but JT slowly began to smile before he gave a slight nod.

***You got this, JT!***

“Hey, G!” Ty caught him right as they broke the huddle. “You sure this play is right? You sure you’re going to have enough time with those boys coming at you?”

***Well.***

Gunner shrugged and threw on the best grin he could. The massive lineman across the field dug in.

***I really hope so.***

**“Here we go: Third down for the Pioneers, and Weston calls out the cadence. He takes the snap and is going to drop back to pass! Weston is immediately put under pressure from Bishop. He is going to have to move to his right side. Oh no, it looks like Weston is...Wow! What a block by Carter to spring Weston free! He’s going to set and look to throw one deep. Weston just gets it off before taking a huge hit from Ricardo Sampson! Jefferson Taylor is running step for step with All-American Riley Davis down the field. It is going to be a foot race to the ball!”**

Gunner immediately felt all the air leave his lungs. A shooting pain traveled up the entire left side of his body as he was sandwiched between the ground and the gargantuan man who had just hit him.

***Shit.***

He tried to breathe, but his lungs refused to fill with air, his ears ringing loudly.

***Deep breath—just try and relax.***

Gunner finally rolled over, staring up into a black sky. Due to the blinding pillared lights, he could only see a few faint stars.

“G!” He could hear a voice, but it sounded like it was at the other end of a tunnel. “G!” His body was being picked up, Emilio staring him in the eyes. “Are you OK?”

*No, I am not even close to being OK.*

Gunner took a short breath, the ringing in his ears replaced with thunderous screams.

“What...what happened?” He could barely get the words out.

“He caught it, G! Look!”

JT was flying down the sideline with the ball still in hand. A massive group of his teammates were celebrating as he jumped into them.

“We scored?” Gunner tried to smile, but numbness had begun to take over the entire left side of his body.

“Yeah, G.” An anxious quiver entered Emilio’s voice. “We scored.”

**“...Jefferson Taylor just ran right by the All-American safety Riley Davis, and now this is only a one-score game at 21-14! Who would have thought this possible after the domination of the first half by the Crusaders, but now the Pioneers are one defensive stop away from having a chance to tie this ball game!”**

“I need you to sit still, Gunner.”

*This is like a damn tradition now!*

The trainer was working gingerly on the padding under his shoulder pads. Unfortunately for Gunner, he was so used to it at this point that he could almost move in rhythm with the man.

“I can’t. It feels...forget it!” The trainer’s eyes widened at his shout. “I won’t be able to throw if you add more padding. Just take it all off.”

Based on the trainer’s reaction, Gunner was not going to get his request.

“G, are you OK?” Ty jogged over to him.

***No, I AM NOT OK!***

Gunner let out an audible groan as the trainer moved his hands under the shoulder pads again.

“G?” Ty sat next to him on the bench and grabbed his hand. “Come on, man, take my hand.”

The tears were coming fast, and Gunner squeezed so hard that Ty winced.

“To hell with it!” Gunner shot his head up toward the sky. The knives poked all over his left side. “It’s not helping anyway! Take it all out so I can make the throws I need to!”

The trainer’s eyes were locked on him, processing what Gunner had just requested.

“G. You can’t do that, man. You know you can’t do that!” Andy was supporting him from his other side now.

***Will someone just listen to me?!***

Ty started to remove the brace that held the padding. And while his best friend’s eyes seemed to not agree, his actions did set the trainer in motion to assist as well.

“AG!” Gunner gritted his teeth, trying to get the words out between gasps of pain. “I need you to take my spot-on defense. I’m useless on that side of the ball now.”

Andy started shaking his head just as Emilio arrived.

“You can do this, AG!”

***Oh shit!***

A deep stab of pain caused Gunner to slam his feet against the underside of the bench.

“And...and Emilio!” He used everything he had left to grab the facemask of the muscular linebacker. “You get me that damn football back!”

His voice cracked, and a headache from the constant jolts of pain forced him to close his eyes.

***Please.***



Gunner tensed every muscle. He popped up from the bench and slapped Andy's shoulder pads.

“Gunner—”

“Just get me that damn football back!” he shouted as loud as he could.

**“Third down for Whitworth and the Allegheny Prep Crusaders. They have moved the ball slowly down the field, and with time running down, the Pioneers need a stop. Whitworth takes the snap and looks to run around the right side. Whitworth is looking for space, but here comes Cortez and...WHAT A HIT! Cortez stopped him just short of the first down.**

**And, well, folks, look at this. After Cortez's game-saving tackle, it appears that the Allegheny sideline is going to hesitate. They're going to go for it on fourth down and go for the WIN! With one minute and twenty seconds remaining, and the Pioneers out of timeouts, two yards will bring home a state championship for Allegheny Prep.**

**Whitworth looks over the defense with the clock continuing to run. He takes the snap and is going to drop back to pass. He is under pressure from Cortez again! Whitworth moves to his left and throws to the sideline. He has a receiver working against Malcolm Bailey and...”**

“Gunner!”

The pandemonium, the entire sideline exploding, told him all he needed to know.

***Our ball.***

Gunner tried to stand, but his legs were still weak.

***Deep breath, Gunner, it's your moment.***

He inhaled, using every ounce of energy he had to push his Nike cleats into the turf.

“Gunner!” Coach Bianchi called again, shifting his visor violently. “The trainer just told me that you took off all the protective padding and that you may have re-injured that shoulder. I am not—”

“Coach.” He was fighting to force a smile. “Trust me.”

***Please.***

His coach’s shoulders dropped, and his eyes softened. While the rest of the stadium was in chaos, the two stood in complete silence.

***Come on, Coach.***

“Damn it.” Coach Bianchi exhaled and shook his head. “OK. Stay to your right, protect yourself, and remember that you have no timeouts. Fifty seconds on the clock.”

Gunner flashed a more genuine smile.

“This is your game now.” Coach Bianchi pulled him close. “Make the calls, and don’t forget, fifty seconds for the state championship!”

A push sent Gunner jogging out onto the field. His teammates had all gathered in a huddle, waiting for him.

***Take your moment.***

He slowed and stood in front of his offense, the sound of heavy breathing crystal clear through the thunderous screaming of the crowd.

“Gentlemen...” he said, forcing the word out between bursts of pain.

“G, are you—”

Gunner laid his hand on the top of Emilio’s helmet to cut him off.

“One drive, one last moment. Together.” He turned to each player before finally landing on Ty. “And I wouldn’t want to be in this moment with anyone else but you guys.” Ty nodded his head slowly, a grin on his face. “Gun right, 234 aces. We have no timeouts, so get out of bounds when you can and get right to the ball.”

He took one more look around, inhaling quickly to hide the tremor that was making its way up his body.

“This is our moment. The one we’ve been working toward since we were six years old.” The entire huddle exhaled as one. “Now, let’s go take it!”

**“Well, here we go. Gunner Weston, who just had his shoulder pads off in pain, will have to move his offense fifty yards against one of the greatest defenses we have ever seen in this state.**

**Weston comes to the line of scrimmage and stands in the shotgun. He calls out the cadence and takes the snap. He looks down the field and fires a pass to Andy Green! What a catch by Green, who takes the ball down to the Crusaders thirty-five-yard line!**

**The Pioneers have no timeouts, so they are going to hustle to the ball. Weston points out a new play using hand signals as the referee blows his whistle, the clock starting again. He takes the snap. Weston is put under pressure by Sampson but gets it dropped off to Carter! Tyquan Carter is now out in space. Carter runs to the twenty-five, now to the twenty. Carter is still on his feet and makes it down to the Crusaders twelve-yard line!**

**What a play by Carter, but he was not able to get out of bounds! The clock continues to run! Weston scrambles his team to the line of scrimmage. He calls out another play, but there is confusion! The clock is at ten and continues to run. Weston calls out the cadence. This will be the last play of regulation. Weston takes the snap and looks to throw. He is going to loft it to the back left of the endzone, looking for Green! Andy Green jumps and...”**

***Did he catch it?***

Gunner froze, and the stadium came to a hush around him.

***Come on, AG!***

He took a step forward, staring intently at the referee, who was pulling Andy and the defender apart.

***TOUCHDOWN!***

He saw him raise his hands, followed by an eruption from the stands.

“Hell yeah, AG!” Ty yelled as he ran by him. “What a throw, G! What a damn throw!”

The opposing team was in shock, frozen in place. Ty and the rest of his teammates had run to find Andy.

***Wow.***

Gunner let out a sigh of relief. His heart was pumping fast, but the knives that had been stabbing him a few minutes earlier were now just a dull prick. He turned his gaze to the sky above and smiled. The sound of the crowd and his teammates overtook him as he let it all soak in.

***Live your moment. Take your moment.***

His smile widened as he turned to the sideline. He began a jog to his coach while holding up two fingers.

“What are you talking about, Gunner?” Coach Bianchi ran out to meet him. “We kick this extra point, and we can take this game to overtime.”

***I hate overtime.***

Gunner shook his head.

“No way, Coach!” The rest of his teammates had joined them. “I say we make them earn it!”

“Gunner...” His coach shook his head.

“Coach,” Ty jumped in, “G is right! This is our moment. Let us live it together.”

Coach Bianchi paused. He peered around at the rest of the team, who started to nod their heads in agreement.

“Well then.” A sly smile formed as he ripped the visor off his head. “Go take it, boys!”

***Hell yeah!***

A surge of energy ran through Gunner. He pumped his fists and turned back to the field.

“Gunner, wait.” Coach Bianchi twisted him so they were eye to eye. “You call the play. You know the offense. This is your team.”

### ***Me!?***

“You earned this.” His coach leaned in close, pressing his forehead against Gunner’s helmet. “And I wouldn’t want any other quarterback out on the field for this play.”

### ***Coach...***

Everything stuttered around him. While Gunner’s heart was still pumping fast, his arms and legs felt strong. The knives were no longer jabbing at his shoulder, and the smile refused to leave his face.

### ***He trusts me.***

As they remained locked, Gunner could see a new look bloom in his coach’s eyes. The agonizing pain was gone, replaced by a warm look of contentment.

### ***He really trusts me.***

Sure, he trusted Gunner with this play, but this look meant more than that. He trusted him with so much more, and now Gunner finally understood.

“Well, Coach,” the other sideline was scrambling as the defense ran back on the field, “I’m really glad you didn’t listen to anyone else. I’m glad you took this job.”

### ***Really glad.***

“Go make it happen, Weston.” The final pat on the back sent Gunner onto the field. What had initially been a blistering surge of adrenaline had steadied to a warm tingle.

### ***Moments.***

As he finally settled by the ball, he scanned the sideline he had just come from. He found his sister, screaming and waving her pom poms with a joyous smile he had not seen on her face since their father had passed. He saw the student section cheering together with all the people from town, including Tony and Mr. Chen.

He found his mother, a large grin on her face as she clapped her hands together.

### ***Family.***

Finally, he found Hailey. She was staring directly at him, and he had that feeling in his stomach again.

***We are all with you.***

The referee's whistle jerked Gunner's attention back to the field. Ty and the rest of his teammates set into position and awaited his play.

"One more time, boys!" He started to signal the call with his hands. A head nod from each player meant they were ready to go.

***Moments, Gunner.***

He took one more deep breath and brought his hands to his mouth. He closed his eyes, expecting to see the image of his father.

***And so will you.***

Instead, his own words echoed in his head as Hailey's face lit him up from within.

Back in August, he had no idea that the girl that ran past him would change his life forever. She would challenge him, make him see the monster he was becoming, and allow him to become the man that his father would have wanted him to be. He could finally feel what his coach was talking about. The strength that his father had seen.

***I understand.***

That strength brought a sense of calm and clarity as the entire stadium cheered around him. While this play may have been for the state championship, he already felt like he had won. The game was just that—a game. He had given everything he could, and whatever the result, he would wake up tomorrow and have another day. His life would go on, and when it did, he would have Hailey.

***I finally understand.***

He finally understood that feeling in his stomach.

***This is the moment, Dad.***

This feeling was different, and if he could've, he would have grabbed the PA announcer's microphone and told everyone in the stadium.

***I LOVE HAILEY BIANCHI!***

**“This is for the championship, Pioneer fans! Coach Bianchi is going to go for the win on this play. Weston calls out the cadence and looks over the defense. He takes the snap! Weston rolls to his right side. He has pressure from behind, but no one is open! Weston is going to be hit in the...NO! He spins away from Sampson and moves back to his left side. He is now being chased by Bishop! Weston is going to throw one into the endzone! He has Green backpedaling to the pylon. Andy Green extends his arms and...”**

# CHAPTER 22

“I can’t believe we pulled it off!” Tyquan ran up and hugged Hailey.

*We sure did!*

“Seriously! It was amazing!” Tyquan continued. Andy and Emilio joined in, wrapping her up before JT embraced the entire group.

“You were a star, Hailey!” Tyquan pulled away and winked. “And I would know what it’s like to be a star.”

“Boys!” she shouted, unable to hold back the tears in her eyes. “You were amazing, too! I am so proud of all of you.”

*My boys were fantastic!*

“Thanks for everything, Hailey.” JT hugged her again. The others were now engaged in a round of high fives and fist bumps. “You really were amazing, and you look so beautiful in that dress.”

*Aww, JT!*

Her face was getting hot, and she smoothed the golden gown draped over her body.

The flowing satin dress that she now wore had initially intimidated her. It was meant for a princess, and Hailey had never felt like one. However, the moment Gunner’s deep green eyes had locked on her when she walked out for the dance, she knew she belonged in it.

“Hailey!” Juliana’s voice broke in behind her. “You were stunning, amazing, wonderful!”

A chorus of giggling laughter erupted as Hailey twirled around. Brad and Bridgette joined her best friend, and the trio sprinted toward her.

“Bridgette.” Hailey jumped over and hugged her. “Your voice is amazing, and you were so wonderful tonight!”



Bridgette blushed, a tear in her eye as she hugged Hailey back.

“Coming from you, Hailey, that means the world.”

Brad grabbed them both and screamed. “It was so wonderful!”

***So wonderful.***

Hailey could not help but beam as she looked at the group. Eight months ago, she had been an outcast with no friends. Her world had appeared to be crumbling, and she had consistently felt a heavy sadness that she could do nothing about.

Now, as they all stood together in the hallway, which would soon be overrun with spectators, she could not help but feel a new, bittersweet sadness.

***I am going to miss this so much.***

Bridgette and Brad would be going to college an hour north of South Mountain. While Hailey had never heard of the school, she was sure the decision had something to do with Emilio playing football up that way next year. Andy and Juliana, who were currently rubbing noses while Emilio rolled his eyes, would be off to Pittsburgh, and Hailey was already excited to go visit and see a brand-new city. JT, who was slapping hands with Tyquan, had settled on NYU. Hailey was over the moon that he would be majoring in theatre when he arrived.

Tyquan, meanwhile, would be on his way to State College, and Hailey already had plans to be at every game he played in the large stadium that awaited him.

“Everyone!” Ms. Summers stood, arms outstretched, in the middle of the hallway. “We need to head to the main entrance of the auditorium so you can walk in for your curtain calls. Remember, you will head right to the stage and prepare for the last dance! A little surprise for our fans!”

***One last dance.***

“Hailey.” Ms. Summers pulled her aside. “Thank you for all you have done. For me, and, well, for all of us.” Her hug was full of warmth. “This truly was a magical night.”

***Absolutely magical.***

Hailey gave a final squeeze. Her teacher headed for the door that would lead them down the center of the auditorium.

“Hailey!” She felt her body lurch forward from an impact.

***Peyton!***

“Hailey, you look so beautiful in that dress, and you were amazing out on that stage!” Peyton’s eyes shimmered in the light of the hallway. “The dance...I cried the entire time.”

***Oh, Peyton.***

She grabbed the young girl and held her in a long embrace.

Peyton had become like another sister to her over the last few months. But the fact that she had convinced Melissa to help with the cheerleading team next year was the real reason why Hailey squeezed even tighter before letting go.

“You girls were amazing!” Hailey waved to the other cheerleaders, who were skipping up the hallway. “I am so glad you joined this year.”

“We wouldn’t have, if not for you. But I am so glad we did. It was so much fun! Thanks, Hailey!” Peyton took a second to giggle with her friends before she peeked back at the end of the hallway. “He, umm, he’s already at the main entrance.” Peyton leaned in close and whispered. “I think he’s waiting for you.”

***Gunner.***

The young cheerleaders immediately ran to join the other cast members by the door.

***Right.***

Hailey took a deep breath, steadying herself before beginning her walk to meet her co-star.

***I wonder...***

She found him just around the corner, standing by the trophy case.

***Gunner.***

She was struck again by how handsome he was in his blue tuxedo coat, the yellow lining contrasting brilliantly with the white shirt underneath.

“Hey,” she said softly to his back, “you thinking about the game?”

He jumped, and she heard him exhale. The runner-up trophy was front and center.

The last play of that game felt like it took an hour, and Hailey could still see the boys lying on the field in defeat. The image of the other team celebrating next to them had replayed in her head the entire drive home.

However, in time, it had faded. What remained was the image of her father and Gunner—the way they embraced tightly after the play, the way they seemed frozen, immune to the worries of those around them. It was a moment that she would never forget. She knew that whenever she was going through a tough time, that image would help her. She knew she would hold on to it for the rest of her life.

“Actually...” He turned.

***He’s smiling!***

“I wasn’t.”

She finally realized what he was really staring at. It was the picture of his father, the one he had been looking at all those months ago.

***Oh, that smile, Gunner.***

When his green eyes locked on her, she saw the strength that had pulled her in from the beginning.

“I was thinking about how happy he must be right now.”

He grabbed her hands, and the familiar butterflies began to flutter.

“He would have been so proud of you,” she whispered as they came close. “You were fantastic out there.”

The rustling of the other cast members was a mere backdrop. All she could focus on was Gunner’s face. His eyes held her still. He came even closer, cupping her face and putting his lips against hers.

***I love this.***

As he gripped her tighter, she felt her body weaken and fall into his arms.

“I held back a little on the stage. I hope that’s alright.”

She giggled and pulled him right up against her.

“I love you, Hailey.” The words floated from his mouth, melting her even more deeply into his arms. “You saved me.”

He held her as if she might run away.

***No, you saved me.***

She grabbed his neck and pressed her forehead against his. Even now, after all these months together, she could not contain her emotions when they were this close.

“I love you too, Gunner.” His shoulders relaxed underneath her arms. “I would not pick anyone else to have this last dance with me.”

He smiled wide and picked her up, spinning her around as they laughed together.

“Hey! My two stars!” Ms. Summers yelled from around the corner. “It’s time. It’s time for your moment!”

Gunner slowly set her down, the bottom of her gown settling on the linoleum floor.

“You ready?” she asked softly as they made their way to the entrance.

“Yes.” He grabbed her hand. The two came to a stop just as the doors swung open in front of them.

The lights were directed right at where they would step in. The applause and music hit her before they even began to

walk. While it was dimly lit, she could see all the faces from around town. Tony, his big Italian smile bright as he clapped hard. Todd and the Chen family, beaming. His daughter's mouth hanging open. She found Gunner's mom, who was wiping her eyes with the warmest look on her face. Finally, she saw her father and sister, who were smiling ear to ear. They had tears in their eyes, but this time, they were not from sadness or defeat. These were tears of joy, and as Hailey blinked, she felt one of her own roll down her cheek.

***I am ready.***

She looked up at Gunner, who had once chased her up to these very double doors. The same boy who had made her run through them crying, the same boy who had made her hate everything about this town.

Yet now, as she held his hand and stared at him, she saw the young man that she had begun to care for so much, the strong and caring young man that she was ready to take on the next chapter of her life with.

Moving to State College together would be tough; they would have good times and bad. Life was not a fairytale, and it did not end at the final dance. However, as the song began to play and the light moved with them, she knew. She knew that no matter what came their way, they would do it as one. It had started as a childish game, but they had found a strength together that neither knew they had.

“Let's go have our moment.” He smiled and squeezed her hand, slowly leading her into the applause as her favorite song played on.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## **Jake Stehman**

Jake is a fiction author hailing from the outskirts of Reading, Pennsylvania. After an unexpected layoff during the pandemic, Jake discovered a passion for writing he never knew he had. He holds a bachelor's degree in business from Lebanon Valley College and has returned to his career in talent acquisition when he's not crafting his next story. A devoted sports enthusiast and movie buff, Jake currently resides in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with his wife and their two beautiful young children.