She's *never* been kissed.
He's never felt this way about *anyone*.

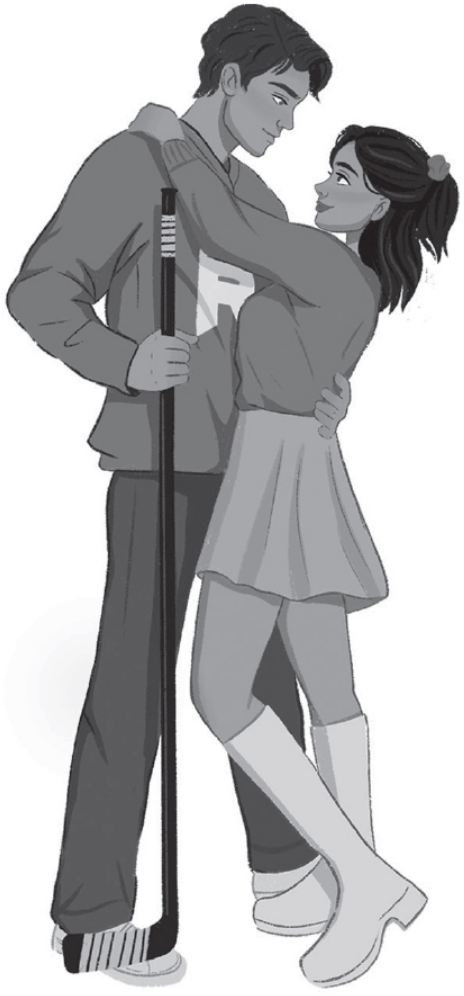
Grumpy DARLING



Author of *Rival Darling*

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Grumpy DARLING



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Dedication

For Pete. My everything.

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Chapter 1

Grayson

Falling for your best friend was always dangerous, but this was the first time I thought my feelings for Paige might actually kill me. The muffin had looked innocent enough when she first offered it. I should have known better than to trust anything Paige cooked.

I was seriously regretting my decision to take such a big bite, and I was struggling to swallow. It tasted like she'd mixed up sugar and salt somewhere in the recipe. Could she have accidentally dropped a dash of chili powder in there too? I pressed a hand to my chest as the muffin burned its way to my stomach. My insides felt like they were on fire, and I was starting to wonder if my day might end with a trip to the hospital.

"So, what do you think?" Paige smiled up at me, her big brown eyes brimming with hope and pride. She had always reminded me of a character out of a fairy tale: sweet, playful, and if she could sing, I had no doubt birds would gravitate toward her voice. It was just my luck that the enchanting princess in *my* fairy tale was handing me a poisoned apple.

There was no way I could tell her what I really thought about the muffin, so I tried my best to smile and ignore the confusing taste that still lingered in my mouth. "I think these might be your best yet." It wasn't far from the truth. Baking was Paige's latest obsession, and I'd been the guinea pig for her creations all week. The muffins were at least an improvement on her cookies. I'd almost chipped a tooth on those.

"Really?" Paige looked around the locker room at the other guys who were all staring at their muffins in various states of horror. It was bad enough she'd decided to poison me with her cooking, but did she really have to try and take out my entire hockey team too? At least this was happening after the game we'd just played and not before.

"What do the rest of you think?" she asked. "Do you like them?"

I didn’t want Paige to notice their disgust, and my smile immediately transformed into a dark glare as I warned them not to say anything negative. They were going to eat every last crumb of those muffins whether they liked it or not. My twin brother, Reed, might be captain of our team, but as the Ransom Devils’ main defensive enforcer, I still held plenty of authority among the guys.

When they saw the look in my eyes, they all started nodding and giving small, satisfied groans.

“These are great, Paige.”

“Never had anything so good.”

“I wish my mom cooked like this.”

They were laying it on a bit thick, but I didn’t stop them. Not when I could see how happy it made Paige. She was practically skipping on the spot.

Reed was slowly working through his muffin beside me, and I noticed him pull a small piece of aluminum foil from his mouth. He caught my gaze, and I lifted an eyebrow as I waited for him to agree with the others.

He quickly tucked the foil into his hand. “Thanks, Paige. I really like the extra kick they have.” I nudged him with my elbow, forcing him to continue. “Is that cinnamon I taste?”

“It is,” Paige gushed as she spun to face him. “Oh, I’m so glad you all like them. I’ll have to bring more to your game next week.”

I was about to tell her that wasn’t necessary, but my younger brother, Parker, chimed in, “That’d be great.” His words were barely decipherable as he was speaking with his mouth full.

The funny thing was, I didn’t think he was lying. He was quite happily demolishing the muffin, and before he had even finished, he started gesturing for Paige to hand him the box containing the rest. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Parker was a bit of a garbage disposal when it came to food, with absolutely no standards for what he put in his mouth. He didn’t really have standards for what came out of it either, and was the kind of person who released pretty much every thought that popped into his head. In that regard, we couldn’t have been more different.

“Okay, well, I better run before I get caught in here,” Paige said. She gave everyone a wave but, as she went to leave, she stopped next to my younger brother. “Make sure you share, Parker.”

He was too busy digging into another muffin to respond, but I could feel the rest of the guys in the room flinch at the mere thought of going back for seconds. I guided Paige over to the exit before she could notice.

Once we were out in the hallway, she paused and turned to me. “They weren’t that good, were they?”

I was suddenly grateful my face had the emotional range of a goldfish. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I loved them.” Technically, that was true. I loved everything about Paige, even her crappy muffins. Apparently, love wasn’t just blind, it also had no sense of taste.

She laughed and shook her head. “I know you’re just saying that to be nice. But don’t worry, the next batch will be better. I’ve got to get this cooking thing nailed if I want to check it off my list.”

I murmured some sounds of agreement. There was a strong chance I wouldn’t survive the next batch, but I didn’t want to discourage Paige when it came to her bucket list. She’d started it over the summer, while her work-obsessed parents were pressuring her to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. At first, the list was full of things Paige thought she might be able to make into a career someday. But now it seemed to have a much broader focus. There was definitely stuff on her list that could never lead to a paying job. I didn’t know for sure what she’d included though, as I’d never actually seen its full contents.

She always kept the pink piece of paper stuffed in her school diary and was very secretive about it, even with me. It was strange, considering she involved me in practically everything she tried anyway. I was constantly being dragged from one activity to another. One week she was knitting us all mittens, the next she was painting our portraits. Now she was cooking. Who knew what was coming next.

“Once the muffins are perfected, maybe I’ll try baking a cake,” Paige continued. “I know how you love chocolate. Or maybe cinnamon rolls, for something different . . .”

Her eyes were glittering with excitement, and it drew a smile from my lips. I loved the way her face lit up when she sensed a challenge. Whenever she tried something new, she always gave it her all. And while nothing she’d attempted so far had stuck, I had no doubt it was only a matter of time before she found the thing she loved.

Paige tilted her head as though she was waiting for me to respond. She’d finished speaking, and apparently I’d been so lost in my thoughts

about her I was now staring in silence like a complete idiot. I couldn't help it that every time she looked at me time seemed to slow, and I was briefly transported to an alternate universe, where my deep and secret feelings for my best friend weren't completely one-sided.

"Sorry?" I asked, jerking myself back to reality.

She laughed softly. "Chocolate cake or cinnamon rolls? I know it's a hard decision, but you're looking at me like you've forgotten what baking is."

"I know I might have lost a few brain cells playing hockey, but I haven't been slammed into the boards *that* much."

"Yes, you are more of a slammer than a slammee." She grinned. "So, what do you think?"

"Uh, maybe cinnamon rolls?" I might never eat a muffin again; I didn't need her to ruin chocolate cake for me too.

"Good choice." Paige nodded, but then her expression started to sour. "Although, I may not get a chance to cook again for a while. I think my mom's been possessed by the ghost of a college admissions officer. She's on a total rampage about my applications. And with my dad going away on a business trip tomorrow, I'll be the only one in the house for her to nag. I swear she's going to chain me to my desk until I finish them."

She scrunched her nose up at the thought, and I found my chest tightening with sympathy. It was rare to see Paige without a smile on her face and a sparkle in her eye, but when it happened, it was usually because of her parents. They were both so wrapped up in themselves and their jobs, they frequently acted as though she didn't exist. And when they did pay attention to her, she often wished they hadn't. Paige's lack of future direction was an especially sore spot between her and her mom.

"You're so lucky you know what you want to do with your life," she muttered. "I can't even figure out what my hobbies are, let alone what colleges I want to apply to, or what career aspirations I have."

I certainly felt lucky to have hockey in my life. Especially since I'd been offered a full scholarship to play at my dream school, Ryker University, next year. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite as straightforward as it sounded. I only had a verbal agreement with them. Nothing would be official until signing day, in a couple of weeks. Until then, I was skating on very thin ice.

"Maybe you could tell your mom you want to be a chef?" I suggested.

“Maybe.” Paige laughed. “Do you think she’ll be convinced after trying one of my muffins?”

“Sure.” My stomach took that moment to groan loudly, reminding me what a terrible liar I was. “Uh, I better get back in there before Coach Ray starts to wonder where I am.”

“You’re probably right,” she agreed, before she reached up to give me a quick hug. It was something she’d done a thousand times over the years, but it never stopped my heart from racing.

“I’ll catch you later, Gray.” Her arms fell and I immediately missed their warmth. The corners of her lips lifted as she started to back away. “Oh, and great game today. You were amazing. That block you made in the second period was incredible. We wouldn’t have won without you.”

I scoffed under my breath. The block she was praising me for wasn’t that impressive, and I knew my performance had been well below my best. I’d played particularly badly in the final period, when my old injury had started to flare up.

My knee had been causing me problems ever since I injured my MCL a few years back. And although it had been doing better recently, I’d landed on it badly in preseason training. I couldn’t afford to give it time to rest though. Not when my whole future relied upon it working.

I just needed to push through the pain until the ink had dried on that scholarship contract. I couldn’t let the coaches at Ryker see my performances drop, or discover I was damaged goods, in case they withdrew their offer entirely. But now the season was in full swing, with constant games and training, I wasn’t confident my knee would hold out.

“I’m sure the guys would have been just fine without me.” Paige knew my knee was bothering me, but I’d never told her quite how precarious my situation was.

“No way. The Devils would be nothing without big bad Grayson Darling.” She flashed me one last smile, before she started for the exit. “See you tomorrow.”

“Sunday dinner at our place?”

“As always,” she called back over her shoulder.

I watched until she disappeared around the corner before returning to the locker room. Despite being far from happy with the way I played today, it was hard not to feel lighter after talking to Paige. Then I opened the locker room door.

“Is Grayson’s girlfriend trying to kill us?” I heard someone groan.

It wasn’t the first time Paige had been referred to as my girlfriend. We spent so much time together, I could understand people making that assumption. However, most of my friends and teammates knew just as well as I did that we’d only ever been friends.

“Girlfriend?” Matt snorted. “He wishes.” Usually, not even Reed’s best friend tried joking about me. Either he was feeling brave, or the guys hadn’t realized I was back.

“It’s lucky she’s hot,” Elliot added. “Watching her ass walk out the door almost made me forget she just violated my mouth with those muffins.”

My knuckles cracked as my hands clenched at my sides. Paige might not be my girlfriend, but I still wouldn’t let anyone talk about her that way. One more word from our team’s goalie, and I was going to do something that would see us both sidelined for the rest of the season.

I loudly cleared my throat, causing everyone in the locker room to snap their heads in my direction. When Elliot saw the look in my eyes, his face went white.

In moments like these, I didn’t really mind the infamous reputation my brothers and I had developed over the years. There were always rumors circulating about the Darling Devils, each one more outrageous than the last. Most of them weren’t true, but it could be useful sometimes. Like when we wanted to intimidate our opponents on the ice, or force our teammates to consume poisonous baked goods in the locker room after the game. In this case, it was useful to stop a jerk like Elliot objectifying my best friend.

“Oh, uh, sorry, Grayson, I—”

“I think what Elliot was *trying* to say is that the muffins were memorable. Right, Ford?” Parker prompted, giving Elliot a hard look.

“Yeah, uh, that’s right,” Elliot replied, swallowing visibly as he did his best to look anywhere but directly into my eyes. “Unforgettable, in fact.”

I took a few slow, strong steps toward him, and he instinctively shrunk back against his locker. The rest of the room was silent, as though all the other players were holding their breath, waiting to see what I’d do next.

While Reed and Parker weren’t nearly as frightening as they could appear, I often wondered if my bad reputation was justified. As the team’s most ruthless defenseman, it was my job to intimidate the opposition as much as possible, and people struggled to forget that, even when I stepped

off the ice. I did little to try changing their opinion. I wasn't exactly approachable, and often wore a dark expression that Paige referred to as my "resting storm face." It caused most people to keep their distance. But that was fine by me.

"It won't happen again." Elliot's voice was quaking slightly, and I almost felt bad. I didn't want to scare him too much. The team still needed a goalie after all.

"Good." There was no need to say anything more. Elliot was already cowering enough, and the incident would probably sprout a new rumor about me anyway. I held my gaze on him for a few seconds, just to make him sweat a little longer, but then turned and continued to my locker. I felt the whole room exhale as I did.

When I reached my locker, I slowly lowered myself onto the bench next to Reed. For the first time since the game, I allowed myself a moment to give in to the aches and pains rampaging through my body, especially my knee. It had been a tough contest today, and I'd had to work hard to hide how much my knee was hurting. How was I going to get through the whole season feeling like this? I wasn't even sure I'd make it to next week, let alone signing day.

"How's your knee?" Reed asked quietly, nodding to where I was tightly gripping my leg.

"Fine." I quickly moved my hand away.

Reed's eyes were filled with worry. "You'd tell me if it was giving you trouble again, wouldn't you?"

"Like I said, it's fine."

"If you say so," my brother replied, though he appeared far from convinced.

"I do."

His lips pulled at the sides as he considered me. "So, Paige's cooking—was today a special occasion?"

"She's baking at the moment," I said. "You know how she likes to try everything."

"Ah, the list." Reed was one of the few people who knew about it. "I think I preferred it when she was trying to learn the bagpipes."

I shuddered at the memory. She'd made sounds I didn't think were possible, and I was sure she'd hit notes that only dogs could hear. My ears were still ringing.

“At least loud noises can’t kill you,” Reed added.

“Maybe your stomach needs to harden up.” Not even my brother was allowed to insult Paige.

“Oh, is that why she fed us cement mix?”

I scowled at him, but he only smirked in reply.

“Maybe she’s a secret spy working for the Sunshine Hills Saints,” Matt said, leaning forward to join our conversation from the other side of Reed. “And she’s trying to take us all out.”

“Not Paige,” Reed said. “She loves hockey. Have you seen the way she cheers for us at games?”

“Cheers for us?” Matt said. “Or one of us?”

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and caught him grinning at me. It was obvious what he was getting at, but he decided to spell it out anyway.

“Seriously, Grayson. Are you ever going to make a move on her?” Matt really was feeling brave today.

“We’re just friends,” I replied through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, but can’t you change that?” Matt glanced at Reed as though he was looking for backup. And while my brother was eyeing me like he wholly agreed with his friend, he thankfully kept his mouth shut. He’d given up trying to change my mind about Paige a long time ago.

“Don’t you want to be more?” Matt prodded.

What I wanted was for this line of questioning to end. I could barely admit how I felt about Paige to myself, let alone to anyone else. And those feelings needed to remain buried within me, hidden so deep I could pretend they didn’t exist. I was practically an expert at that now. I’d been doing it since the first time she’d smiled my way in second grade.

She was the first person to truly see me as more than a talented hockey player. If it weren’t for my skills with a puck, I often wondered whether anyone would even know I existed. I wasn’t a natural leader like Reed, or outgoing like Parker. But I never felt invisible when I was around Paige.

Unfortunately, by the time I realized the true extent of my feelings, I’d already been stuck in the friend zone for years. And even if, by some miracle, Paige suddenly did start seeing me differently, I knew I wasn’t worthy of her. She was the human embodiment of sunshine, and what kind of selfish jerk would I be if I dimmed her glow with my dark, stormy clouds?

“I don’t want anything to change. I like things how they are.”

“Okay, man, whatever you say.” Matt shrugged, and I hoped that would be the end of it, but then Reed spoke up.

“Things are going to change, though,” he said. “And soon, whether you like it or not. We’re committed to play for Ryker, but what’s Paige doing next year?”

Coach Ray entered the locker room and called us to attention before I could respond. Reed already knew the answer to his question. Paige had no clue.

But, eventually, she’d have to make some decisions. And those decisions could lead her somewhere I wasn’t. We might not be in the same town or even the same state. Paige could end up in a different country for all I knew. She’d seemed to enjoy learning French for her bucket list a couple of months ago; what if she suddenly decided to move to Europe?

Coach had started addressing the room, talking about some new player joining the team next week, but I wasn’t listening. Instead, I was repeating Reed’s words over and over in my head.

Everything was going to change at the end of this year. And I didn’t like it at all. Still, that didn’t mean I was going to do something stupid that could ruin my friendship with Paige. She was the girl I wanted in my life forever, and even if that was only as a friend, it would have to be enough for me.

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Chapter 2

Paige

“Come down here, Paige. I’ve got something important to—” Instead of finishing her sentence, my mom let out a blood-curdling scream. It was quickly followed by a shocked yelp. “What the hell is that?”

I was slowly making my way downstairs, but the sound of my mom’s panicked voice had me racing to the kitchen. I’d never heard her scream like that before. Something must be horribly wrong.

I burst into the kitchen and found her pressed up against the fridge, one shaking hand pointing across the room to a spot on the floor. Her face was pale as my dad appeared in the doorway behind me.

“What’s wrong now?” he demanded.

“M . . . M . . .”

Whatever it was, my mom couldn’t seem to get the words out to explain. I glanced in the direction she was pointing and smiled when I saw something small and fluffy on the floor.

“Aw, is that a mouse?” The poor little guy was probably terrified from all the screaming. But as I went to walk over to it, my mom finally snapped out of her state of shock and reached out an arm to stop me.

“Paige, no. It’s dead.”

“What? Really? How?” I couldn’t help but feel sad, especially given the relief in my mom’s voice as she announced his passing.

“All that screaming over a dead mouse?” My dad shook his head. “I thought there was a real problem.”

“I was taken by surprise, Steven.”

“I don’t have time for surprises, Deborah. My flight’s in just over two hours, and I have a stack of emails to get through before I go.”

He stalked from the room without another word. My mom took a deep breath, straightened her jacket and smoothed a hand over her perfect dark

hair that was slicked back in a tight bun. In an instant, her expression had transformed, and I almost forgot she'd been quivering in the corner only moments ago.

"Right, like I was saying, I've got something important to tell you." She turned and retrieved her cup of coffee from the counter as though nothing had happened. "Your father isn't the only one going on a business trip."

"Oh, okay." I failed to see how that news trumped the mystery of the mouse's tragic end. My parents were always traveling for work, so this was nothing new. Had she no respect for the dead?

"I'm leaving tonight."

That got my attention. "Wait, you're both leaving today?"

"Yes."

"How long will you be gone for?"

"They need me in Seattle first thing tomorrow," she replied. "And then Chicago the week after that. It'll be at least two weeks, maybe longer."

She took a long sip of her coffee, as though she hadn't just dropped a bomb on me.

"But Dad's going to be gone even longer than that, isn't he?"

My parents normally tried to time their business trips so at least one of them would be home with me, and it had been a while since there was a clash like this. I tried to remember the last time both my mom and dad were away. It must have been before my grandma died, because I could recall staying with her for a few days one winter, maybe in freshman year. Either way, I was certain my parents had never disappeared for this long at the same time. Now that I was a senior, I wondered whether I'd be allowed to stay home by myself.

"I know it's not ideal," my mom continued. "But your father refuses to change his plans, and my manager made it very clear how important my trip is when he called this morning."

I zoned out as she began to explain in painstaking detail exactly why her presence in Seattle, or wherever she was going, was so crucial. She worked in sales for a tech company—hardly a matter of life and death. No, but for my parents, it often felt like their jobs were even more important than that.

The thought made me return my attention to the poor little creature lying on the floor a few feet away. If he'd still been with us, listening to my mom talk about fostering strong client relationships probably would have bored him to death anyway. I wasn't particularly focused on what she was

saying, but she continued her one-sided conversation, oblivious. After a while, she seemed to pivot from talking about building trust with stakeholders into something about the trust she was placing in me to finish my college essay while she was away. It was truly impressive how she could bring almost any conversation back to my lack of plans for the future.

"What about the mouse?" I said, interrupting her.

"What about it?"

I waved my hands at it, in case my mom had forgotten it was still lying there. "What are we going to do with him?"

"I'll put it in the trash when we're done here."

"The trash?"

My mom bristled at my stunned response. "Well, it's not exactly getting a funeral in the backyard, Paige. You're not five anymore."

"But—"

"No buts. I'm not concerned about that." She snapped her fingers at me, making sure she had my full attention. "What I am concerned about are your college applications. I know you haven't been working on them. And you've got your meeting with the career counselor this coming week. Now, obviously I won't be around to check up on you, but I expect you to get all the applications drafted before the meeting so you can take them along and get feedback."

"But—" I tried to protest again, and she cut me off even quicker this time.

"What did I say about buts? This is important, Paige. Your future is important. You've been putting this off for months, and even though I'm not going to be here, I refuse to let you avoid it for another second."

I knew there was nothing I could say to win this argument. She was right. Not about the mouse. He *did* deserve a funeral in the backyard. But I had been putting off my college applications and avoiding my mom's attempts to talk to me about my career plans. Or should I say, *her* plans for my career. It killed her that I didn't have my whole life mapped out, like she did. But the more she pressured me into it, the more I wanted to drop out of school and join the circus.

"So, make sure you pack those college admission guides I got you, as well as all your books and homework—"

"What do you mean, pack?"

My mom looked down at me over her glasses. “You didn’t think I was letting you stay here alone for two weeks, did you? No, I’ve arranged for you to stay with that friend of yours . . .”

I should have known I was being too optimistic about having the house to myself. “You mean, Bonnie?”

“The one with a newborn baby in the house? No, there’s no way you’ll get your homework done with all that noise going on. It’s your other friend. The one who’s named after a color. Amber . . . Scarlett . . . Ivory . . .” She shook her head, giving up. “I don’t know. You’re always going to their house for dinner on Sundays.”

“Gray?” I gasped. “As in Grayson Darling?”

“Yes. That’s the one.”

My mouth hung open in surprise. “Mom, you do remember Gray’s a guy, right?”

“Oh yes, yes, of course, I do. The little boy you used to run around the neighborhood with all the time.”

There was nothing little about Grayson these days, but that wasn’t the kind of thing my mom noticed. Apparently, she was also unaware that Gray had a very big and very bad reputation. It was totally undeserved, but people in Ransom loved nothing more than spreading rumors about Grayson and his brothers: the infamous Darling Devils.

Of course, when they won a hockey game everyone worshipped the ground the three boys skated on, but they generally did so from a distance. I’d seen strangers cross the street to avoid bumping into Reed, Grayson and Parker. I’d even seen people get up and leave our local coffee shop just because they walked in. I couldn’t imagine many people freely sending their daughter into the Devils’ lair for a sleepover. I guessed there were some advantages that came with having parents who were too busy working to take notice of town gossip.

“You know he grew up, don’t you?”

She gave me a pointed look. “I’m aware.”

“And he has two brothers. You’re really letting me stay in a house filled with boys?”

“When I spoke to their mother, she suggested you room with her daughter. But I can’t imagine it will be an issue. You’re not silly about boys and dating like that.”

Apparently, even my mother knew my love life was a disaster. She wasn't wrong though. How could I get silly about boys when absolutely no boys were silly about me?

"Look, Paige, that family was not my first pick," she added. "But your grandmother's gone, and this trip came up at the last minute, so I didn't have much choice. We're just lucky Mrs. Darling was happy to take you."

Ah, the truth. The Darlings were her only option. My mom just cared more about her trip than she did about where her daughter was going to live for the next two weeks. Again, I wasn't sure why I was surprised.

The thought of the warm reception I'd get from the Darling family did make me smile though. I knew Amy would give me the tightest hug when I arrived, and Danny would be so welcoming. Cammie wasn't going to be thrilled about sharing her room, but Reed would be pleased to see me, Parker would definitely crack a joke, and Grayson, of course, would barely crack a smile. Still, his reaction was the one I was most excited to see when I rocked up with my bags.

"I told Mrs. Darling to expect you at three, so you better go pack." Mom paused and her expression soured as her gaze dipped to my outfit. "Is that what you'll be wearing?"

I glanced down at the pink polka-dot skirt and yellow blouse I had on. I failed to see why my mom was so confused. It was maybe a little bright, but I was feeling positive this morning and wanted my outfit to reflect that. At least, I had been until something died in our kitchen. I was now wondering if I should be wearing all black.

"It's just a skirt and top, Mom."

"You look like you're off to entertain at a child's birthday party."

"Well, I *was* planning to talk to the counselor about applying to clown college."

I could tell my joke had hit a nerve, and I was punished with another lecture.

"Be polite at the Darlings'. Do your homework. Clean your dishes. Please work on your applications, and do not miss your meeting. I can't afford to cut this work trip short and come back early. I'm trusting you, Paige."

I resisted the temptation to poke the bear with another witty retort, deciding instead to play it safe and give my mom the answer she needed to hear. "You've got nothing to worry about, Mom. I promise."

Her mouth twisted in a pout, like she wasn't sure whether to believe me. But then she gave a sharp nod. "Good. Thank you. But I'll still be calling you to check in." I wasn't sure if that was a promise or a threat. "Now, go pack." She ushered me from the kitchen. "You don't want to be late."

I was in a bit of a daze as I left the room. After the mouse tragedy and my mom's sudden announcement that she was going away, I felt like I'd slipped on a patch of ice and hit my head, leaving the world looking slightly wonky. It was all a lot to take in, but I was at least beginning to shake off the initial surprise. And to be honest, the more I thought about going to the Darlings', the more it felt a little like I was going on vacation. Well, what I imagined a vacation would feel like. My parents never took breaks from work. The closest I'd gotten to a holiday was joining Grayson and his family for a week at his uncle's lake house one summer in middle school. It hadn't turned out as I'd hoped. I'd fallen in poison ivy on the first day and Grayson, the thoughtful idiot that he was, decided I shouldn't be in pain alone, and had jumped in the ivy too. We'd both spent the whole week itching and rubbing lotion on ourselves.

I was making my way up the stairs when my mom called out to me. "Paige?"

I dreaded to think what she still needed to say after unleashing multiple rants and lectures already. I looked over the handrail just as she poked her head into the corridor.

"Was there something else, Mom?"

"Yes. For the love of all that is holy, do not cook for the Darlings while you're there. I just disposed of the mouse, and it was surrounded by crumbs from those terrible muffins you made yesterday."

"Terrible muffins?" I gasped as realization struck. "You think I killed the mouse?"

"I think I'd like the Darlings to survive your stay."

"But the muffins can't have been that bad. Plenty of people ate them and were fine."

She lifted one eyebrow at me. "Tell that to the mouse."

I stood frozen to the spot as she disappeared back into the kitchen. I'd never killed anything before—that I knew of. And I had honestly thought those muffins were okay. Could they really have been as inedible as my mom suggested? The Devils players had all finished theirs and given them glowing reviews.

Were they lying? Surely not. Unless . . . What if they had been forced?

There was only one person with the ability to make an entire hockey team eat something, despite the fact it tasted gross, and that person was my best friend. Grayson Darling was in trouble. And, unfortunately for him, I was about to move into his house.

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Chapter 3

Paige

“You’re such an ass, Grayson Darling!”

He was lying half asleep on his bed when I arrived, so I picked up a pillow and thumped him with it. He didn’t even flinch, easily plucking the soft, fluffy weapon from my hands. “Hello to you too,” he said with a yawn.

I had let myself in through the back door of the house. My bags were still in the car, but only because I wasn’t sure if I still wanted to bring them inside. Despite my mom’s plans for me while she was away, I was considering finding another family to take me in.

I folded my arms across my chest, but my stern expression only seemed to amuse him as he calmly added the pillow to the one under his head. “I know I’m an ass, but why am I an ass today?”

His brown hair was a mess, and he was dressed in his usual gray sweats, but I could only imagine how the girls at school would react if they were standing where I was: in a Darling Devil’s bedroom while he lay on the bed all sleepy and tousled. I didn’t dare think about how they might react if they knew I was living with him for the next two weeks.

Reed might be the poster boy for the Ransom Devils, but the girls were all drawn to Gray’s quiet magnetism. I frequently heard them talking about how gorgeous he was. How dark, mysterious, and dangerous he was too. Thankfully, most were too scared to approach him, or he’d probably get mobbed every day. I wasn’t deterred by his good looks or his devilish reputation. Especially not when I had a bone to pick with him.

“The muffins I made yesterday were terrible and you didn’t tell me!”

Grayson refused to make eye contact as he replied. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about how I walked around town all day, oblivious to the fact I was handing out toxic muffins.”

I grabbed a pen off his desk and threw it at him to emphasize my point. Even though he wasn't looking at me, he somehow managed to snatch it from the air. That only made me more annoyed at him.

"I knew they might not be the best, but I didn't think they were deadly. How could you not tell me? I thought we were always honest with each other."

"They weren't deadly."

"Weren't they?"

"I'm alive, aren't I?"

"Well, the cute little mouse we found in my kitchen today definitely isn't!"

He looked like he was struggling not to laugh, but he managed to keep a straight face as he continued. "Your cooking did not kill a mouse. It must have died of natural causes."

"It was surrounded by muffin crumbs."

"Well, has someone conducted an autopsy?"

"This isn't funny, Gray."

"I'd never joke about mouseslaughter . . ."

My eyes narrowed on him.

"Maybe I should go stay with Bonnie," I said, pretending I was deep in thought. "I know her baby sister screams all night long. But I think that might be less painful than this."

"Stay with Bonnie?" Gray lifted himself slightly up from his relaxed position on the bed. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, didn't you hear the news? Both my parents have abandoned me for work trips and dumped me on your family until they get back."

"You're staying here?"

"I'm supposed to be, yeah."

"For how long?"

"Two weeks."

"Two weeks?"

If I wasn't so committed to being mad at him, I might have laughed. He looked like he was going to self-combust at the prospect. I knew I could be a lot to handle, but surely the idea of me living here wasn't *that* bad.

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning to steal your bed or finish your Cheerios. Your mom said I can room with Cammie."

"This isn't a joke?"

“Do I look like I’m laughing?” He was really struggling to come to terms with this. If he genuinely didn’t want me here, maybe I would have to follow through with my threat and go stay with Bonnie.

“Your mom must have called every other parent in town.”

“Yes, you were most likely a last resort,” I agreed. “But let’s be real, my parents don’t really care where I stay as long as it doesn’t affect their work.”

Gray’s eyes filled with sympathy and I immediately regretted my words. I was supposed to be mad at him, not seeking his pity, so I quickly added, “But, like I said, I’m still considering my options. I’m sure Bonnie’s parents will have me . . .”

I started for the door but didn’t make it very far. In an instant, Gray had leaped from his spot on the bed and grabbed hold of my hand. Apparently, he wasn’t so sleepy after all.

“No, wait.” His voice was a little more frantic than I expected. As he spoke, he glanced down at where he held my hand in his. As though shocked by his own decision to reach out to me, he quickly but gently pulled his hand away, lightly brushing my fingers as he did.

“Uh, I mean, you can’t go.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Your mom wanted you to stay here. We should really honor her wishes. I know you’re angry with me, but let’s not make any hasty decisions just because of a little misunderstanding over some muffins.”

“Uh, since when do you care about honoring my mom’s wishes? It was hardly a little misunderstanding, and you can’t just hold me hostage.”

Gray’s serious expression relaxed a little and a sparkle returned to his eye. He calmly leaned his shoulder against the doorframe, the urgency he’d shown just a few moments ago now gone.

“Sure, I can. You’re so little, it would be pretty easy.”

I huffed. “I’m not that little.”

“You are. But I think we both know I won’t have to hold you hostage. You need sleep.”

“What?”

“You need sleep like I need food, and you’re not going to get a wink at Bonnie’s house with the baby crying all night.”

“I could wear earplugs . . .”

“Perhaps. But does Bonnie have a secret stash of candy in her room that she lets you raid whenever you visit?”

“Well, no . . .”

He must have sensed he was winning the argument, because his eyes were gleaming with victory. “Then it’s settled. I’ll go get your bags.” Gray set off down the hallway without waiting for my response. He looked so smug, I honestly wouldn’t have been surprised if he started humming.

Sometimes being best friends with Grayson was like befriending a brick wall. Strong, reliable, and perfect, if you needed something sturdy to lean on. But also, totally immovable and completely stubborn.

I followed him down to my car, but by the time I’d reached the driveway, he was already making his way back toward the house, his arms laden with my bags. Despite my best efforts, I’d struggled to pack light, so they were somewhat bursting at the seams.

“What did you pack in these?”

“Things . . .”

“Things? Like what? Don’t tell me you packed your entire snow globe collection.”

“Of course I didn’t pack my snow globe collection.” That was just ridiculous. I had way too many and they were far too delicate to just shove into a bag. “And don’t make fun of me. Snow globes are totally cool.”

“Totally.” I had no idea how he kept such a straight face.

I knew perfectly well just how uncool my snow globes were, but I’d been collecting them with my mom for years. She used to get me a new one every time she went on a work trip, but it had been a long time since she’d remembered, or bothered, to bring one home. These days they were gathering dust on the shelves in my room. I knew it was silly to hold on to them, but I just liked how pretty they were.

Gray muttered something else about the weight of my bags, and I made a move to help him, but he quickly jerked them away.

“I’ve got it.”

I ignored him and made another attempt to help, snatching my school bag off the top of the pile. He gave me a disgruntled look. It was as though I’d somehow undermined his manliness by taking on a little of the load.

“You can let me carry one bag. I have homework to do,” I explained. “Got to honor my mom’s wishes, right?

He simply grunted and heaved my bags the rest of the way to the house.

“Ready to rethink this whole hostage situation?” I called after him.

“Not yet,” he called back. “But ask me again later . . .”

I was smiling to myself as I followed him inside. Staying here was going to be fun. But it felt a little strange to enter the house, knowing I’d be calling it home for the next couple of weeks. Not in a bad way though. It was strange, because I already felt far more welcome here than I ever did at home.

I loved everything about the Darlings’ house. It was always so warm and cozy, with Grayson’s dad often lighting a fire in the living room during the winter. The scent of Amy’s floral perfume always lingered in the entryway, and countless family photos lined the walls. It was an old house, totally different than my parents’ gaudy new development, and I much preferred it.

The ancient carpets all looked like they had stories to tell, and the lights often flickered thanks to the old wiring Danny kept insisting he’d get around to fixing. The hot water would take ages to come on, the doors had squeaky hinges, and the floor creaked underfoot. You had to thump the TV just right if you wanted to watch ESPN, and I was constantly tripping over discarded crap the boys left lying around. But the place felt full, almost bursting with things and people, and I think it was the chaos of the house that I loved most.

Gray had disappeared upstairs, taking my things to Cammie’s bedroom, but I made my way to the kitchen. I hadn’t been lying about the homework. I had a test in the morning to study for and there were tons of math problems I needed to get started on if I had any hope of finishing before the weekend was over.

As I entered the kitchen, I found Parker raiding the fridge. Stanley, the family’s docile golden retriever, was waiting hopefully at his feet.

“Where’s Amy?” I asked, taking a seat at the kitchen counter and unloading my books. Grayson’s mom was ridiculously good at math, and I was eager to pick her brain.

“Grocery store.” Parker closed the fridge door, his arms laden with junk food. “Given the flap she’s been in about making sure we have enough food for you, you’d think the whole hockey team was coming to stay rather than one tiny human girl.”

“What is it with you Darlings?” I muttered under my breath. “I’m not that small.”

“Well, I can almost guarantee you won’t be once Mom’s done with you.”

“Can’t wait,” I said with a slight grimace. I joined the Darlings for family dinner almost every Sunday night. And almost every Sunday without fail we ended up eating takeout because Amy Darling had a catastrophe in the kitchen. She wasn’t a completely terrible cook, not as bad as me anyway, but she was known for attempting dishes on Sunday nights that were well beyond her capabilities. At least no creature, human or otherwise, had died because of her food.

“So, are you ready for our sleepover?” Parker dumped his snack pile on the counter and started digging through the pantry. Reed and Grayson often got fed up with their younger brother, but I had a soft spot for Parker. Even though he had a habit of getting himself into trouble, and his mouth was always running away from him, he was usually very sweet to me.

“Can we call it a sleepover if it’s for more than one night?” I asked.

“That depends.”

“On?”

“Whether there’s half-naked pillow fights.”

I spluttered out an incredulous laugh. “That’s your definition of a sleepover?”

“I think that’s every guy’s definition of a sleepover.”

“Then we’re definitely not having a sleepover.”

“Shame.” Parker couldn’t have been that disappointed as he shot me a devilish grin. “So, where’s Grumpson?”

“Upstairs. And please don’t call him that. He’s not grumpy.”

“Maybe not around you.”

“He’s no different around me than anyone else.”

“Pfft. Sure.”

“I’m serious. Just because someone doesn’t smile much doesn’t mean they’re unhappy.”

“It does if they’re Grayson.”

No matter how much I defended Gray, people rarely agreed with me—not even his younger brother. His quiet nature often caused others to assume he was grumpy or even angry. To be fair, he usually was when Parker was in the vicinity. He certainly knew how to push Gray’s buttons.

Parker wasn’t the only person who misjudged him. Because of Grayson’s size and strength, he was frequently mistaken as a brute. But you

only needed to look into his eyes to see he had the kindest soul. I'd known that since the first time I met him, when we were seven years old. We were at the town pool, and I found him rescuing a bee from the water. He'd fished it out so gently, before I helped him find a safe place to hide it in the rosebushes. It was clear to me then that Gray was someone special, and I'd be lucky to call him my friend.

Did he get moody sometimes? Sure. But who didn't? It probably didn't help that he was frequently in pain thanks to an old knee injury. Over the years, I'd made it my own personal mission to try to put a smile on his face as much as possible—well, as close to a smile as he could manage. I wasn't a hundred percent certain Gray's lips knew how to curve all the way upward.

"I think you might be the only person who can put up with him," Parker continued. "If you don't marry him, he's going to end up old and alone."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You're right." He nodded. "It's too late—Grayson already acts like he's in his eighties."

"Parker!"

"Paige!" He mimicked me before grinning. "Seriously, when are you going to put him out of his misery and date him already?"

I shook my head. "Please don't say that. You know we're just friends."

"You sure about that?"

I hated it when people asked me that question. It always made me blush, but not for the reason everyone thought. Grayson was everything a girl should want in a boyfriend. He was sweet and loyal and kind. And it didn't hurt that he was totally gorgeous to look at. But it was something I refused to even consider. We'd been friends for so long, he'd become the most important person in my life; so much more than some passing high school relationship. I didn't want that to change.

Besides, I knew for a fact he had never considered me in that way either. Grayson could be hard to read, but of this I was certain. In all the time we'd spent together, he'd never done anything that even resembled making a move on me, and not once had he ever checked me out. I'd seen him get more excited over a nice cut of steak than he ever had about me in a cute outfit or in my swimsuit. In fact, just this summer he'd taken one look at me in a bikini and spent the entire day at the lake trying to convince me to put my cover-up back on. I wasn't really sure what Grayson's type was,

since he wasn’t one to flaunt hookups with other girls. I just knew it wasn’t me.

“Yes, I’m sure. Just friends.”

Parker scoffed his disapproval, but I quickly changed the subject before he could continue. “Any chance you’re a secret mathlete and have been hiding mad algebra skills all this time?”

Parker glanced down at the notebook I’d just opened and scoffed. “Uh, no.”

“So, you’re no good at math?”

“I’m about as good at math as you are at hockey.”

“Hey,” I complained. “I’m not that bad.”

“Last time we played down at the lake, you hid behind Grayson the whole time.”

“A smart tactic, if you ask me. I love you guys, but you know you’re all terrifying as soon as you step on the ice, right?”

Parker beamed with pride.

“Besides,” I added. “I like to think I make up for my lack of hockey prowess with knowledge. Most girls at our school go to the games just to watch you guys. They don’t know an icing call from an offside call.”

“Sorry, Paige, that doesn’t count.”

“It totally counts.”

“Either way, I can’t help you with your algebra homework. When it comes to math, I have no skill or knowledge.”

“Damn.” I focused down on the page, but as I did Parker’s hand whipped out toward my bag and swiped the bright pink piece of paper that was sticking out the top of my diary.

“Hey!” I cried, trying to snatch it back.

But Parker was too fast and had already danced across to the other side of the kitchen.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” he mused as I chased after him.

“Give it back, Parker.” But he wasn’t listening. Instead, his eyes were devouring the page.

“Parker!” When I got close to him, I tried to grab the paper, but he lifted it high out of my reach and continued to read. This was a nightmare. He was the last person I wanted to see the list.

“What’s this?” he asked, looking down at me with a glint of mischief in his eyes. He lowered the list, and I finally managed to take it from him.

“Nothing.”

“You seem very upset over nothing.”

“Well, it’s private.”

“Not anymore.”

Perhaps Reed and Grayson were right about Parker. He was the worst.

“Looked like some kind of list to me . . .” he continued.

“Yeah, for groceries.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “If it’s just groceries, then I’m sure you’ll be happy to let me see it again.”

I groaned up at the ceiling. “You’re really not going to leave this alone, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Not even if I ask nicely?”

“Especially not if you ask nicely.”

I released a sigh. “Fine. You’re right. It is a list. It’s my senior year bucket list.” He looked confused so I tried to explain. “You know, all the things I want to do before I graduate.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he replied. “What I don’t get is why I saw ‘knitting’ and ‘ballroom dancing’ on it.”

I didn’t really want to get into the reasons the list existed with Parker. He didn’t need to know that I’d started it as a way to find my one true passion, so I could prove to my parents there was more to life than getting a boring office job and climbing the corporate ladder. Somewhere along the line, the list had expanded to include all sorts of things I felt I needed to try before high school came to an end. I decided to give Parker the short version of the story.

“Because I’ve never done those things before, and I wanted to try them,” I said. “And knitting has been ticked off the list already. Don’t you remember the mittens I gifted you at the start of winter?”

“Oh yeah, I wondered why you gave me those.” He paused for a moment but then snatched the list away from me again, completely ignoring my complaints as he read through it.

“Yoga?” he muttered. “And baking? Is that why you made those muffins?”

“Yes.” He sounded confused, but I was struggling to see the issue. “Is that a problem?”

He glanced up at me like I'd somehow let him down. "The problem, Paige, is if this is really a senior year bucket list, then baking shouldn't be on here. If anything, you should be trying to *get* baked."

Of *course* that was Parker's advice.

"I'm serious," he continued. "This is the worst-looking bucket list I've ever seen in my—wait, what's this one . . ." His voice trailed off as his eyes caught on something toward the bottom of the list. When he looked back up at me, his face was covered in shock. "'My first kiss'?"

"Oh no." He'd found the final item—one that remained very much unchecked. I'd forgotten it was even there, probably because I'd given up hope of ever completing it. "Please forget you just read that."

"Paige, how the hell have you never kissed anyone?"

I wanted to crawl under the table, curl up, and die. Unfortunately, the smirk on Parker's lips made it clear that he'd taunt me about this even beyond the grave.

"I don't know," I protested. "I just haven't gotten around to it."

"Haven't gotten around to it? This isn't a homework assignment, Paige." He shook his head like he couldn't have been more disappointed in me. "Does Grayson know about your virgin lips?"

"Oh my god." I buried my head in my hands, my cheeks flaming hot.

"Well, does he?" Parker continued, totally unfazed by the fact I was shriveling into a corpse in front of him.

"No," I replied. "I don't see how it's any of Grayson's business."

"Because everything about you is Grayson's business."

"Whatever." I finally dropped my hands. "Just please don't tell him, or anyone for that matter."

"I think I have better things to do with my time than gossip about you, Paige. But you really do need to fix that situation." He gestured at my lips with one hand and eyed them with distaste. "And fast. You can't finish high school without being kissed."

"Yes, I realize that. Which is why it's on my list."

Parker scrunched up his nose at the bright pink piece of paper that was still clutched in his hands.

"So, how do we fix this?" he asked.

"*We* don't do anything. I don't need your help, Parker."

He responded by holding the list in front of my face and pointing at the final item on it. "Clearly you do, or this would have been checked off a long

time ago.” Apparently, I was getting Parker’s advice whether I wanted it or not.

“It’s not that easy . . .”

“It should be. You’re pretty hot. Just pick a guy and smack him with your lips.”

I think Parker was trying to be nice—in a Parker kind of way—but it was only making my humiliation worse. “You think I haven’t tried that?”

“If you’d really tried, then this item wouldn’t even be on the list,” he replied. “Seriously, Paige. Just writing it down on a piece of paper doesn’t count as trying. You can put bait on the hook, but if you don’t lower it into the water, you’re never going to catch a fish.”

“My hook has been in the water.”

“Has it?”

I lifted my hands in the air. “Maybe the fish just don’t like this kind of bait.”

“You’re the most likeable girl I know, Paige. If you were fishing properly, the guys would bite.”

My cheeks warmed at his compliment. At least, I think he was being complimentary. In true Parker fashion, it somehow managed to sound both crude and sweet all at once.

I released a heavy sigh as I thought over what he’d said. He might think I’m likeable, but I wasn’t sure that was helpful. No one wanted to kiss someone just because they were nice. I needed more to go on than that.

“So, how do you suggest I ‘fish properly’?” I asked. “Because sometimes it feels like I’ve got some kind of built-in boy repellent. As soon as any guy gets close and I think he might potentially like me, he’ll vanish. Poof. Gone.”

Parker raised an eyebrow. “Built-in boy repellent?”

“Yes.” I folded my arms. “It’s a thing.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is. But I don’t think that’s your problem.”

“You don’t?”

“Let’s just say, I suggest you start by searching for fish that don’t scare so easy . . .”

I shook my head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged.

“Parker . . .”

“Come on, Paige. You can’t be surprised the fish are all hiding under rocks when you’re sitting on the bank next to a giant grizzly bear.”

I blinked at him as I tried to figure out what on earth he was talking about. He was really taking this fishing analogy too far. “Like, metaphorically? Is my personality the bear, or—”

“Grayson! Grayson’s the bear!” he shouted. “He scowls at any guy who comes within a ten-foot radius of you.”

My heart stopped. “What?”

“Your best friend is terrifying. The other day there was lettuce instead of beef in his sandwich, and the look on his face when he went to complain sent the lunch lady running home in tears. Why else would any guy avoid a girl like you?”

“You know how Grayson gets about his food . . .” I murmured.

Parker looked at me like I was missing the point.

Surely he was exaggerating. I tried to recall Grayson scowling at any guys on my behalf. It was a little hard to remember any specific incident though. Grayson spent most of his life with a scowl on his face. But I still refused to believe Parker. Grayson only wanted the best for me. I was sure if there had been any guy-scaring, it was just another example of how easily people misunderstood Gray.

“I don’t know, Parker. It sounds a little silly. He would never do something like that on purpose.”

“I didn’t say he does it on purpose. Trust me, he doesn’t have to.”

I opened and closed my mouth several times as I tried to figure out how to keep arguing with him. But I didn’t know what else to say. Could Parker be right? Was the reason I’d never been kissed simply the fact I hung out with our school’s scariest bear?

I tried to think of all the times my natural boy repellent had reared its ugly head. There was Jon Spencer in freshman year, who stood me up without warning on what would have been my first date. Last year, when I was playing spin the bottle, Justin Chen refused to kiss me when it landed on him. Just this summer at a party, I’d been dancing with Drew Moskowitz, and I could have sworn he wanted to kiss me, but he suddenly claimed it was past his curfew and he had to get home. It was only 7 p.m.! It was no wonder I’d given up on having my first kiss after all that trauma.

“I’m back,” Amy called from the front of the house. “I hope you’re all hungry. I’m making pad thai.”

Grayson entered the room as she spoke, carrying some of his mom's shopping bags. He shuddered at her words. "That sounds ambitious. Does Mom even know what pad thai is?"

"Guess we're about to find out." Parker grimaced.

I laughed quietly at the two of them, though I was still distracted by my conversation with Parker. Was Grayson really the reason I'd never kissed anyone? Why no boys ever asked me out? Why they literally ran in the opposite direction when I dared to get close? I'd always assumed there was something wrong with me. But was my biggest problem my choice of best friend?

Parker leaned in close, lowering his voice as he handed my precious pink bucket list back to me. "Just think about what I said." He gave me an encouraging smile before he left the room, a trail of unanswered questions and uncertainty behind him.

"What was that about?" Grayson asked as I stared after his younger brother.

I quickly tucked my list back into my diary before Grayson could spot it. It was bad enough Parker had seen its contents. "He was just helping with my algebra homework."

"Really? Parker? Algebra?"

"Yeah, he can be useful sometimes, you know."

Grayson snorted in disbelief. "And was this one of those times?"

"I'm not sure yet." He'd certainly left me with a lot to consider. I'd all but written off having my first kiss before the year was through. But Parker made it sound possible. Maybe even easy. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so quick to give up on it. Perhaps I just needed to try a little harder. And, if Parker was right, that started by having a difficult conversation with my best friend.

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Chapter 4

Grayson

Dinner that night was a disaster. My mom's pad thai turned out so spicy it was inedible. As I watched Paige and Reed's girlfriend, Violet, nervously shuffle their food around their plates, I couldn't help but feel bad they had been subjected to it too. I knew they were trying to be polite but, like the rest of us, they'd stopped eating after the first mouthful. My dad tried his best to insist the meal was fine, but he only made it three bites before his eyes started watering so badly he had to excuse himself from the table. The moment he reached the kitchen, I heard him gulping and gurgling water straight from the sink.

"I think you broke Dad." Cammie smirked in Mom's direction.

"Don't be silly. Your father's fine." She flinched though as Dad started spluttering and making a loud hacking noise. He sounded like Stanley, choking on a furball.

"He doesn't sound fine . . ." Reed said.

"I think he just coughed up a lung," Cammie added.

"Probably because dinner was spicier than Mom's dirty books," Parker joked.

Reed thumped him on the arm while Cammie groaned. Violet and Paige glanced at each other and tried their best not to laugh. My mom was a saint because she didn't seem the least bit ruffled by my younger brother.

"Oh, I hope it wasn't that spicy!" she gasped as she glanced in the direction of the kitchen, guilt flickering in her gaze. "Although, maybe it did have a little too much kick," she admitted.

"A little?" Everyone at the table responded in unison. Well, everyone except Paige and Violet, who were both still heroically trying to continue with their meal.

"I think it's got a nice zing to it," Paige said.

“Yeah, I don’t mind food that packs a bit of a punch,” Violet added with a smile.

“Well, Mom really went straight for the knockout blow with this dish,” Parker said. “One hit and you’re on the floor.”

“I was just trying to make it more flavorful,” Mom tried to explain. “But I might have gone a bit heavy with the chilies. I don’t want to make anyone sick, so I’ll get us some takeout just to be safe.”

We all exhaled with relief.

“Can someone clear the plates while I order the food?”

I quickly jumped up to help and Reed did the same.

My dad looked up as we entered the kitchen, his eyes still watering from his valiant attempts at eating dinner. “Take my advice, boys,” he said as he sipped on a glass of milk. “I love your mother, but marry a girl who can cook.”

Memories of Paige’s muffins immediately filled my head and I couldn’t help but glance back toward the dining room. I could see her through the open doors, where she was laughing lightly at something Violet had said. All I could think was that I’d happily put up with terrible cooking every night for the rest of my life if it meant I could be with Paige.

“Or I could just become a great cook myself,” I said, turning back to my dad.

Reed gave me a knowing look, which I ignored.

“Always a safer bet,” my dad agreed. “And last time you made something for us, it wasn’t too bad . . .”

“Not sure either of us will get much time in the kitchen come next year,” Reed replied. “Did you see Ryker lost again today?”

My dad winced as he nodded in reply. “They’re not having a good season. You two will certainly have your work cut out for you. I bet Coach Mercer can’t wait for you guys to join the team.”

I remained silent as my dad and brother continued to discuss the Raiders. I couldn’t afford to think as far ahead as next year, because I might not be joining the team at all if my knee didn’t improve. Ryker’s legendary hockey coach, Mack Mercer, was coming to Ransom in two weeks to watch Reed and me play and then have us sign our letters of intent, committing us to four years at Ryker University. It was a whole big thing, including a formal presentation at the school and interviews with local media and

everything. I blinked the image from my mind. I just had to focus on making it to signing day in one piece.

We managed to survive the rest of dinner without problem, although Cammie took the meal as an opportunity to lay down ground rules for Paige sleeping in her room. My sister seemed mostly concerned about losing sleep. She had a figure-skating competition coming up and was training with a new partner, which meant she had a lot of early starts.

Paige had happily nodded along with all of Cammie's stipulations, until my sister told her she wasn't allowed to snore.

"How do I know if I snore or not?" Paige whispered to Violet, the moment Cammie turned away.

"I'm not sure . . ." Violet replied. "But I have a feeling you'll know by tomorrow morning."

The girls both grimaced and then shared a laugh. While Violet and Reed had only recently started dating, she and Paige were becoming fast friends. But the two of them had been so engrossed in conversation this evening, Paige had hardly said a word to me. Come to think of it, she hadn't even looked my way.

I got the unfamiliar feeling she was genuinely annoyed with me. Surely she wasn't actually pissed I'd made fun of her killer muffins? I thought we'd just been messing around. This was why I should never try to be funny.

My suspicions only grew stronger when she joined me in my room after dinner to work on our homework. She had a test tomorrow, so I was quizzing her using a set of cue cards she'd meticulously written out. She was mostly quiet, keeping our conversation firmly on the quiz. Paige was famously easy to distract, especially while studying, so I kept waiting for her to laugh about my mom's cooking or gush over how cute Reed and Violet were together. She hadn't even mentioned Cammie's stringent rules yet. All she wanted to talk about was homework. It wasn't like her, and I hated every moment of it.

I finally lay the cue cards down on the floor. "Something's up with you."

"Nothing's up with me." She refused to meet my eyes as she responded, which only confirmed my fears.

"I know you, Paige. You're taking this test way too seriously."

“It’s important,” she replied, picking up the cards and flicking through them. “You never know when you’re going to need to reel off a list of facts about cumulonimbus clouds and atmospheric pressure systems.” She was reading directly off the cards, so it was safe to assume she hadn’t been very focused on the study session.

“It’s a geography test on storms, Paige. And there’s nothing you hate more than storms.”

“Most people don’t like storms. They’re scary and they cover up the stars . . . I wish this test was on astronomy. I’ve always thought people don’t spend enough time stargazing.”

I knew she was trying to change the subject, and she was still avoiding my searching gaze. “Something is clearly up with you.”

She fell quiet.

“Are you still annoyed I made fun of you for being a mouse killer?”

“Actually, I’ve decided I prefer the term ‘unwitting mouse assassin.’”

I chuckled quietly, but she didn’t even notice, keeping her eyes locked on her cue cards. There was no way I could let this drop now. “You might as well spill. You’re staying here now, so I can just bug you for an explanation for the next two weeks straight.”

She finally glanced up, but it was only to shoot me a glare.

“Come on, Pidge . . .”

“Don’t call me that,” she grumbled. Using my nickname for Paige was always a surefire way to win her over in situations like this, and she knew it. I’d been calling her the same thing ever since we first met as kids. We were only seven, but even then I’d been so struck by how pretty she was, I could barely speak. I went to say her name, but I was so nervous I stumbled over it. Ten years later, I was still pretending it had been on purpose.

“You know if something’s bothering you, you can talk to me, right?” I wasn’t the kind of guy people usually chose to unload their feelings onto. Probably because I didn’t tend to sugarcoat my responses.

“It’s just . . .” She was still frowning down at the cue cards in her hands but slowly let them drop to the floor. I waited patiently for her to continue, but she was quiet for so long I thought she might not respond at all. Then she suddenly looked up at me. “I want to be kissed.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“I want to be kissed.” She said it a little slower, as if she was trying to make sure I heard. I stared back at her, still unsure if I’d understood

correctly.

“You know, kissing?” she finally added, looking at me like I’d taken too many pucks to the head. “Two sets of lips meeting? Maybe a little tongue . . .”

“Yeah, okay, I know what kissing is.”

“Well, good. Because I’ve never kissed anyone, and I need your help with my first time . . .”

“Uh, like, now?” Was I too young to go into cardiac arrest? Because the way my heart was pounding couldn’t be healthy.

“You wanted to talk about what’s bothering me,” she said. “So, let’s talk about it.”

I rubbed a hand down my face as the reality of her words hit. Of course she didn’t want to kiss *me*. She only wanted my advice. And that meant she wanted to kiss somebody else. I was already regretting starting this conversation and wondering who I was going to have to murder.

“No guy will go near me . . .” she continued, and my eyes shot straight up to hers.

“Why?” I growled. “What’s wrong with them?” I might not like the thought of Paige dating or kissing anyone, but the idea that a guy couldn’t see how amazing she was made me see red.

“That.” She pointed at me. “That’s the problem.”

“Me?” I mimicked the way she was pointing directly at my chest.

“You’re scaring guys off.”

“No, I’m not.” At least, I didn’t think I was. There were a few guys over the years who’d taken an interest in Paige, but they were mostly total players who weren’t nearly good enough for her. I hadn’t told them they couldn’t ask her out. Not exactly. I’d just warned that they’d have to answer to me if they broke her heart.

Okay, yeah, maybe I was scaring them off.

“Think about it,” she continued. “Almost every guy at school is terrified of you. You just have to look at them the wrong way and they run in the other direction.”

“I can’t help it if some people have weak dispositions . . .”

She folded her arms across her chest as she stared me down.

“Fine.” I quickly caved under her icy glare. “You may have come up in conversation with one or two guys at school.”

“And . . .”

“And, I just made it clear that if they ever hurt you, then I’d hurt them.”

“Grayson!”

“What? I didn’t think that would stop them from asking you out!” I mean, maybe a part of me had hoped that would be the result, but I couldn’t let *her* know that.

“So, you’re telling me the reason I’ve never been asked out—the reason I’ve never been on a date or been kissed—is because you’ve been intimidating any boy who even tried to approach me?”

Guilt formed a heavy knot in my throat as she spoke. It wasn’t often Paige got truly angry, but her eyes were flaring, and her hands had formed small fists at her side. If I didn’t feel so bad, I’d be smiling at how cute she looked.

“Paige, I never meant for that to happen . . .”

She lifted a hand, cutting me off. “I’m not graduating high school having never even kissed a guy. You’re going to help me fix this.”

“Fix this? How?” Confusion and anxiety were starting to pile on top of the guilt. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know where she was going with this. Paige and I rarely talked about relationship-type stuff, and when we did, I became only too aware of just how one-sided my feelings for her were.

“I need you to back off and play nice,” she said.

I’d never really grasped the concept of playing nice, but I couldn’t say no to Paige. I’d do anything to make her happy. And if this was what she wanted, then I was going to do it. Even if I knew it would slowly kill me inside.

“Okay, I can do that. I’ll play nice.”

She folded her arms over her chest, eyeing me closely. “You mean it?”

“Of course I mean it. Damn it, Paige, you know I’d never do anything to intentionally hurt you.”

It took a moment before she slowly released a breath. “I know you wouldn’t, Gray.” She tucked a loose strand of her short, dark hair behind her ear. “I can’t imagine there were a heap of guys jumping at the opportunity to kiss me anyway.”

“Paige, any guy would be lucky to kiss you.” They’d also be lucky to be alive, thanks to Paige’s new decree that I couldn’t threaten them anymore. This was going to be tougher than I thought.

“You’re my best friend. You have to say that.”

It was because I was her best friend that I shouldn’t.

“So, why the sudden interest in this?” I asked. “Is there a guy in particular or . . .”

“No!” she quickly replied. “No guy.”

A surge of relief washed over me.

“Then why the urgency?”

She shrugged. “It’s on my list.”

“Your list? Like your bucket list?”

“Yeah.”

“Kissing is on your bucket list?”

She laughed at my shock. “That’s what I said.”

I was suddenly wishing I’d asked to inspect her list more closely before now, and slightly terrified about what else might be on it. This was a stark departure from candle making or knitting mittens.

“That seems like a bad reason to want to kiss someone.”

“I can’t think of a better one. It’s on my list because I want it to happen. And it’s high time it did. Maybe now there’s a chance that it actually will.”

Guilt tightened my chest once again as she reminded me I was to blame for this.

“I’m just saying this isn’t the kind of thing you should rush,” I added. “Obviously, it’s okay if you want it to happen soon, but you don’t have to kiss the first guy you see either.”

Although, while I was sitting right in front of her, perhaps that wasn’t the worst idea.

“Parker made it sound like no big deal.”

“You talked to Parker about this?”

She smirked at the outrage on my face. “It wasn’t exactly by choice,” she admitted. “Parker accidentally saw my list, and he had a lot of thoughts about my lack of kissing experience.”

Not for the first time, I wanted to kill my younger brother. “You should never listen to Parker.”

“But I think he might be right. I need to get out there and be more proactive. Just having you play nice might not be enough to change anything. Maybe you could start talking me up too. You know, put in a good word for me around the guys at school. Kind of like my wingman . . .”

“Uh . . .” *Just tell her no. Two little letters. One word. Easy.* Why couldn’t I say it?

“Please?” She blinked her big brown eyes up at me.

“Don’t make that face,” I grumbled. “You know you get your way when you make that face.”

“So, you’ll help?”

“You know I’ll always help you,” I replied. “With whatever you need.”

“Thank you. Thank you!” she squeaked as she threw herself into my arms. These moments were the best and worst part of my day. Paige always smelled sweet, like the candies she was constantly sneaking. And she fit so perfectly in my arms, it was like she was made for them. I closed my eyes, wishing for the millionth time that things were different. That I was the kind of guy who deserved Paige. That she returned my feelings. That I was selfish enough to risk our friendship and show her how great it would be if we were something more.

She grinned up at me as she pulled back. “And I bet you thought me staying here was going to be boring. Look how fun I’ve just made things for us.”

“Yeah, sounds great. I can’t wait.”

She laughed and swatted a hand against my chest. “I’ll see you in the morning. Provided I survive the night with Cammie. I’m a little scared I may not make it.”

I struggled not to chuckle. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“You may laugh, Grayson Darling. But if your sister takes me out, you’ll miss me when I’m gone.”

I watched her leave, and the room felt so much emptier. I wasn’t worried about Paige disappearing from my life because my sister was a little unhinged. But I *was* concerned about her leaving me for another guy. I was scared of losing her, even though she wasn’t mine. Any idiot could see how incredible Paige was, and if word got out she was searching for someone to kiss, there would be a line of guys a mile long volunteering to help.

I wanted to be at the front of that line, but how could I when I knew she didn’t want me there? She wanted me to be her wingman; to be a supportive friend. So, I was going to have to keep on pretending that was enough. What other choice did I have?

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Chapter 5

Paige

“I still can’t believe you’re sleeping with the Darling Devils!” Bonnie gasped as she appeared beside my locker at the start of lunch. She was sporting a new pixie haircut today, and it seemed to have given her even more attitude than normal. While Grayson was my best friend, Bonnie had been giving him a run for his money ever since she moved to town in freshman year. Though if she kept shouting things like that for everyone to hear, I might have to reconsider our friendship entirely.

“Would you keep it down?” I hissed as several girls glanced over at us. “I’m staying at their house, not sleeping with them.”

Bonnie flashed a wicked grin. “It’s pretty much the same thing.”

“It’s definitely not.”

She shrugged away my concern and focused on straightening her blazer. She was always so well put together at school, as though she could be called away on an assignment for the school newspaper at any moment. She took her role as editor of the *Devil’s Advocate* very seriously. But once the weekend arrived, her wild side came out and she favored sky-high heels and little black dresses. She’d always been far more fashionable than me.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t stay with me,” she added. “But not that sorry. I think I might have done you a favor. I’d pick sleeping with three hot hockey players over a screaming baby any day. Tabitha is still a nightmare.”

“Technically, if I’m sleeping with anyone, it’s Cammie.”

“She’s hot too,” Bonnie replied, though the amusement in her eyes quickly dimmed. “But she is mildly terrifying. Did you have to sleep with one eye open last night?”

“Of course not. Cammie isn’t that bad.”

“I heard she threatened to cut off her last skating partner’s balls with a pair of skates . . .”

“She must have been having a bad day.”

“I’ll say,” Bonnie agreed with a laugh. “But enough about your psycho new sleep buddy. You said you had news to tell me? Spill.”

I drew in a deep breath. “Parker found my bucket list.”

“So?”

“So, there’s an item on it that I would prefer he didn’t know about, but now he and Grayson both do.”

“I’m lost.” Bonnie shook her head. “I thought the list was just a bunch of hobbies you wanted to try out. What’s so embarrassing about this one thing?”

Bonnie was one of the few people aware of my list, but I wasn’t sure she really understood it. Unlike me, she knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life and how to get there. Inquisitive by nature and capable of digging up dirt on pretty much anyone or anything, she was destined to fulfill her dreams of reporting for a major national newspaper. I was still working out what my dreams were. The list was meant to help with that.

I’d come up with all sorts of things I could try to help find my passion in life. I’d started a veggie patch, then tried to learn an instrument. I’d volunteered as a candy striper at the local hospital and offered a dog-walking service on the weekends. I’d tried to sew a dress, taken a woodworking class, and auditioned for the school play. I’d even spent a day in Danny Darling’s garage.

Nothing had stuck. My vegetables had died, one of the dogs had escaped, and the dress I made looked like a last-minute Halloween costume. Bonnie had watched me go from one failure to another, and I could never work out whether she thought it was hilarious, heartbreaking, or just plain boring.

I found trying all these different things was fun though. The list was also forcing me to get outside my comfort zone and experience things I never would have otherwise. So, any time I thought of something I wanted to do before I graduated, I added it to the bottom of the page. The kissing—well, I was seriously regretting that addition now.

I fished the list out of my bag and handed it over to her. “See for yourself. It’s the one at the end.”

Her eyes darted to the bottom of the page, and she immediately started to grin. “That’s what you’re worried about? I’ve told you before, there’s nothing embarrassing about the fact you haven’t kissed anyone. It’s just a

little bad luck. If you really want to, I'm sure we could make it happen in no time."

"Except it's *not* bad luck."

She gave me a curious look as she waited for me to explain. We'd reached the entrance to the cafeteria, and I pulled her aside so people wouldn't overhear.

"It's Grayson," I whispered. "He's been scaring guys away from me."

Bonnie was silent for a moment but then she let out a laugh. "Oh, of course he has."

"It's not funny." She was taking this far better than I had. "And why don't you seem surprised?"

"Because this totally explains your guy problems," she replied. "You're like Rapunzel—trapped in a tower with a fire-breathing dragon keeping guard. The beast is so terrifying, only the bravest knights in the land would consider battling it to rescue you."

"Gray isn't a dragon."

"Oh yes, he is. Scales and all." She grinned. "Your very own personal dragon. It's actually pretty cool. I'm jealous."

I rubbed a hand across my forehead. "What if I don't want to be rescued?"

"You don't want a brave warrior to ascend your tower, clamber into your highest room and release you?"

I poked her in the ribs. Hard.

"There's something wrong with you, Bon. I meant, I don't need protecting from guys, and I certainly don't need *releasing*."

"Pity." She looked thoughtful. "Maybe Grayson's just going to have to make it up to you then . . ." She let the end of her sentence drift, as if I was supposed to know what she was implying. When I didn't respond, she filled in the blank for me.

"With his lips, Paige!"

"No, Bonnie!" I shook my head. "He's already agreed to help, but not like that. I've asked him to back off and maybe talk me up around the guys a bit. That's more than enough."

She let out a short, disbelieving laugh. "Look, Paige, you're desperate for a guy to kiss, and Grayson is one of the hottest guys in school. Most girls would kill to have him pay them a fraction of the attention he pays you. I'm surprised you haven't made a move on him already."

“I’m not desperate for a guy to kiss!” I protested, still doing my best not to draw attention to myself, but it was getting more difficult as I became more flustered. “And it’s not like that between me and Gray. You know we’re just friends.”

“Yeah, well, I think if you threw in a little kissing, you’d be a match made in heaven.” She emphasized her point by making kissing sounds in the air.

“Stop!” I pressed my hand over her mouth. “I’m not kissing Gray!”

“It could just be a one-time thing.” Her voice was muffled as my hand was still clamped across her lips, so I pulled it away. “I bet he’s a great kisser . . .”

I immediately wished I hadn’t released her mouth.

“We’re not kissing, that would be totally weird. And, more importantly, I don’t want my first kiss to be a pity kiss. I could think of nothing worse.”

“Okay, okay. You’re right,” Bonnie finally agreed. “Besides, there’s plenty of eligible bachelors at this school.” Her face lit up as a group of boys on the athletics team wandered by. “How do you feel about runners?”

“I’m not going to pick the first guy that walks past.” I’d never even spoken to any of those boys.

“Fine,” Bonnie conceded, although she was soon smirking again. “But would it be the worst idea to choose a guy who can run fast? At least he could escape if Grayson came after him . . .”

I decided I’d heard enough and started into the cafeteria. Bonnie was chuckling as she caught up with me. I knew she was joking around, but the thought of selecting a guy to kiss felt daunting. I’d never really considered or noticed just how many different guys went to our school. So many eligible bachelors to choose from, as Bonnie had put it. In my case, it just felt like a ton of different ways to experience rejection. This wasn’t going to be as easy as Bonnie made it sound.

I turned to my friend as soon as we sat at our usual table, and she pulled out her packed lunch. She’d refused to eat anything from the school cafeteria ever since she’d done an exposé on the lunch menu for the paper. With the nerves currently thrumming through me, I wasn’t sure I could stomach the food today either.

“How on earth am I supposed to pick a guy?”

“That’s where I come in, obviously.” She looked almost too eager, and I felt both a sense of relief and trepidation at her enthusiasm. Bonnie knew

everything about everyone at this school, so I had no doubt she was the perfect person to figure out who was the right guy for me.

"You really want to help?"

"Of course I do!" Her expression quickly shifted as she went into investigation mode. "We'll start with the most obvious question. Are you interested in anyone?"

"Uh . . . not really." The sad truth was I'd all but given up on guys. It felt pointless when none of them seemed to like me back.

"No one? Are you sure?" Bonnie pressed me for an answer.

"Not at the moment."

It wasn't like I'd never crushed on a guy before, but I certainly couldn't think of anyone recently. Was there something wrong with me? I should be able to get my heart fluttering over at least one boy, right? Unless I'd just closed it off to protect myself.

"Hmm, okay," Bonnie muttered. "I guess that just means every boy has potential. We'll have to narrow it down a little though. Ideally, he'll be someone who hasn't already been intimidated by Grayson."

"You know what his reputation's like," I replied. "That could rule out every boy in school."

"Surely not *every* boy." When Bonnie caught my dubious expression, she quickly continued. "Okay, so, maybe we'll need to search a little further afield. But don't stress, Paige. Even if we have to go all the way to Antarctica, we'll find you a guy."

That did not sound promising, but Bonnie wasn't letting anything deter her. "There's a hockey after-party this weekend. That would be the perfect chance for a first kiss . . ."

"You think I should kiss someone this weekend?" Things were already happening too fast for my liking. "You just said we were going to have to go to Antarctica to find this guy!"

"I mean, it's ambitious, but why not? It's always helpful to have deadlines."

I was running out of ways to argue with her. And, in all honesty, this first kiss was quickly becoming like a rotting Band-Aid on my arm. It had been left there for far too long and needed ripping off as soon as possible.

"Maybe we can start making a shortlist now?" she suggested. "We can see what kind of guy you like and then start refining our selection."

"Oh, okay, sure." That didn't sound too bad.

But then she started pointing at every guy that passed. “Dave is sweet, but everyone knows he puts the horn in horny. Oh, you wouldn’t guess it, but Jackson has a six-pack under those Spider-Man tees. There’s Harvey? Everyone knows he has great hands on the field, but I hear they’re even better off it . . . And Derek—nice guy, but we should probably rule him out. I sit in front of him in English, and he has a serious case of halitosis . . .”

“Bonnie!” I grabbed her hand, yanking it down beneath the table to stop her from being so obvious. “Are you trying to kill me with embarrassment?”

She laughed. “What? I’ve finally found a good use for my years of observing our fellow students.”

I buried my head in my hands. “I can’t believe I’m already regretting asking for your help.”

“What? I have great taste in guys.”

“Your taste is questionable at best. Just last week you were drooling over that guy on the Netflix show we were watching.”

“And . . .”

“Bon, it was a documentary about a serial killer.”

She laughed. “Speaking of tall, dark, and scary . . .” She looked up and over my shoulder, just as Grayson cleared his throat behind me.

“Room for one more?”

He was carrying a heaving tray of food, and his expression was as stoic as usual, but I could still make out some uncertainty in his eyes. He didn’t always sit with us at lunch, so maybe he was worried he was interrupting.

“Always.” I smiled up at him. “You know you don’t have to ask.”

“We’re just doing some talent-scouting,” Bonnie said.

Grayson gave me a questioning look, and I had to resist kicking Bonnie under the table. She’d already embarrassed me enough times in the last few minutes, and I was even more mortified at the idea of Grayson being around to hear her comments.

“Uh, Bonnie’s helping me find the perfect guy.” Gray’s expression didn’t change, so I continued. “You know, for that one particular item on my bucket list.”

He let out a low grunt of understanding before lowering himself into the seat at my side. I was struck by the subtle scent of his woodsy cologne, and as his arm brushed mine, I somehow felt warmer and calmer. I was always more relaxed when Grayson was near.

“You’re really serious about this, huh?” He mumbled the words, so I wasn’t sure if he was genuinely asking me or just talking to himself.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

All I got for an answer was another of Grayson’s trademark grunts, before he changed the subject.

“I saw you hadn’t gotten lunch yet, so I grabbed you a few things.” He nodded at his tray. “I hope you’re hungry.”

I lifted one eyebrow at how blatantly he’d avoided my question, but that was Gray. It was going to take him some time to get on board with all this. He was probably still trying to wrap his head around the fact that his best friend was a girl who had lips capable of kissing.

I looked down at his tray, piled high with food. He had enough there to feed a hockey team. Well, maybe not *his* hockey team—those guys all attacked each meal like it was their last. Especially the Darling boys.

“You sure you’ve got enough for me? I wouldn’t want to leave you hungry.”

“Of course. I can’t eat all of this.”

“You shouldn’t want to eat any of that,” Bonnie scoffed under her breath before taking a bite of her home-made sandwich.

I laughed and did my best to ignore her vendetta against the cafeteria. “I know you, Gray. You can get a little touchy when you haven’t eaten enough.”

“I’m always a little touchy,” he replied. “Just take what you want, Pidge.”

I took a closer look at his enormous lunch. The pizza must be for me—Gray knew it was my favorite. I also assumed the bag of gummy worms were for me too, because he never really ate candy, so I went for them first. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he rumbled.

“You guys, can we get back to the matter at hand, please?” Bonnie waved at the rest of the cafeteria. “Your first kiss isn’t going to pick himself, Paige.”

“Damn,” Grayson cursed. “I forgot the ketchup.”

“I’ll go,” I said, jumping up from my seat. I was only too eager for the excuse to leave. Bonnie’s lips tightened. She knew exactly what I was doing. But I was up and away from the table before she could stop me.

I took my time grabbing the sauce, happy to delay my return as long as possible. Was it too much to hope the end-of-lunch bell might ring?

When I got back to the table, I expected to find Bonnie and Grayson sitting in uncomfortable silence. It's not that they didn't get along, but they didn't exactly have a lot in common either. Unfortunately, as I walked up, it sounded like they were arguing about something.

"What about Levi?" Bonnie said.

"He's too selfish," Gray replied without hesitation.

"Tyler?"

"He's mean to his mom."

"Elliot? I know he's in the year below us, but he's hot and he's on the team with you."

"Definitely not. He never owns up to his mistakes."

Oh no. I should have known Bonnie couldn't be trusted. The idea of her dragging Grayson into this made me want to hide under the table and never come out. Already, he was surveying every guy in the room as though he were a border-patrol officer searching for contraband.

Looking at him now, I wondered how I hadn't seen it earlier. How I hadn't realized he was the reason guys avoided me like the plague. I felt like I was in a Jane Austen novel, and he was my overly protective father trying to find me the ideal suitor.

Bonnie sighed, exasperated.

"Okay, you come up with a name then."

Grayson shrugged. I was beginning to think I should interrupt them. At the very least, let them know I was here. But I was both horrified and intrigued by their conversation, and I couldn't bring myself to intervene.

Bonnie continued, "Well, if no one else is good enough for her, perhaps her best friend should step up to the plate . . ." She leaned back in her seat, a satisfied smile on her face as she waited for Grayson to reply.

I knew I should have returned to the table when I had the chance. What was Bonnie thinking? I wasn't sure I wanted to hear Gray's answer, and I instinctively started to back away. But he spoke before I could escape.

"We're friends. I'm the last person Paige should kiss."

I expected to feel relief. He was only repeating what we'd both said to people countless times before. It was something I'd already said myself at least once today. But a small part of me flickered with disappointment. Did Grayson really find me so unappealing?

“I’m back,” I said as brightly as I could, placing the ketchup packets on Grayson’s tray.

“Thanks,” he murmured, keeping his eyes on his food. He was probably still grossed out by Bonnie’s suggestion and trying his best not to shudder at the mental image of kissing his best friend.

“Finally,” Bonnie said. “I’ve had some time to think while you were gone.”

Alarm bells were already ringing as I lowered myself into my seat. “Okay . . .”

“Since Grayson joined our table, I swear zero guys have walked by it.” She shot him an accusatory look, but he remained focused on his food.

“So . . .” he muttered.

“So, a freshly sharpened blade would be less cutting than your stare. People literally take a detour to avoid you.”

“I’m just sitting here, eating lunch,” he grumbled.

“Exactly,” Bonnie replied. “The ‘Grayson effect’ is clearly even worse than I realized. I think you need to give us a list of all the guys you haven’t scared the hell out of already . . .”

Gray’s eyes snapped up from his tray and he glanced between Bonnie and me. He was clearly surprised I’d told her about the so-called “Grayson effect,” and I felt a little guilty.

“How am I supposed to know who’s scared of me and who isn’t?” Gray protested. “I didn’t do the scaring intentionally.”

“You must have some idea,” Bonnie replied. “Which guys talk to you? Which guys have you threatened, accidentally or otherwise? Which guys see you in the corridor and run the other way?”

She folded her arms as she waited for his answer. I was eager to hear it too.

“Like, are we talking this week,” he said, “or . . .”

I released a groan and turned to Bonnie again. “We really are going to have to go to the ends of the earth to find someone for me, aren’t we?”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad. We can—” She paused, and her eyes darted to something behind me, before a slow smirk lifted the corner of her lips. “Well, hello, Antarctica.”

We followed her gaze to the cafeteria entrance. Reed had just walked in, and he was standing with a guy I didn’t recognize. He was massive, perhaps even taller than Reed and Gray, with tanned skin and sandy-blond hair that

fell so softly it was like something out of a shampoo commercial. I couldn't quite see his face properly from where I was sitting, but even at this angle it was easy to tell he was good-looking.

"Oh. My. God." Bonnie said, shaking her head. "How did I not think of this before."

"Think of what?" I turned away from the mystery guy to face her.

"That must be the new guy everyone's been talking about today," she explained.

She wasn't the only one who appeared intrigued. Every eye in the room had turned to greet our newest arrival. There was nothing more fascinating than a new student at school. Especially one who joined midway through the year and had already made friends with Reed Darling, the reluctant king of Ransom High.

"New guy?" I wondered out loud. "I hadn't heard about that."

"I only found out this morning," Bonnie replied. "It's his first day. And do you know what that means?" She didn't miss a beat before she answered her own question. "He's a blank slate. Untainted by Grayson's infamous reputation. The perfect candidate for your first kiss!"

"You're right . . ." I quickly turned to look for him once more. But he and Reed had disappeared into a crowd of people. My heart was starting to race, but I couldn't be sure if it was driven by nerves, excitement, or something else. I had no idea who this guy was. I didn't know if he had a nice smile or a friendly face. I didn't even know his name. But he was exactly what I needed: someone who Grayson hadn't scared off.

Gray grunted his disapproval.

"See, even Grayson thinks you should go for it," Bonnie continued. "He looks hot. And he's so tall. You'd have to climb him like a tree if you want a kiss, but that's half the fun . . ."

Before I could tell Bonnie to keep her voice down, a strangled noise sounded from Grayson.

I turned to see what was up with him now, but I was shocked to find his face had turned a shade of pink I hadn't seen before.

"Oh my god. Gray! Are you okay?"

He nodded and held up his hand, as if he was trying to tell me he just needed a moment. But I wasn't sure he had a moment. It sounded like he was choking on his lunch.

I leaned over and smacked him on the back. He didn't even flinch. Had I done it right? He was so big, he probably needed far more force than I could muster. I really wished I'd paid more attention when we'd learned first aid, because I had no idea what to do. I gave him another hard slap on the back, and he appeared to cough something up. I held my breath as I waited to see if I'd done enough. His face was still bright red. Perhaps one final thump to be sure? I lifted my hand, but Gray interrupted me before I could bring it back down.

"You can stop beating me up now."

I slowly lowered my arm. "Are you okay?"

He coughed to clear his throat. "I'm fine."

He didn't look fine.

"Seriously, Paige." He grabbed his bottle of water and took a long drink.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Because if you're still choking, I think you're too big for me to do the Heimlich on."

"Like I said, I'm fine."

"Should I call Parker or Reed over here?"

"If you get one of my brothers, I'll wish my lunch had already finished me off."

I relaxed and settled back in my seat. "Just chew your food properly next time, okay?"

I glanced at Bonnie, who'd been sitting back, watching this all unfold, and appeared to have thoroughly enjoyed it.

"Way to burst into action and help, Bon," I said. "Remind me never to choke around you."

The bell rang, and Bonnie jumped from her seat, still smirking. "I've got to go." She scrambled to gather her things. "I have to stop by the newsroom before class. But don't worry about our hunt for the perfect set of lips. I've got a good feeling about the new guy."

"I haven't even met him! He could be crazy."

"As long as he's crazy good at kissing, that's all that matters." She grinned at me over her shoulder and was gone.

"I'm beginning to wonder if asking Bonnie for help was a bad idea," I said as Grayson and I slowly followed the rest of the students out of the

cafeteria. “Although, she’s enthusiastic, I’ll give her that—” I paused when I heard our names being called.

“Grayson? Paige?”

Turning to find the source of the voice, I was met with a pair of bright blue eyes, tanned skin and sandy-blond hair—it was the new guy. And for some reason he had a large smile bursting from his lips. It took me a moment as I tried to figure how he knew us, but as I looked into his eyes I was hit by recognition.

“Damien?” I gasped.

Gray stiffened beside me. Bonnie’s number-one pick for my first kiss wasn’t just some new guy. He was also my first friend. My first crush. The boy who got away.

And now he was back.

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Chapter 6

Grayson

Damien? Why did that name sound familiar? And why did I recognize that messy blond hair and cocky grin? A moment later, it clicked. Damien Stone. I'd thought talking about Paige's first kiss was the worst thing to happen to me today. Apparently, I was wrong.

"Damien?" The way Paige gasped his name, you'd think he were the answer to all her prayers and the subject of all her dreams. She didn't hesitate for another second—just rushed forward and launched herself into his arms.

He swung her around, pulling her feet right off the ground. I stood and watched, waiting for them to finish their reunion like my heart wasn't aching at the sight. Paige was always smiling and joking around with the guys on the team, but something about seeing her with Damien hit differently.

Damien Stone had lived across the road when we were growing up. He hung out with me and my brothers sometimes, and other kids in the neighborhood. I'd never liked him, but he'd firmly cemented his name on my shit list the day of my eighth birthday, when he blew out my candles and stole my wish. In hindsight, it wasn't the best reason to hate someone, but when you already had to share a birthday with your twin brother, you didn't want to share your candles too. I hadn't been the least bit sad to see him go when his dad got a job out of state, and he had to move away. Mostly, I was glad I no longer had to share Paige with him.

They'd been friends when we were younger too, and it had always felt like we were competing to see who she liked the best. I'd assumed it was Damien, because he could always make her laugh. Then there was the wedding. I shuddered at the memory. I could never recall whose idea it was to play dress-up that day. But I would never forget it was Damien who got

to stand next to Paige under the tree at the bottom of her parents' garden and pretend to get hitched. I had to stand on the sidelines as Paige's maid of honor, watching my place in the friend zone become official.

"You're all grown up." Paige still sounded slightly breathless as Damien lowered her back to the ground. She was grinning brightly up at him, and his smile was just as wide. "And you got tall. You might actually be bigger than Grayson."

I stood slightly straighter as I realized she could be right. Damien *was* taller than me. Not by much, but I rarely found myself eye to eye with another guy, and I was used to being the largest person in any room I entered. Not anymore, apparently.

"And you stayed short," he replied, making her laugh. "How the hell are you guys doing?" Damien turned his friendly smile on me, but didn't give me a chance to answer. "Still cheery as ever, hey, Grayson?"

I hadn't even said anything. Was the pain on my face really that obvious? Usually, I found it easy to keep my emotions a closely guarded secret, but being around Damien must have been making it more difficult.

I decided to ignore his "cheery" jab and focus on what was important. "What are you doing back in town?" I asked.

Apparently, I'd said something hilarious, because Damien was laughing again and shaking his head. "You haven't changed a bit."

"Neither have you," I grumbled. "Just visiting then?" I added hopefully.

"Actually . . ." he replied, "you're looking at the newest member of the Ransom Devils."

The hits just kept coming. Coach Ray had said something about a new player. Perhaps I should have listened more closely.

"That's so great," Paige replied excitedly. Did she have to sound quite so happy about it? "Isn't that great, Grayson?"

"Yeah, the best." I wasn't even trying to hide the disdain in my voice. Damien didn't seem bothered by my frosty attitude though. He was far more interested in Paige.

"But you're moving schools in the middle of your senior year," Paige said as she focused on him once more. "What happened?"

"My parents split up," Damien replied. "My mom wanted to move back home to Ransom, so here I am." He gave a weary smile. Clearly, returning to Ransom wasn't his choice and he was doing his best to get through it. Hearing about his parents did make me feel a touch guilty about the cold

reception I'd given him. But then Paige reached out her hand to touch his, and I immediately returned to loathing the very sight of him.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," she said gently.

"It is what it is." He shrugged. "I'm just glad to see some familiar faces."

"Well, we're glad to see you." Paige's sunny expression returned. "What class do you have now?"

"Uh, let me check." He fished a piece of paper from his pocket and glanced over it. "Biology. Though I have no idea where the classroom is."

"Oh, that's easy." She laughed. "Just head up those stairs behind you, and it's the first door on your left. Do you want me to show you?"

Damien shook his head. "It's okay. I think I can handle that. If I get lost, I'll just follow the smell of latex gloves and bleach."

"Okay." Paige laughed again, but this time the sound was high-pitched and spluttered awkwardly. I frowned at her. I hadn't heard her nervous giggle in a while. It only usually made an appearance when she was really flustered or taken by surprise. The last time she'd fully unleashed that sound was when we'd been playing volleyball in PE last year. She'd been looking upward as she'd gone to bump the ball, but had accidentally hit Matt's butt instead. It was an understandable reason to be mortified. I couldn't make sense of what was causing it to appear now.

She quickly cleared her throat, as though she too had noticed it and was trying to compose herself. "Good luck," she added.

"Thanks, P, I'll see you later. We've got a lot of catching up to do." He emphasized his words with a wink.

"We do," she squeaked. Was she blushing? Why was she blushing?

"Grayson." Damien gave me a nod before heading for the stairs. I stared after him, still trying to come to terms with what had just happened. I was feeling a little blindsided. A little blindsided and a lot annoyed.

"Oh my gosh, can you believe Damien's back?" Paige gushed as she turned to me, her eyes brimming with excitement. "He looks so different, but still familiar. Obviously taller. A lot taller. Bonnie was right, he's kind of hot now, don't you think?"

I took several deep breaths, trying to remind myself that I was a supportive best friend.

"Do you think I sounded okay?" she continued as we started down the hall. "I didn't come off too ditzy or desperate, did I? Can you believe my

first kiss could end up being Damien Stone?”

No, I couldn’t. I was still surprised by how seriously she was taking this first kiss thing. And I’d never seen her babble over a guy this way. Under normal circumstances, I’d have thought her reaction was cute. Her eyes were big, and her cheeks were lightly flushed. I loved when she got this excited about something and her every thought spilled from her lips. But right now, she was talking about another guy, and as cute as Paige was, it sucked.

“You were fine. Just the right amount of ditzy.”

She made a playful face at me, but then she started to frown. “You don’t seem very happy he’s back.”

I hated that her excitement dimmed because of me. I should have been happy for her. Instead I was ruining her mood because of some fifth-grade jealousy. It was moments like these that reminded me why I didn’t deserve her. Why she’d be so much better off with someone else.

“Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

Her gaze was intent, like she could see right through me. “He’s your friend, Grayson. But you’re looking at him like this is a hockey game and he’s on the other team.”

“He was on another team until today. And no, he’s *your* friend, Paige.”

She waved me off like that made no difference. “I wonder what he’s like now. He still seems so nice. Or do you think he’s changed since we last saw him?”

“Well, we haven’t seen him since we were, like, ten years old, so I’d hope so.”

Paige kept going, apparently deciding to ignore my comment. “I’m surprised he came back though, even if his parents split,” she said. “Starting a new school midway through your senior year must be hard.”

“I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

“Of course he will.” She smiled confidently. “He’s Damien.” She said his name like he was some kind of superstar.

I didn’t exactly trust myself to reply. It was becoming harder and harder to watch Paige’s growing enthusiasm for a guy who had just been selected as the perfect candidate for her to kiss. She and Bonnie had made that decision before they’d realized who he was though. When they thought he was just some random new kid. Maybe this changed things.

“So, do you think Damien is still the right guy to . . . you know . . .” I wasn’t sure I could finish the sentence, but Paige was watching me expectantly.

“To . . .” she prompted.

A sinkhole tragically opening up beneath my feet and sucking me down would be more comfortable than this conversation. “Kiss,” I replied. “Is he still the guy you want to kiss?”

Her cheeks warmed and she tucked a stray hair behind one ear. “Why? You don’t think he should be?”

“Uh, I don’t know. It’s Damien, isn’t it? We know him. He’s not a blank slate, like Bonnie said.”

“Well, have you threatened him recently?”

“No.”

“Then I think we’re good.”

“But . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I, uh, just figured with your history, he was probably in the friend zone.”

“The friend zone?” She stared at me for a moment, but then it was like a light bulb flicked on in her head. “You think he won’t want to kiss me because we’re friends?”

“That’s not really what I meant.”

“You don’t think friends can turn into something more?”

That question was essentially the bane of my existence, and her asking it to me directly had me dreaming about sinkholes again. “No, I’m not saying that.”

“Because we were friends a long time ago. Maybe we aren’t anymore. Also, I’m pretty sure the friend zone isn’t some impenetrable fortress. People can come and go.”

Was she serious? I didn’t know whether to feel suddenly hopeful or totally disheartened. Could you really just leave the friend zone as easily as that? Not in my experience. I was so firmly entrenched in the zone with Paige, I was practically its mayor. Maybe she was just trying to convince herself the friend zone was no big deal because she wanted to be right about Damien.

Either way, I hated that I’d made her doubt herself. She was now questioning whether a guy could possibly want her, and once again, it was

because of me.

“You’re right,” I said. “It was a long time ago, and he’s an idiot if he’s not interested in you now.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said, a soft smile gracing her lips. “But I guess we’ll just have to see. You just make sure you don’t scare him off, okay?”

She playfully wagged a finger at me, but there was an uncertain look in her eyes. Was she really worried I’d try to ruin this for her on purpose? I guess she had every right to be. It seemed I had inadvertently scared away a few guys already, and right now every instinct in my body was telling me to do the same to Damien. But as much as I wanted to give in to the protective urges pulsing through me, I knew I had to keep my thoughts to myself.

“I won’t,” I agreed. Just because I wasn’t going to warn Damien not to hurt Paige didn’t mean I couldn’t still deal with him if he did. The thought gave me some small comfort.

“This is me,” she said, nodding to the classroom we’d just arrived at. “I know you have practice after school, but I’ll see you at home tonight?”

She darted into the room before I could reply.

As I watched her disappear through the door, I couldn’t help but wonder when my life had taken such a drastic wrong turn. Sure, Paige’s friend zone wasn’t my dream destination, but at least it was safe. It was comfortable. Things had suddenly gotten out of control though, and I had no idea where we were headed next. Paige was determined to find a guy to kiss, Damien had reappeared just at the wrong time, and I’d somehow ended up agreeing to help with the whole situation. But I was the absolute worst person for the job. All I wanted to do was pull Paige into my arms and kiss her myself so I could bring this nightmare journey to an end.

I just had to hope I’d already suffered enough for one day. I should have known things were only going to get worse.

It was only his first session with the Ransom Devils, but it didn’t take long for Damien to make himself at home. He was everywhere on the ice, stealing the puck and shouting instructions to other guys like he’d been training with us for years rather than minutes. I wasn’t sure how I was going to handle the remainder of the season with his overexuberant attitude. The fact he was a decent player only made everything worse. He was fast

on his skates, and his passes were all smooth and direct. He was also unbeatable in defense.

Having a talented player join the team wouldn't normally concern me, but Damien and I were both defensemen. He was coming for my spot on the team, and seeing as I was struggling with a bad knee, he might actually have a chance at taking it. I still needed to prove my worth to the coaches at Ryker, so I couldn't afford to let my injured knee or Damien Stone get the better of me.

"Damien looked pretty good out there," Reed said. "Could be a handy addition to the team."

I grunted, and that one sound was apparently enough for him to know exactly what was going through my mind.

"Don't worry," he said, slapping his hand on my shoulder. "He's not taking your spot. That infamous Grayson Glare is irreplaceable." I narrowed my eyes at him, and he laughed as though I'd proved his point.

"Just count yourself lucky they already named you captain," I scoffed. "I think you were the only one he wasn't barking orders at."

"I'm sure he'll calm down as he adjusts to the team." Reed shrugged. "Don't let it get to you."

I nodded, but then realized he was still watching me closely.

"What?" I demanded.

"Oh, nothing." He smiled. "Just that if I didn't know better, I'd say you were jealous."

"He's not that good a player."

"I'm not talking about hockey."

Before I could respond, Reed was called over by Coach Ray, so I settled for shooting him another glare. It didn't have the same effect when it was aimed at someone's back though, so I turned and continued toward the locker room.

"That was a great session," Damien said, falling into step beside me.

I gave him a brief nod, hoping if I didn't respond he might get the message and leave me alone, but apparently, he was completely oblivious to my cold shoulder.

"I have to admit," he continued, "I was nervous about joining another team once the season had already started, but I feel like I'll fit right in with you guys."

“I’m sure you will,” I replied, though the words nearly killed me. I wanted to be at least somewhat friendly, because that’s how Paige would want me to treat Damien. I just wasn’t sure I had it in me. Not when the image of her gathered in his arms kept flashing in my mind. Not when she’d mentioned she’d happily abandon the friend zone to kiss him.

“It was great seeing Paige again today,” Damien added. Maybe my brother wasn’t the only one who could read my mind. “Looks like it will be us three amigos back together again.”

Except it had never been us three amigos. There had been Paige and him, and Paige and me. Three was a crowd.

Damien kept glancing at me cautiously, as though he was eager for me to reply. Eventually, he broke the silence. “You two aren’t together, are you?”

“No.” I hoped my short response would close the matter, but it only made Damien’s face light up.

“Really?” He sounded surprised. “I thought you might—”

“Paige and I are just friends. Nothing more.” It grew harder and harder every time I had to say those words. A pain lodged in my chest whenever they left my lips, but this time it hurt just a little bit more than usual.

“Okay,” he replied with a grin. “So, is she dating anyone?”

This was the part where I was supposed to be a supportive friend. Where I was meant to be the world’s best wingman and talk Paige up. But I couldn’t seem to get the words out of my mouth. Wasn’t it enough that I hadn’t threatened the guy?

“Nope,” Parker said, joining us from behind. “She’s single.” If we were alone, I would have thumped him.

“How is that possible?” Damien asked. “She’s gotten really hot.”

Parker smirked in my direction. I wondered if he could tell that my blood was pulsing so hot with annoyance there was a distinct possibility my head might explode.

“I don’t think the right guy’s come along yet,” Parker replied. He spoke to Damien, but the mischievous glint in his eyes was directed at me.

“Hmm, well, maybe he’s just arrived.” The smug look on Damien’s face was enough to make me want to break every promise I’d made to Paige right here and now. But I wasn’t allowed to say or do anything. Paige would never forgive me if I did. So, instead, I was left quietly fuming.

“Maybe,” Parker agreed.

We entered the locker room, and Reed gave Damien a slap on the back as he caught up with us. “Great work out there, Stoney.” Was I seriously the only person who didn’t like this guy?

“Yeah,” Matt added as he went to sit across from us. “It’s like you’re one step ahead of everyone else. With you joining the ranks, no one’s going to get past our defense this season.” Apparently, Reed’s best friend wanted to be on my shit list too. Everyone sounded so excited, and I had a bad feeling Damien’s nauseating positivity was catching. It was like some kind of disease.

“Yeah, well, it’s only because I already have a great team to work with,” he said.

I turned my attention to my locker, so I didn’t have to share my own opinion about Damien.

“I’m going to shower,” I said to no one in particular.

“Take your time,” Parker replied. “I have to talk to Coach before we leave tonight . . .”

“But—”

He disappeared from the locker room before I could object. Surely Parker could grab a ride home with Reed. I didn’t want to be home late, because I knew Paige would be there.

“Can’t you take him, Reed?”

“I’m not going straight home,” he replied with a shrug. “Guess you’ll have to wait around.”

He was probably going to meet up with Violet. I couldn’t complain though. Reed had worked hard for his truck, picking up shifts with my dad and spending hours in the garage getting it fixed up. His reward was the freedom of having his own transport, while I was forced to share our old family pickup with Parker.

“He better not take too long,” I growled as I made my way to the showers.

Despite my urgency to get back home to Paige, I followed Parker’s advice and took my time. Knowing my brother, he’d finish with Coach Ray in no time at all but then get distracted by something shiny, like an excitable puppy. Who knew how long he’d be. But my knee was aching and the hot water running across my skin was a welcome relief. I’d pushed myself hard in training tonight because I hadn’t wanted Damien to outdo me. I was

paying the price for that extra effort now, and it was taking everything in me not to grimace in pain.

When I returned to the locker room, it was quiet; the lights were dimmed and, for a moment, I wondered if everyone had taken off. But then I noticed people huddled around my locker. Reed was there, along with Matt and his younger brother, Owen. Parker had also returned from his meeting with Coach. He was standing on a chair and seemed to be sticking some sort of banner or sign above my locker.

"What's going on?"

They all turned to me at once, identical looks of guilt plastered across their faces. Parker quickly hopped off the chair and tucked the sign behind his back.

"Well?" I repeated, nodding at the sign. "What's that?"

"There's no hiding it now," Matt muttered.

"Yeah, just tell him," Owen added.

"Now, Grayson, don't freak out," Reed said.

Parker slowly pulled the sign out from behind him and held it out wide for me to see. When I read the hastily written word plastered across it, I stared for a few moments in total confusion.

"Told you he can't read." Parker laughed.

"I can read just fine," I rumbled. "What I don't understand is why you're sticking a sign with that word on it above my locker."

Reed elbowed Parker in the side before stepping forward. His hands were outstretched as he approached, like he was walking toward a ticking time bomb.

"Because, brother, this is an intervention."

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Chapter 7

Grayson

An intervention? My jaw clicked as I stared at the sign in Parker's hands. An intervention for what?

"Reed . . ." The displeasure in my voice was clear, but out of all of them, I trusted my twin brother could be straight with me and just explain what was happening.

Instead, he simply gestured toward one of the benches. "Why don't you take a seat?"

"I don't want to take a seat. What's going on?"

They were all still huddled in the corner near my locker and eyeing me with apprehension. I must have been looking about as murderous as I felt. What did they expect? This felt like the start of a breakup conversation.

"Well?" I prompted.

"Okay," Reed said finally. "Uh, I guess I'll start." He took another step closer to me and let out a breath. "We wanted to get you alone so we could talk. But with Paige at our house, it's a little difficult . . ."

"Why?" I demanded.

They all shared another anxious look. Whatever they were about to tell me, it must be bad. Could this be about my knee? My stomach dipped as I wondered whether they'd noticed how much I'd been struggling with it at practice. Reed had tried to convince me to take a break from hockey the last time it had caused me issues. If he thought he'd have a better chance at convincing me to take it easy with Parker, Matt, and Owen here, he was going to be severely disappointed. I was a good player, but I wasn't a superstar like Reed. I was certain Ryker wouldn't hesitate to pull their scholarship offer if they found out I was damaged goods. None of that explained what Paige had to do with this though. I wanted answers, fast.

"Would someone just spit it out already?"

Reed drew in a breath. “Parker told us about Paige’s bucket list.”

I stilled. That’s what this was about? Parker never should have shared the contents of Paige’s bucket list, and I was going to kill him for that later. But first, I needed to hear why the guys thought her bucket list had anything to do with me.

“So?” My voice was like ice as I urged them to go on.

“We think it’s time you and Paige stopped dancing around each other,” Matt said.

Reed was nodding beside him. “And stop pretending that being just friends is all you want.”

“You need to man up,” Parker added.

There was a pause, and they all turned to Owen, who looked like he was doing his best not to run and hide behind his older brother.

“Oh yeah, uh, it’s time to tell her how you feel,” he finally managed to say.

I was being assaulted from all angles, and I didn’t know who to direct my counterattack at first.

“What I feel is anger,” I said. “Growing by the second.”

Owen started to edge closer to Matt. Poor kid had never been on my bad side before. I might have felt sorry for him if I wasn’t so irate.

“Come on, Gray,” Reed pleaded. “Just listen to us for a minute.”

I grabbed my bags to leave. “I’ve already heard enough.”

But Parker moved to stand in front of the exit. “We know how you feel about her.”

“It’s clear you belong together,” Matt added.

I should have left Parker behind and showered at home.

“Whatever you guys think you know, forget it. I don’t like her that way,” I said. “Paige is my friend. That’s it.”

“We all know that’s bull,” Parker said. “You’ve been in love with her for years.”

“No, we’ve been friends for years.”

“Friends?” Reed shook his head at me. “You don’t look at her like she’s just a friend.”

“Of course I do.”

“No, Grayson. You look at her like her like she’s everything.”

The other guys all nodded along.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself, Reed.” Parker seemed to be the only one who was enjoying the situation.

I stared each of them down. Did I really have to spell this out? They all looked fully committed to this “intervention”, so apparently I did. “Even if it were true. And it’s not. It wouldn’t change anything. Paige doesn’t feel that way about me.”

As far as I was concerned, that should have ended the conversation. But these guys were relentless.

“Maybe she does, but she doesn’t realize it yet,” Owen suggested.

“Or maybe she would if you gave her a chance to see you that way,” Matt added.

I let out a sigh, knowing the sooner I gave in and let them say their piece, the sooner I could leave and pretend this whole thing had never happened.

“Okay, I’ll play along,” I said. “But what exactly am I supposed to do?”

“Well, the first stage of any good intervention is admitting you have a problem,” Parker said.

This all seemed so much worse when it was coming from him.

“And then . . .” I prompted through gritted teeth.

“And then, allowing your friends to help,” Reed answered and nodded at Parker.

The smirk my younger brother had been wearing since this all started grew even wider. He practically skipped across the room to where Coach Ray’s tactics whiteboard was. He wheeled it back toward us and then flipped it over so all the plays that had been scribbled on the board disappeared and were replaced by something else. It was a list. And I stared, frozen in horror, as I read the title at the top.

“Operation Shrek?”

“We could hardly call it Operation Prince Charming . . .” Parker laughed.

As I scanned my gaze down the list, I realized the title was the least of my worries.

Operation Shrek

1. Makeover. Dress nicer and get your hair cut
2. Compliment her — but not too much

3. *Flirt with her — but don't be creepy*
4. *Show your sensitive side — if you don't have one, fake it!*
5. ~~*Touch her more*~~ *– show her you have chemistry!*
6. *Be charming — or at least try*
7. *Take an interest in her hobbies*
8. *Be less* ~~*grumpy*~~ *Grayson*
9. *Don't be too clingy or too nice*
10. *If all else fails, just tell her you have feelings*

"This is how we get you out of the friend zone," Parker said proudly. "You need to show her you can be more than just a friend."

"Be less Grayson?" I pointed at number eight on the list.

Parker shrugged. "Grumpy, Grayson; they're pretty much the same thing."

My lips pressed into a firm line as I took another look at the list. I didn't want to do any of those things—especially not number ten. That was certain to drive Paige away.

"You want me to be a completely different person? Is that honestly the only way you can see Paige being interested in me?"

"Uh . . ." Parker fumbled.

"And even if I wanted your advice, which I don't, your little list is useless to me. If you know about Paige's bucket list, then you know she's looking for someone to be her first kiss. And she wants that person to be Damien Stone."

The guys considered my argument for a while, but then Parker started to grin. "I think we can still help. What's the one thing you're great at in hockey?"

"One thing?" I wondered where he was going with this. "I'm great at more than one thing."

"Sure you are." It felt like Parker was talking to me like I was five. "Just answer the question."

I released a pained sigh. "I don't know. Skating?"

"No."

"Stickhandling?"

"Definitely not. I'll give you a clue. What did you receive the most penalties for last year?"

"Interference?" I guessed.

“Bingo.” Parker snapped his fingers.

“That’s the one thing I’m good at? How does that help?”

“We interfere with Paige’s attempts to kiss Damien.” Parker said it so simply. Like messing with Paige’s dating life was an obvious and easy choice.

“I’m not going to purposely sabotage her,” I replied. Especially not when she’d asked me to play nice. “If she wants to go after Damien, I have to respect that.”

“What about what you want?” Owen asked.

“Don’t just give up,” Matt added. “We can help.”

A part of me wished they could, but I didn’t need to look again at their whiteboard plan to “help” to know they were in way over their heads. I was alone in my feelings, and their list wasn’t going to change that. Getting a haircut or trying to be “less Grayson” wasn’t going to make Paige suddenly see me differently.

“Thanks for the intervention, guys. But you’ve got it all wrong. I really don’t need this.” I pulled my bag onto my shoulder and headed for the exit, cursing myself for not doing so earlier. The door had just closed behind me when it swung open again and my twin brother followed me into the hallway.

“I think I’ve heard enough for one night, Reed.”

He lifted his hands as though to signal he came in peace. “I know we caught you off guard.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“But we’ve been watching the two of you for years, and I know you feel more for her than you’re letting on. It’s time you did something.”

“Maybe I like things how they are,” I said. “Maybe I don’t want things to change.”

Reed released a heavy sigh, as if dealing with me made the very act of breathing an arduous task. “You said yourself, Paige is looking for another guy to be her first kiss, right? Who knows where that might lead. And I know you’re going to Ryker next year, but Paige hasn’t made any plans. She could end up anywhere. You need to make a move now, before it’s too late.”

I didn’t want to panic, but when Reed put it that way, it felt like there was a ticking clock hanging over me. It was highly likely that Paige and I

would be forced to go our separate ways next year. And if she kissed Damien, I might never get her back.

“She deserves so much better than me.” I sighed.

“You’re the only person who believes that,” Reed said. “You *are* good enough for her. She’d be the first one to tell you.”

I hated that Reed’s words were getting to me. Tempting me in a way I’d never let myself be tempted.

“She doesn’t want me,” I argued.

“Maybe, or maybe she’s just never entertained the thought of you.”

“And what if I go after her and I lose her forever?” I sounded so pathetic. This was exactly why I didn’t talk much. You couldn’t say anything stupid if you simply kept your mouth shut.

“I guess that’s a risk you’ve got to take,” Reed replied. “But you also need to realize that doing nothing is risky too. You could lose her either way.”

I stared at my brother, absorbing his words. Maybe I wouldn’t lose her instantly, but if Paige was with some other guy, then, day by day, I’d begin to lose the parts of our relationship that were so special. At first it might be something simple, like the texts she sent me every night. But then it could be the subtle smile she only shared with me. Or worse, the way she laughed when we teased each other, and the sparkle in her eye when she coaxed a reaction out of me.

If I revealed my true feelings for Paige, I could easily crash and burn. But if I did nothing, there was just as much risk I would lose her. If that was going to happen, it had to be better to go down fighting.

“She’s staying with us for two weeks,” Reed continued. “This might be the best chance you have to show her how great you’d be together.”

Or I might drive her away for good. My heart desperately wanted to hope, but I’d been stuck in the friend zone with her for such a long time, I didn’t know how to contemplate escape.

“Just say you’ll think about it,” Reed said. “And know you’ve got backup if you decide you want to do something.”

“Okay,” I grumbled. “I’ll think about it.”

In truth, I was already thinking about it far more than I wanted. I should be dismissing the whole thing. Paige would never see me as anything other than her friend. But what if this was my one and only chance, and I was

throwing it away? What if there was a way for her to see me in another light?

I guess I had to decide if I was finally ready to take control of my own fate. And, more importantly, whether I was selfish enough to try to make Paige mine.

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Chapter 8

Paige

I was doing my best to watch Grayson play, but it was a little difficult to concentrate when Bonnie's commentary was purely focused on each player's ability to pucker up rather than their performance with the puck.

"Aren't you supposed to be covering the game for the paper?" I asked.

"Nah, I assigned it to Abby. I knew this game was going to need my full attention for a different reason." She was surveying the players closely, but she probably didn't even know the score.

"And that reason is . . ." I already knew the answer.

"Damien Stone." She grinned at me. "I'm trying to plan our best form of attack for the party tonight."

"And that involves watching him skate?"

"The way a hockey player skates says a lot about their personality."

"And what does Damien's skating say about him?"

"He likes to take command of a situation."

"You could probably say that about half the guys on the team."

She shrugged and continued forming her game plan. "I think your best bet is to flirt with him tonight, and then lure him onto the dance floor, but let him think he's taking the lead."

"Flirting. Dancing. Okay," I muttered. Why did that sound so simple, but also completely terrifying?

I was distracted by the action down on the ice, as a Jefferson High Giants player prepared to take a shot at the Devils' goal. I held my breath as I realized our goalie, Elliot, was completely out of position. The Giants were certain to score. But Grayson appeared out of nowhere, swooping in front of the Jefferson player before he could swing his stick. Gray snatched the puck away, surprising his opponent so much the guy lost his balance and ended up sprawled on his stomach across the ice.

I applauded Grayson’s play along with all the other Devils fans in the building, but then instinctively moved to the edge of my seat as he made a pinpoint pass up the ice to Parker, who had a clear opportunity to score. When he flicked his wrists and sent the puck sailing into the top corner of Jefferson High’s net, everyone leaped to their feet and the noise of the crowd practically shook the arena. I was still watching Grayson, who modestly accepted the praise of nearby teammates, including a very relieved Elliot, while Parker celebrated wildly at the other end of the rink.

Bonnie couldn’t have looked more disinterested in the game as she gave a half-hearted clap at my side.

“You still want to go through with this, don’t you?” she asked as the applause died down and we lowered ourselves to our seats again.

I had no idea how she expected me to focus on this conversation and the game at the same time. “The kiss?” I asked.

“Obviously.”

“Uh, I think so?” I wasn’t feeling nearly as confident as I’d hoped. As much as I wanted my first kiss over and done with, it made me nervous to think of kissing anyone, especially someone like Damien. We hadn’t had much of a chance to talk this week, but whenever I’d seen him around school, he’d been confident and charming. He was the kind of guy that would make any girl go weak at the knees. Could he really be interested in someone like me?

“Because if you’re not sure about Damien, we can always try someone else,” Bonnie said, turning her eyes back to the Devils players. “Like, Elliot Ford has a really great ass,” she added, pointing to him.

“He’s a useless goalie, though,” I muttered. It seemed Grayson was out there saving his “great ass” at every turn today.

But Bonnie couldn’t be derailed. “And I hear Matt Cleaver is an amazing kisser, which is pretty important for the task at hand . . .”

“No way! Kissing Reed’s best friend would be too weird.”

“Okay, how about—”

“No, it has to be Damien,” I said before she could suggest more names. “I can’t risk another guy evaporating into thin air and, like you said, Grayson hasn’t yet had a chance to scare him off. Also, I know we were really little when Damien left town, but even then, I had a huge crush on him.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I thought he was super cute.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet. It’s like you guys are meant to be.”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far . . .”

“I would.” Bonnie tilted her head and batted her eyelashes. “Damien’s lips are your destiny.”

I gave her a pointed look. It was a little hard to feel reassured when Damien had had girls flocking around him all week, and we’d exchanged only a few words. My stomach swirled with a mixture of anticipation and worry as I considered what I hoped to accomplish tonight.

I glanced at the scoreboard, briefly hoping it might have changed while I wasn’t looking. Maybe the Devils were losing and their victory party would have to be called off. But I had no such luck. As if to rub salt in the wound, Reed scored a goal just a moment later, putting the Devils ahead by three points. The game was almost over, so there was no chance for the other team now.

The crowd exploded into cheers and whistles as they celebrated the goal. For once, I was struggling to match their enthusiasm. There was no way tonight’s party would be cancelled now, which meant my plans with Damien would be going ahead too. I knew I needed to get my first kiss over with, but it all felt like it was happening way too fast.

“Now, make sure you remember to bring mints tonight,” Bonnie said.

“Okay.”

“And are you sure you don’t want me to watch you kissing your hand first so I can give you some pointers?”

“Bonnie!” She’d said it quite loudly, just as the cheers from the crowd were dying down, and the girl in front of us turned to shoot us a curious look.

“I’m kidding, obviously,” Bonnie clarified, although I wasn’t too sure. My embarrassment only worsened when the guy next to the girl turned around too. He was pretty good-looking, and Bonnie must have agreed because she threw an arm around my shoulder. “My girl Paige is looking for someone to kiss tonight. Want to volunteer?”

The guy started to smile, like he might be interested, but the girl beside him threw me a furious look and then forcefully turned his face back toward the ice. I sank into my seat.

“I think that’s his girlfriend, Bon.”

“Yes, well, she should be willing to sacrifice him for just one night. This is practically a medical emergency. You could die with untouched lips if we don’t sort this situation out soon.”

She was being far too dramatic. “I’m not going to die with *untouched lips*.”

The siren rang, sounding the end of the game, and the crowd cheered again. As usual, the Devils had won. I smiled down at Grayson as he made his way from the rink. He was always so strong and powerful. But lately, when each game ended, it was as if I could see how heavily his exhaustion was weighing him down. I hoped he was okay.

His eyes lifted to mine as he stepped off the ice. No matter where I sat in the crowd during his games, he somehow always managed to know exactly where I was. I lifted my hands and clapped just for him. His lips curved just a fraction before he continued to the locker room.

I sighed as I lowered my hands. He’d been a little distant this week and it seemed like something was bothering him. I wondered if I’d upset him by asking him to back off, or if perhaps having me live with his family was just too much. I could be a lot to handle 24/7, though given how much time he spent training, we honestly hadn’t seen that much of each other.

He might just be worrying about hockey and his knee. He spent a lot of time icing it each night, and signing day was only a week away. I knew his future coach from Ryker University was coming to the game that day too. He was probably pretty nervous about it. My boy problems were likely the least of his worries.

I realized Bonnie was still talking and I turned to her. “What did you say?” I’d completely tuned out while watching Grayson. Thankfully, the crowd had been quite loud, so I hoped Bonnie would assume that was the reason I hadn’t heard her.

She smirked as if she knew exactly who’d distracted me. “I said I need to go find Abby. I want to check on her game notes before she writes it up. She’s sitting somewhere up the back, so it’s probably easier if I just meet you by the exit.”

“Okay. Well, make sure she includes that great block Grayson made at the end of the first period when we were only winning by one. And the time he saved Elliot’s ass. Oh, and did you know that last goal was Reed’s twentieth for the season?”

Bonnie raised an eyebrow at me. “Anything else?”

“Uh, yeah, the coaches need to make better use of their line changes in the third period, and that penalty against Parker in the second was an awful call by the referee. But I don’t know if you’re allowed to say that, are you?”

She laughed. “I swear, Paige, you should be the one writing about these games for me.”

“Uh, no. I’m a terrible writer.” I shook my head. “Probably best I leave that to the experts. I’ll see you soon.”

I started making my way down the bleachers before she could pursue the idea any further. She must have been joking anyway. I’d never been very good at writing anything longer than a text message. Every essay I turned in came back covered in red marks. I just struggled to organize my thoughts and could never seem to get them down in a way that made sense. It was so frustrating, and the thought of doing it voluntarily, particularly when there would be a strict deadline and other students might actually read it, was pretty much my worst nightmare.

The crowd was still making their way from the building as I waited for Bonnie. She didn’t normally catch a ride with me, but we were planning to get ready for tonight’s party together. She was desperate to avoid her house right now, so I’d suggested she come to the Darlings’.

She usually used her baby sister as her excuse for escaping her house, but in this instance, I was wondering if it was more her own curiosity than the newborn’s colic that had her jumping at the chance to come over. She was probably hoping to prove or disprove one of the many rumors that circulated about Gray and his brothers.

My theory was only confirmed when we eventually arrived at the Darlings’ house, and she immediately started asking questions.

“Can you give me a tour?”

“Is this where they eat?”

“Mind if I take a look in the bathroom?”

“Where’s the basement?”

I ignored each of her queries and pushed her toward the stairs. The house was oddly quiet. The boys had headed straight to Matt’s place after the game, and I was guessing the rest of the family were still out. “No snooping, Bonnie.”

She gasped and placed a hand against her chest. “I would never snoop.”

“Snoop is practically your middle name.”

“Come on, Paige. Please?” she persisted. “It’s not snooping, it’s just a little healthy poking about. I can’t have my best friend staying in a house that has a meth lab in the basement . . .”

“Oh my god. That rumor is ridiculous! The Darlings don’t even have a basement.”

“Backyard shed?”

I gave her a stern look. “This isn’t really about my health and safety, is it?”

“Okay, fine.” Bonnie threw her hands in the air. “It’s public-interest journalism, Paige. The people deserve to know the truth about their idols.”

“You know better than to listen to rumors about Gray and his brothers. Pretty much none of them are true.”

“Which means some are . . .”

“If you want the truth, just ask Gray. You hang out with him all the time.”

“No, I hang out with you, and Grayson suffers my presence. He’s not my biggest fan.”

“That’s just Gray being Gray. He likes you. He’s just not great at showing it.”

“Uh-huh.” She seemed far from convinced, but I knew it was pointless to try and tell her otherwise. The only thing that might change her mind was if Grayson said the words himself, but even then she’d be skeptical.

“Whatever,” she muttered. “Just let me get this straight. You’re telling me, I’m not allowed to raid the boys’ underwear drawers to find out if they prefer boxers or briefs?”

“Definitely not. I thought you said this was public interest.” I laughed.

“I think you’re underestimating how interested in these boys the public are.”

“Look, let’s just go get dressed for tonight.”

She reluctantly agreed but didn’t stop asking what was in each room we passed, or from slowing down whenever there was an open door she could look through.

Just as we reached Cammie’s room, I received a text from Grayson.

Gray: Are you still at the rink?

Me: No, I’m home now. Bonnie and I are getting ready for tonight. Apparently, what I wear to Matt’s party is a big deal.

Gray: Just wear what you had on at the game. You looked perfect.

Me: I was wearing your jersey.

Gray: Like I said . . . perfect.

I rolled my eyes. Wearing his jersey to the party would be a bad idea. Especially if I wanted to make a move on Damien. I needed to look hot tonight, and I certainly wasn’t going to catch his attention with another guy’s name and number on my back.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t sure looking hot was something I was capable of. The clothes in my closet were entirely chosen based on vibes. Nothing particularly matched, and I normally chose my outfit for the day based on how I was feeling. And, right now, I felt like I should be donning my biggest winter coat, a massive fuzzy scarf and a pom-pom hat. I was nervous, and that made me want to cover myself in as many layers as possible. Tonight, it seemed, I was going to have to step beyond my comfort zone in more ways than one.

“Wow, so this is Cammie Darling’s room,” Bonnie said. “It’s not nearly as menacing as I expected. Where’s the coffin she sleeps in each night?”

“That’s not very—”

“Actually, I keep my coffin in the attic.” I jumped with surprise as Cammie walked through the door behind me. I had no idea she was home. “I like to stay close to my pet bats.”

“Oh, uh, Cammie . . .” Bonnie stuttered. “I didn’t mean . . .”

“Yeah, you did,” Cammie replied, walking past us to grab her headphones off her desk. “Sounds like you’ve been listening to too much town gossip. I would have expected more from the editor of the school paper. Maybe you should try thinking for yourself next time.”

My eyes went wide, and I turned to Bonnie to find her looking even more shocked than I felt. I had never seen her speechless. Questioning Bonnie’s journalistic integrity was just about the worst possible way someone could insult her. Cammie disappeared from the room without

another word, and I quickly followed after her, leaving Bonnie still standing dumbstruck.

"Cammie, wait," I said as I caught up to her in the corridor. "Sorry about my friend."

But she grinned in reply. "You kidding? I've been itching to put someone in their place all day. That was fun."

"It—it was?"

"Yeah, catching people gossiping about me might be my favorite pastime."

"Oh, okay."

"I know it's weird." She shrugged. "But, the way I figure it, if people stop gossiping about me, it means I've gotten boring. Anyway, I'm off to the rink to meet Eric."

"Is that your new skating partner?" She went through so many, it could be difficult to keep track of them sometimes. "How's it going?"

"Not well. He's refusing to agree on a soundtrack for our next program. And I'm not skating to *Carmen* or *Swan Lake* again." She shuddered to show her disgust. "I'll convince him eventually. One way or another. Wish me luck."

She headed off down the hallway before I could respond to her slightly ominous closing comment. Cammie Darling was certainly one of a kind. I could see why she scared people so easily, but I envied her confidence. I also felt pretty lucky I'd never managed to end up on her bad side.

When I returned to her room, Bonnie looked as though she'd recovered slightly, but she was still clearly fretting.

"Did I just make an enemy of Cammie Darling?"

"I think you'd have to do more than that to achieve enemy status," I replied with a laugh. "And to be honest, I don't think a little quip about a coffin even ranks as offensive to Cammie. She was just messing with you."

"If you say so," Bonnie mumbled. "But we're getting ready at my house next time—crying baby or not."

I nodded, but turned away when I found myself smiling. It had been kind of fun watching Bonnie squirm under Cammie's wrath. To get us back on track, I started rifling through my bag and retrieved the outfit I'd been thinking of wearing tonight: one of my favorite plaid skirts and a navy top that matched it nicely.

“Cute,” Bonnie said when I held it up, although her frown revealed her true feelings even before she added, “If you’re a grandmother.”

I glanced down at the outfit in my hands. “Hey, I really like it.”

“I’m sure everyone does, down at the nursing home.”

I hoped she was just trying to be funny. “But I always wear stuff like this.”

“Which is probably why you keep getting mistaken for the school librarian.”

“That was one time!” I corrected her, though that didn’t make me feel much better. “If this isn’t enough to impress Damien, then perhaps he isn’t the one for me.”

“You’re not looking to marry the guy. You just need to kiss him.” When she caught my determined expression, she released a pained sigh. “I guess with your hair and makeup done it could work . . .”

“Great.” I let out a breath. I wasn’t sure why I was being so stubborn about the clothes. I guess I didn’t like trying to be something I wasn’t. I wanted someone to kiss me because they liked me just as I was.

Bonnie helped me with my hair and makeup, and once she was done, I went into the bathroom to check it out. I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed as I stared at my reflection. She’d done a good job on my makeup. I looked cute enough, but in a forgettable sort of way. I was still just me. No amount of mascara or eyeshadow was ever going to transform me into some siren goddess that would make all the boys at school fall before me. And while I’d never really been insecure about my looks, a flicker of uncertainty rushed though me. I must be one of only a few seniors who had never been kissed. Perhaps even the only one. What if it wasn’t simply my surly best friend that sent guys running? What if the problem was me?

I squared my shoulders as I dismissed the thought. I had to believe that tonight would be different. Grayson had backed off, and the perfect guy had appeared right on cue. I wasn’t sure if I believed in fate, but every sign was pointing toward the fact that the stars had finally aligned. I just had to hope that meant my bad run with boys was over, and everything was about to change for the better.

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Chapter 9

Paige

Despite the many pep talks I gave myself on the way to the party, I was undeniably anxious by the time we arrived. The pressure of trying to land my first kiss was making me jittery, and it didn't help that the weather started turning on the way here. It felt like a storm was brewing and I seriously hoped I was wrong. I'd hated storms ever since I was little, when lightning struck a tree outside my house while I was sleeping. A branch had cracked and come crashing in through my bedroom window. Now, whenever a storm rolled in, it felt as though it was bringing something ominous with it.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself, although the clouds looked dark, there was only a little wind and light rain. That didn't mean there would be thunder and lightning too. This wasn't a bad omen, and it didn't mean tonight wasn't going to go well.

I smoothed a hand over my outfit as I glanced around the living room. The party hadn't been going long, but already Matt's house was packed. People were pressed up against one another as they danced to the pumping music that filled the room, and I struggled to imagine Damien and I doing the same thing. Was this really the place I'd experience my first kiss? It certainly wasn't romantic. I wasn't even sure if it was appealing.

"Is everything okay?" Bonnie asked.

"Yes. No. I don't know."

She waited for me to explain.

"What if I don't click with Damien? What if I decide he's not the guy I want to kiss tonight? What if I do, but he doesn't want me?" It was the last question I feared the most.

"If he doesn't want you, then he's an idiot."

"Are you sure about that?"

“Of course.” She smiled. “But, if by some shocking stroke of bad luck I’m wrong, or you change your mind, then we’ll find another guy. He can’t be the only person in town you could possibly kiss.”

“I think he might be,” I grumbled. “And I don’t want to literally go all the way to Antarctica.”

“Me neither.” She laughed. “Just stick to our plan and see what happens. If there’s a problem, we’ll figure out a Plan B. Maybe we’ll give spin the bottle another crack.”

I cringed at the thought.

“For now,” Bonnie continued, “let’s just think positively, yeah?”

“You’re right.” I released a breath. “The nerves are just getting to me.”

She reached out and squeezed my arm. “It’s going to be okay, Paige.”

It was easy enough for her to say—she already had kissing experience. Still, I returned my attention to the party and tried to get my head in the game. I had a mission tonight, and there was no chance I’d succeed if I kept freaking out like this.

“Can you see Damien anywhere?”

Bonnie gave a cursory glance around the room and shrugged. “He’s probably out back with the other hockey players.”

I nodded in agreement. Gray, Reed, and all the other guys on the hockey team usually hung out in Matt’s rec room during his parties. Damien already appeared to be getting on with his new teammates pretty well, and had been sitting with the other players at lunch all week.

“Let’s go get him.” Bonnie reached for my hand, but I hesitated to take it.

“You don’t think it’s too early in the night to try to kiss him?”

“I don’t know, but I’m certain it’s not going to happen if you two are in different rooms.”

“Okay. I guess we could at least do some recon.”

She grinned as I placed my hand in hers and allowed her to lead me out back. But as we passed the kitchen, Bonnie stopped in her tracks and nodded through the doorway. There were only a few people in there, and I immediately spotted Damien. My stomach dipped at the sight of him. As I watched him talk to Elliot, I realized everything about Damien stood out. His height, his good looks; even his clothes were far too nice for a Ransom High party. His knitted sweater and khakis wouldn’t have looked out of place in a menswear catalog.

Even when we were kids, Damien was always popular and good-looking, and staring at him now, I struggled to spot a single fault. He was flawless—almost to the point where it was a little hard to believe he was real. His hair fell in idyllic waves, his teeth were sparkling white, and his cheekbones gave his features a striking edge. He was too good to be true, and I wondered if kissing him would feel the same. Surely he couldn't be gorgeous, talented, *and* a good kisser.

"There just has to be something wrong with him," I murmured before glancing at Bonnie. "Don't you think?"

"I think it sounds like you're trying to psych yourself out again."

Grayson wasn't around to sabotage my chances now, but apparently, I was doing a great job of it all by myself. I tried my best to push my fears aside. "Okay, so, what am I supposed to do again?"

"Just go talk to him. Flirt a little."

I didn't know the first thing about flirting. I wasn't sure I'd ever even done it. At least, not intentionally. What if I made a fool of myself?

"But, Bon, what if I'm bad at flirting?"

"You won't be," she said firmly. "You know how to talk to guys. Your best friend is a guy."

"That's different." Talking to boys you were friends with wasn't the same as trying to get one to kiss you. I'd never worried about or second-guessed what I said to Gray. Right now, my thoughts were churning so fast I wasn't sure I'd be able to say anything to Damien at all.

"It's not that different," Bonnie insisted. "Just be yourself, but a bit sexier. Be fun but a little coy. Make sure you smile and laugh at anything he says. But not too much. You need to leave him wanting more. Got it?"

No, I didn't get it at all. How was I supposed to do all those things at once?

"I think I need more time to prepare for this. Maybe we should try a bit later . . ." Maybe later I'd have built up the courage to go through with this, or maybe I'd just abandon the endeavor entirely. Maybe I could just have my first kiss in college. Or not at all.

"Do you want to kiss someone, or not?" Bonnie demanded.

"I mean, yeah . . ."

"And is Damien the guy you want?"

"Uh . . ."

“You know the answer’s yes, Paige.” Someone was pouring shots on the counter just inside the door and Bonnie reached over and snatched two of them.

“Hey!”

She ignored the guy’s protests, smiling at me instead. “Now, down this and get in there before you chicken out.”

I hesitated as she handed me a glass.

“Bottoms up,” she ordered.

I scrunched up my nose and downed the drink, before she handed me hers as well. “You need this more than me,” she said, gesturing for me to drink that too.

I knew I was going to regret this in the morning, but I did as I was told and quickly drank the second shot.

“Much better,” Bonnie said. “Now, get in there and flirt your little butt off. I’ll text you with a pickup line to use in case your brain goes blank. And if all else fails, tell him you need the bathroom and bail.”

“That’s really not very help—”

“Stop stalling.” She gave me a shove and I stumbled through the doorway into the kitchen. A couple of people gave me strange looks, but thankfully Damien was still deep in conversation and hadn’t noticed. I shot Bonnie a glare over my shoulder, but she simply winked and walked away. I wasn’t sure whether I should be relieved she’d gone or feel totally abandoned.

“Okay, I can do this,” I muttered as I turned to face Damien once more. The kitchen was large, but he wasn’t that far from me. I wished the distance between us was greater, so I had more time to gather my thoughts. I couldn’t remember any of Bonnie’s advice. She’d encouraged me to laugh, maybe? And said something about leaving him wanting more? But more of what, exactly? God, this was a nightmare.

My phone buzzed, and the tightness in my chest eased a little when I saw Bonnie’s name pop up. She’d actually sent me a line to use. The moment I opened the message though, I regretted it.

Bonnie: I lost my teddy bear. Will you sleep with me instead?

I texted her back straightaway.

Me: I am not saying that.

Bonnie: Ugh. Fine. Be boring. Tell him your phone's broken because it doesn't have his number in it.

Me: That's just as bad.

Bonnie: How about, I know we don't have any classes together, but I think we have chemistry.

Me: I don't take chemistry.

Bonnie: Obviously!

"Paige?" I glanced up and found Damien staring down at me. Apparently, while Bonnie and I had been texting, I'd somehow ended up right in front of him.

My brain emptied as I tried to figure out what to say. All I needed was a simple hello. But that's not what came out.

"Do you have chemistry with me?"

"What?" Damien tilted his head slightly.

"Uh, like at school." I sounded such an idiot. "You know, the periodic table, atoms, gases . . ." Was I really talking about gases? I needed to stop talking, right now.

"Sorry, Paige. I'm not taking chemistry."

"Right. Yeah, me neither." I laughed. That was what Bonnie had told me to do, right? Unfortunately, it had come out as some kind of strange, high-pitched giggle that made me sound more like a squealing pig than a human being. The look of confusion on Damien's face only increased. I was clearly failing to make a good impression and needed to say something to fix this fast.

"I lost my phone number, have you seen it?" Wait, no, that wasn't the line. What was wrong with me? I blamed Bonnie for putting those stupid pick-up lines in my head. "Sorry, I mean my phone, I lost my phone."

"Uh, I think you might be holding it . . ."

I glanced down at the phone in my hand and gave an awkward laugh, making sure it resonated at a slightly lower frequency this time. "Oh yeah, there it is."

“Glad I could help solve that great mystery.” His smile seemed genuine, but it was probably the same one he gave all the other crazy girls who talked to him. I wondered if elite hockey players like him needed coaching on how to deal with deranged fans and groupies. Smile, nod, and don’t make any sudden movements; effective with both dangerous animals and awkward girls.

To my surprise though, Damien gestured to the ice bucket on the counter beside him. “Do you want a drink?”

Given the way I’d been acting, he probably thought I’d already had one too many. But I was only too eager to accept. I needed to do something, anything, to reset this conversation.

“That would be great, thanks.” He handed me a bottle and I took several large sips. Unfortunately, the drink did little to calm my nerves.

“Great party, huh? Are you having a good time?” he asked.

Another ridiculous giggle erupted from my mouth, and I quickly clamped my lips shut. The pressure of trying to impress this guy was clearly getting to me. I was losing it.

He patiently waited for my response, and by some miracle I managed to stammer out the words, “Yeah, you?”

Instead of making some excuse to get the hell out of there, Damien surprised me again by answering. He seemed happy enough once he got chatting, and somehow he diverted the conversation back to the game today. Before long, Damien was deep into the epic tale of his assist during the first period. Technically, I wasn’t sure it counted as an assist. He’d passed the puck to Reed, but an opposition player had intercepted it. They’d only had the puck for a split second though, before Reed stole it back and scored.

I didn’t dare interrupt Damien. I doubted he wanted to be corrected, and there was every chance I might embarrass myself again. He seemed quite content to have an audience for his story, and Bonnie had said to let him do most of the talking, so at least I was getting one thing right. *Just listen and nod and do anything other than talk or giggle, Paige!*

“Were you at today’s game?” he asked.

Oh no. He wanted me to talk again. I went to take a sip of my drink to delay my response, but I was so distracted I missed my mouth completely, sending the entire contents of the bottle down the front of my top. I gasped and swore under my breath as the cold liquid soaked through my top and hit my skin.

“Are you okay?” Damien reached out to me. “Do you need some napkins or a towel or something?”

“I’m fine,” I squeaked.

“Are you sure, because I can—”

“I just need the toilet!” In my panic, I practically shouted the words at him as I took Bonnie’s final piece of advice: I bailed.

My attempt to flirt with Damien had been a complete disaster, and the thought of us kissing after my abysmal performance was laughable. He was more likely to take out a restraining order on me.

As I fled the scene, looking for the bathroom, I almost collided with Bonnie in the corridor. “What happened?” she gasped, her eyes immediately dropping to my soaked top.

“Let’s just say I don’t only need a Plan B after that, I need an overhaul of my entire personality.”

“Oh no, was it that bad?”

“Bad doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

“I’m so sorry, Paige.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your fault. And it turns out, it’s not even Grayson’s fault I haven’t been kissed. I’m the one to blame. I’m hopeless with boys.”

“You’re not hopeless.”

I waved at my ruined top to emphasize my point.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. It was your first try. You’ll do better next time. You just need a little more practice.”

“A little more practice? I’d be better off getting a brain transplant.” I tried to pull the top from my skin—it was starting to stick. “I need to go deal with this.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “We can regroup after. Maybe try a different approach.”

I nodded, but deep down I knew I was done for the night. I had blown things with Damien so thoroughly I was going to need far more than a pep talk from Bonnie if I was going to turn this around. I was going to have to do something drastic. I just wasn’t sure what that might be.

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Chapter 10

Grayson

I would rather eat another batch of Paige's poisonous muffins than watch her kiss another guy. Surely death would be less painful than the suffering I was enduring at the mere thought of her with someone else. The party had only just started, but I'd spent the entire time standing in the rec room, watching the door like a hawk. I knew Paige could arrive at any moment what might happen when she did.

"She's not here yet," Reed said as he came to stand next to me. It was like he'd read my mind.

"Don't know who or what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh." Reed looked like he was fighting a smirk. "Have you thought any more about the friendly advice we gave you the other day?"

"Friendly advice? You mean, when you guys cornered me in the locker room and told me I needed to change my entire personality?"

"Yeah, that."

"I've been doing my best to pretend it never happened." I lifted my drink to my lips and took a slow sip.

"So, you're going to sit back and do nothing?"

"That's the plan." Although, the thought of doing nothing almost pissed me off more than Reed and the guys' insulting list of suggestions. I'd been doing nothing since forever, and unsurprisingly, it had gotten me nowhere.

"You really need to stop being so stubborn," Reed said. "It's making you miserable."

"Perhaps I like misery." Misery was safe. Misery was comfortable. And, however miserable I might be now, surely it couldn't be worse than the devastation I'd feel if I shared my feelings and it ruined my friendship with Paige.

Reed shook his head at me. “You can choose to be happy, you know? You can fight for it. You’ll regret doing nothing, and will only have yourself to blame.”

As he spoke, I followed his gaze to where Violet was chatting with Matt on the other side of the room. Reed was staring at her with bright, wide eyes. He’d had that look on his face pretty much every day since they’d officially started dating.

“You don’t have to just pine after her from a distance anymore,” I said. “You got the girl.”

“I know.” Reed grinned as he pulled his eyes away from her to look at me. “It’s awesome. You should try it.”

He walked over to join Violet and wrapped his arms around her waist. He made it sound easy. Like I could just wave a wand, and everything would fall into place. I’d magically become the guy Paige deserved, she’d return my feelings, and we’d live happily ever after. It was a fantasy. One I wanted to become reality far too much.

I was almost grateful that my knee was still hurting from the game today. I needed the distraction. Although, even that wasn’t enough to fully take the edge off the anxiety swirling in my gut.

“So, what are you going to do if Paige kisses Damien tonight?” Parker said, appearing out of nowhere at my side. “Matt bet me fifty bucks you’d punch him. I bet you’d interfere with the whole thing before he gets a chance.”

What was it with my brothers and their sudden obsession over my relationship with Paige?

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your time than harass me?”

“Sure I do,” Parker replied. “This is a party. You think helping you is the top thing on my priority list?”

“Then why are you here?”

“You haven’t left me much choice. You’re standing in the corner being all moody and scowling at anything that moves. I don’t need girls being any more terrified of you than they already are. It’ll mess with my game.”

I guess that explained Parker’s reasons for helping me. You could always count on him to be self-motivated.

“Also, I figured I should probably tell you Paige is here.”

“What?” My eyes darted around the room.

“Yeah, and she’s already talking to Damien.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that!”

Parker’s face lit with a devious grin. “I just needed to make sure Matt was ready with the camera.” He stuck up his thumb and posed beside me as Matt turned his phone in our direction. “Figured we could frame this and call it, ‘The Moment Grayson Realized He’d Made a Catastrophic Mistake.’”

“Get off me.” I shoved him away. “Where is she?”

“In the kitchen.”

I marched toward the door, but Parker trailed after me. “Ha, I knew you’d pick interference! Easiest fifty bucks I’ll ever make.”

I ignored my brother as I stormed in the direction of the kitchen. But as I approached the room and caught sight of Paige and Damien, I came to a sudden standstill. They were smiling at one another, and he was laughing at something she’d said. My heart was racing, but for all the wrong reasons. I wanted nothing more than to barge in there and tell Damien Stone to return to whatever hole he’d slithered out of. But I couldn’t do it. If this was what Paige wanted, I couldn’t ruin her chances with him. I couldn’t interfere. God, how I wished I could.

My shoulders slumped as realization hit me: I was out of time. I’d had years to take my shot at happiness with Paige, but now it was too late. She and Damien might only be talking at this stage, but if Paige planned to kiss him, then surely it was inevitable. I thought Damien was one of the biggest tools in Ransom, but not even he was stupid enough to miss an opportunity with Paige. She was the best thing about this place.

I tried to tell myself it was just a kiss. That it didn’t mean anything. But this felt like so much more than that. For years I’d wanted Paige and I’d done nothing. Reed was right. Now, I was potentially going to lose her completely, and I would regret my inaction forever.

I started to turn away, so I could leave them in peace, but then a strange sound erupted from Paige’s lips. It was a bizarre combination of a giggle and a squeal. I froze. Oh no. Not her nervous laugh.

It was only now, when I looked at her more closely, that I realized how uncomfortable she was. Her smile was strained, and her eyes looked a little crazed. She kept tucking her hair behind her ears and nodding as Damien spoke. My grandma used to drive around with one of those Elvis Presley bobblehead dolls on her dash, and Paige was giving the figurine a serious run for its money.

I knew things must be dire when her infamous nervous giggle escaped her lips yet again. I cringed, unsure whether to feel embarrassment or sympathy for her. As much as I didn't want things to go well with Damien, I didn't want them to go this bad. Just when I thought the interaction couldn't get any worse, she went to take a sip of her drink, completely missed her mouth and spilled the entire thing down her front.

Shit.

Damien tried to help, but Paige simply yelled something about the bathroom and fled. I wasn't far behind her as I raced across the kitchen to try and catch up. She was too quick though, and disappeared down the hall before I got a chance.

I swore under my breath, knowing how much she must be freaking out.

I wanted to check on her, but my urgency to go after her felt like more than that. Just watching her talk with Damien had been a form of punishment I never wanted to endure again. I didn't want her getting flustered and nervous over another guy. If she was going to squeal with laughter and spill a drink down her top, I wanted it to be because of me. And I wasn't sure I could sit back and do nothing anymore.

I'd always kept a barrier between us; always tried to ignore my feelings because I knew I didn't deserve her. But Reed's words kept playing in my head on repeat. If I stood back any longer, I could lose her forever. Maybe that spilled drink was a sign. It had given me one final chance.

I caught sight of Bonnie and rushed to her side. "Have you seen Paige?"

"She's in the bathroom," she replied with a grimace. "It didn't go well with Damien . . ."

"Good." I cleared my throat when I realized I'd said the word out loud. "I mean, uh, I'll go see if she's okay."

Bonnie smirked, as if she could read all my deep, dark thoughts. "What a great idea."

I hurried past her before she could scrutinize me any further. Paige's friend had a nasty habit of asking questions I didn't want to answer, and was an expert at uncovering secrets people had no intention of revealing.

Luckily, there was no line outside the bathroom when I reached it, so I knocked on the door.

"Just a minute!" Paige called.

"It's me."

The door opened a moment later and Paige grabbed me by my hoodie, yanking me inside. “Thank God.”

Her shirt was drenched, and she was dabbing at it with a hand towel. “I need your honest opinion. How bad is it?”

“Are you talking about your top, or something else?”

“Oh no, you didn’t see me with Damien, did you?”

“Kind of.”

Her shoulders fell and she gave up trying to dry her shirt. “I’m such an idiot. He’s never going to talk to me again after that, let alone kiss me.” She slowly peered up at me. “And I guess I owe you an apology.”

“What? Why?”

“It turns out it wasn’t your fault I’ve never been kissed. I’m useless at this.”

I unzipped my hoodie, took it off, and handed it to her. “You’re not useless. It’s just a spilled drink.”

She gratefully accepted the hoodie and started to put it on over her wet shirt. “No, I also said all the wrong things and started giggling at the stupidest moments. Have you heard my giggle??”

“Could be worse. I like your giggle.”

“Could be worse? How would you react if a girl just stood in front of you and giggled like that?”

“I’d be extremely concerned. But only because nothing I say is funny.”

“That’s not true.” A small smile threatened to break through her hopeless expression.

“He probably just figured he was being hilarious.”

“But he wasn’t even making a joke,” she replied, frustration and disappointment spilling freely from her lips. “I made the conversation so awkward. I was just so in my head, it was a total disaster. I think I said something stupid about losing my phone—”

“You’re holding it . . .”

“Exactly,” she groaned. “And I asked him if we have chemistry.”

“Why would you do that?”

“They were supposed to be pickup lines. And I don’t know how, but I even started talking about gases!”

I couldn’t help but let out a stunned laugh.

“It’s not funny, Gray.”

“It’s not *not* funny.”

She scowled at me. But her scowl was just about the least terrifying thing in the world. It only made her look cuter.

“I’m never going to kiss anyone, am I?” She sighed. “I can’t even flirt with a guy. They should teach this sort of thing in school because it’s not nearly as easy as it sounds. It would be way more useful than algebra. What’s the point in knowing math if you’re going to end up a spinster?”

“You’re not going to end up a spinster.”

She didn’t seem to hear me as she turned and looked in the mirror. “No guy has ever truly wanted me, and they never will.”

My heart was breaking for her, and in my mind I was practically screaming that *I* wanted her. I’d *always* wanted her. Maybe if I’d told her that at some point in the last decade, she wouldn’t be feeling this way. She’d know how perfect she was. She’d know she didn’t need cheesy pickup lines or a flirty laugh to catch a guy’s attention. She’d know there was at least one person in the world that wanted her just as she was, and he was standing right in front of her. I was desperate to make her understand how wrong she was about herself, but how could I do that without exposing my closely guarded feelings?

The truth was, there was no way around it. I couldn’t continue to do nothing. I couldn’t let her feel this way, and I couldn’t sit by and watch her blush and flirt and nervously giggle with the next guy who caught her eye. I needed to finally take some action and accept the consequences—whatever they might be. I drew in a breath, knowing that when I finally exhaled, I was going to utter words that could shatter the foundations of our friendship for good.

“Clearly, you don’t know how perfect you really are.” My voice was deep and rumbly, and my heart ached because of just how true it was.

She turned away from the mirror to look at me. “You have to say that,” she mumbled. “You’re my best friend.”

My chest tightened. Our friendship felt like a brick wall between us, preventing her from seeing what was right in front of her. I needed to take a sledgehammer to it and smash my way through. Reed, Parker, and my friends had told me I needed to make Paige see me as more than a friend, and I cast my mind back to the intervention and their stupid list of advice. What was on it again? Compliment her. Flirt with her. Touch her. Be less Grayson. It felt like I needed to do every one of those things if she was going to believe this. If she was going to feel truly wanted.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I took a step closer to her. She edged back until she was pressed against the counter, and I placed my hands on either side of her, encasing her between them.

“I don’t have to say anything,” I whispered. “Except tell you how beautiful you look tonight.”

Her lips parted with surprise. I might have laughed at the shock so clearly etched across her features, but my heart was beating way too fast. However worried she’d been about flirting with Damien, I could almost guarantee it was a fraction of the fear and hope thrumming through me right now.

“I do?” Her breath caught in her throat as she responded, and the words came out as a small squeak.

I had no idea what I was doing. Was this flirty? Or was I just making a fool of myself? I tried to form a playful expression as I leaned in even closer to her, but the wry smile on my lips felt as foreign to me as the words I was trying to form. Somehow, I managed to keep it in place as I continued.

“You do,” I replied. “And I know you feel like you failed tonight, but you’ve got a guy standing right here who wants to listen to all your bad pickup lines and loves your nervous giggles.”

I reached up and gently tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. It was only now that I realized just how close we were. How much seeing her engulfed in my hoodie affected me. And how desperately I wanted to blurt out each one of my long-unrequited feelings. I was trying to play it cool, but now that I’d started talking, I couldn’t seem to hold myself back.

“But do you know what I want the most?”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed, and her hushed reply was barely audible. “What?”

“You, Paige. I want you.”

The air around us crackled with tension, and I felt certain she could feel it too, because her eyes dipped to my lips. Trepidation and anticipation pulsed in my veins. My desire to make her feel wanted had led to me voicing my true feelings, and it was freeing to finally release the words into the world. But was it actually working? It felt like Paige might be looking at me differently. Could she be thinking about me as someone other than her best friend for the very first time? At least she wasn’t shying away. In fact, I was daring to hope that she might be feeling something too.

But then Paige laughed. Not the nervous giggle she'd uttered for Damien. A genuine, playful laugh. "Oh my gosh, Gray. You're good."

"What?"

"Your flirting," she said. "You almost had me fooled there for a second."

What was she talking about? Did she think I was just messing around? It felt like I'd had ice water thrown on me.

"Where did that come from?" she continued. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Uh, I'm not sure," I stuttered. It had come straight from my poor, forgotten heart, but the confidence that had inspired me moments ago dissipated, and I found myself quickly backtracking. "Just a natural, I guess."

"Well, if they ever do start teaching it in schools, you'll have a job for life. You could be like . . ." She gasped before she could finish the thought. Then she reached out and grabbed my arm, her eyes practically glowing with excitement. "I've just had the best idea."

Why was I suddenly worried? "You have?"

"Yes! What if you teach me?"

"Teach you what?"

"To flirt like that. The closeness, the lines, the hair tuck. It was amazing."

I lifted my hands off the counter beside her and stepped back. I was still close, but the space between us suddenly felt vast, and that damn wall was still holding strong. I'd failed. She thought I was just her best friend, trying to make her feel better. She thought it was all for show. I guess it kind of had been. She'd never seen me act like that before. But the words I'd spoken couldn't have been more serious.

"This is going to be great," she continued, her expression now thoughtful, like she was coming up with a cunning plan. "Forget putting in a good word for me. This will be much more effective."

"It will?" I felt like I was on a freight train that had lost control, and I had no idea how to slow it down. The carriages were racing ahead, plowing through stop signs and coming off the rails as they hurtled round the bends.

"Definitely. You clearly know what you're doing. And I clearly don't. With your help, I might actually have a chance with someone like Damien."

“Right.” The universe truly hated me. Where was an unfinished railroad dangling over a ravine when you needed one?

There was a bang at the door, and we both jolted in response.

“We’re almost done,” Paige called, before immediately turning her attention back to me.

“We?” someone on the other side of the door replied.

Paige ignored them as she looked up at me with her big brown eyes. “So, what do you think? Can you teach me how to do . . . whatever that was?”

I scratched the side of my neck as I tried to figure a way out of this. “You really want my help with this? I’m no expert.”

“Uh, I think you might be,” she said, fanning her face with her hand. “I still feel a little flustered after that performance. Come on, please. Even if we just practice a little, to build up my confidence before I try again.”

“You want to practice flirting?”

“Why not? If there’s a weakness in your game, you practice, right? Remember freshman year, when Coach Ray said you needed to work on your slapshot? You stayed late after training every night for weeks. Now you’ve got one of the best techniques on the team.”

“I guess.”

“Well, I need to practice my slapshot, Coach.”

She looked so hopeful, but I knew this was a bad idea. I didn’t want to be the practice guy. I wanted to be *the* guy.

“Please, Gray? You’re the perfect person to help me with this. We’ve got about a week before my mom gets back. That gives us more than enough time to work out where I’m going wrong and what I can do differently. Plus, I’m so comfortable around you, and I know you won’t take anything the wrong way. Seriously, if I can’t manage to flirt with you, there really is no hope for me.”

I was screwed. Completely and utterly screwed. Despite my best efforts to destroy the friend zone for good, I was just digging myself in deeper than ever before. I was no longer its mayor; I had now crowned myself its king.

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?” Paige sounded subdued, and she must have noticed the apprehension in my eyes.

I cleared my throat. “No, it sounds great.”

“Because Bonnie said she’d start a game of spin the bottle if things with Damien didn’t work out . . .”

“No!” I yelled, before quickly calming. “No, you’re right.”

Her eyes gleamed with optimism and expectation. “So, that means you’ll do it? You’ll be my flirting coach?”

I sincerely hoped that wasn’t my new title. This was a mistake. So, why was I nodding?

“Yeah, I’ll help you, Pidge.”

She squealed and threw her arms around my neck. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

I was stiff at first but soon relaxed into her grasp.

This was going to be pure torture. But I didn’t have much of a choice. At least I’d bought myself some time to try to fix this. All I needed to do was show her I was the guy she should be flirting with, I was the one she wanted to kiss, and I was the one she belonged with.

Maybe I was going to need another look at the guys’ intervention checklist.

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Chapter 11

Grayson

“So, how did it go?” Parker asked.

I’d just arrived home from the party. Paige had gone upstairs to jump in the shower and clean off the drink she’d spilled all over herself. But I was starving, so I’d made a beeline for the kitchen. I needed a moment to decompress and the last person I wanted to face right now was my younger brother.

Paige had been eager to leave the party after her mishap with Damien, and I hadn’t exactly felt like celebrating after my own disastrous attempt at flirting. The small amount of alcohol Paige had drunk seemed to kick in as we made our way home, because she’d looked a little tipsy when Owen dropped us off. Tipsy and all too excited about the prospect of me teaching her how to flirt. She seemed certain I was the secret ingredient that would win Damien over.

“Well?” Parker prompted with a grin.

“What are you doing back already?” I went to open the fridge, hoping if I just ignored his question, he’d stop asking it. By some miracle there was still leftover pizza from dinner last night. Probably because, with Paige here, a whole extra person, Mom had decided to order enough for an army.

“Matt’s was kind of lame tonight, and I was tired after the game,” Parker replied.

“Let me guess. You couldn’t convince some girl to make out with you?”

“I’m not an animal, Grumpson.”

That was debatable. I took a bite of cold pizza. I never trusted anyone who said it was better to reheat it.

“So, are you going to tell me what happened with Paige or not?”

Apparently, he couldn’t be derailed. I knew it was only a matter of time before he got it out of me. That didn’t make it any easier to utter the words

aloud, and they came out low and muffled.

“I flirted with her, and now she wants me to teach her how.”

I held my breath and braced myself for my brother’s reaction, but he simply tilted his head. “What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

I couldn’t tell if he was messing with me, but he seemed honestly confused so I repeated myself a little louder. “I flirted with her, and now she wants me to teach her how.”

“Uh, I still didn’t quite catch that. You have to enunciate, Grayson.”

“I flirted with her and now I’m her flirting coach!” I didn’t quite yell, but I was close. It was lucky Paige was in the shower, because I really didn’t need her to overhear this conversation.

“What?” Parker stood there, almost frozen in place, but then erupted in fits of laughter.

“I’m not saying it again.”

He waved me away. “I mean, what the hell? How did that end up happening?”

Why was he still laughing? His reaction was so much worse than I’d anticipated, and my hands were balling at my sides.

“She struck out with Damien, and I was trying to make her feel better about herself,” I attempted to explain. “Apparently, I’m so good at flirting, she thinks I can show her how it’s done and then she’ll be able to get his attention.”

“Stop, stop.” Parker was still laughing, clutching his side with one hand and wiping away a stray tear with the other. “I swear, only you could mess this up so badly.”

“I’m glad my failure is so amusing to you.” I went to walk away but he grabbed my arm.

“No, don’t go. We need to figure this out.”

On the way home tonight, I’d been contemplating asking my brothers for help, but after Parker’s reaction, I didn’t think it was worth it.

“*We* aren’t doing anything,” I said. “I’m still dealing with the fallout from the last time I listened to you and Reed. I should never have gone after her.”

“Look, this coaching thing isn’t exactly ideal, but I’m sure we can work with it.”

“Thanks, but I’ll figure it out on my own.”

“Come on, Gray. You don’t have to do this alone. I know I annoy the hell out of you, but I’ve always got your back. Let me help.”

I released a heavy breath. He did annoy the hell out of me. But he was also right about the Darling boys always looking out for each other. Parker seemed genuinely invested in my relationship with Paige, and to be honest, I needed all the help I could get.

I was saved from having to answer him immediately though, because right then the back door opened and Reed stepped inside. Stanley rushed over to greet him, and Reed all but got down on the floor to roll around with him. I swore our dog never wagged his tail that hard for me.

“You guys left early too?” Reed asked as he glanced up and realized Parker and I were both in the kitchen.

“I was bored,” Parker replied with a shrug.

“Paige spilled a drink on her top and wanted to come back,” I added.

“Tell him what else happened . . .”

I shot my youngest brother a warning glance.

“What?” Reed looked between the two of us.

I really didn’t want to go over this again so soon. It was bad enough having to tell Parker the first time.

“Gray’s decided to start coaching.” Parker sounded far too joyful as he answered for me.

“Like a youth team?” Reed asked.

“No, it’s more like one-on-one coaching . . .” Parker continued. I wished I could smack the smirk from his lips, but Mom had a zero-tolerance policy about violence in the house.

Reed’s confusion was clear and I groaned, knowing there was no point in avoiding it any longer. “I messed up with Paige,” I said. “And now she’s got me coaching her on how to flirt so she can kiss some other guy.”

“So, we’re not talking about hockey?”

If only. “No, not hockey.”

“But it’s okay,” Parker said. “Grayson was just about to ask us how we can both help him turn this around and get the girl. Weren’t you, Gray?”

They both looked at me expectantly. I had a feeling I’d be getting their help whether I agreed to it or not. “Okay, fine. You can help.” Parker’s face lit up. “But if either of you suggest a makeover again, we’re done.”

“We won’t,” Reed agreed. “That was Parker’s idea anyway.”

“Of course it was,” Parker said proudly. “And I’ve got more where that came from. I say you really lean into the coaching.”

“What do you mean?”

“Use it as an opportunity to flirt with Paige any chance you get. Get her so hot and bothered she’ll have no choice but to realize she wants you in ways she never imagined . . .”

“I already tried flirting with her and it didn’t work. If anything, I’m further away from where I want to be now than I was before.”

“Maybe you’re doing it wrong.” Parker shrugged. “Next time, try asking yourself, what would Parker do?”

“I’m not doing that.”

“He can’t be totally clueless,” Reed interrupted. “She’s hired him to be her coach after all. But I do think Parker’s onto something.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” I muttered, but Reed continued.

“It’s just going to take time,” he said. “You’ve been in the friend zone for years, so you’re not going to change that overnight. Keep flirting with her, and by the time she goes back to her parents’ house, I’m sure she’ll be looking at you in a totally different way.”

“Either that, or I’ll have turned her into a total man-eater who can get any guy she wants.”

Reed laughed and shook his head, as though he didn’t think that was very likely. “Just don’t overthink it,” he said. “The coaching means you can act the way you’ve always wanted to around her. Say what you haven’t let yourself say all these years.”

Don’t overthink it? Already my mind had too many tabs open and each one of them was buffering. Plus, I’d just told her how much I wanted her, and she hadn’t taken it seriously.

“And remember,” Parker added. “You’ve got us and the guys backing you up. I don’t see how this could fail.”

I saw many, many ways this could fail. But I didn’t have any better ideas. Maybe my brothers were right. My best chance of making Paige see me differently was if I continued acting differently. After all, when I’d flirted with her at the party, I had felt different. It was liberating to reveal just a small piece of what I really felt for her. I’d enjoyed being so close to her, and I was certain her body had reacted to my words and my touch. I just needed to get that same reaction out of her again, until she recognized the chemistry between us.

“First order of business,” Parker continued. “We try to buy you a bit more time. I’ve got a great idea of what I can say to Paige to—”

The sound of the water shutting off upstairs suggested she was done with her shower.

“Do not say a word to Paige,” I ordered Parker.

“But—”

“I’ve got to go. We can talk about this later.”

I placed the empty pizza carton in the bin and started from the room before Parker could add any more of his bright ideas. The problem with my younger brother was that he tended to act without thinking things through. Already, he felt way too involved, and I didn’t want him messing this up.

I was halfway up the stairs when my phone buzzed with an alert. I’d been added to a group chat named, “Friends Without Benefits.” I growled under my breath and chose to ignore the messages that were flooding the thread, every one of them from Parker. I didn’t need to open it to know he was alerting the rest of his little intervention squad about their new assignment. I didn’t really want anyone else helping with this, but I guessed it was too late for that.

A part of me still wondered if it would be better to just tell Paige this was all a mistake. That she needed to figure it out by herself. But as I reached the upper landing she emerged from the bathroom and I knew I’d do no such thing.

Her hair was tied up in a messy bun, and she was still wearing my hoodie, along with a pair of pink and blue checked pajama pants. She didn’t have a lick of makeup on, but her skin still seemed to radiate. I’d meant it when I told her she looked beautiful at the party, but she was just as stunning when she wasn’t trying at all. I never understood how such an incredible girl could want anything to do with me.

“What?” She frowned when she looked up and caught me watching her. I bit back a curse word. Had I been checking her out that obviously?

“Why are you looking at me that way?” she continued.

“Uh . . .” Think, Grayson. Think. It was no surprise she was onto me. I was practically gritting my teeth and clenching my fists as I desperately fought the urge to close the distance between us. To lean in close and whisper in her ear and brush the hair away from her face. To glean any hint from her reaction that she might feel the same way. But then I realized

something. If I took my brothers' advice, I wouldn't have to fight this feeling. I could give in to it.

"Wait, are you about to give me another flirting lesson?" Her expression brightened and a faint laugh left her lips.

"Is that what you want?" I murmured, stepping closer.

"Oh, I don't know." She grinned. "I'm still a little lightheaded after the last time you pulled your moves on me."

It could still be the alcohol that was making her woozy, rather than anything I was doing. She probably needed to go to bed. Maybe, for tonight, I would just have to leave her wanting more.

I took another step closer, and with one finger I lifted her chin so she looked me in the eyes. "Another time then. You've left me a little lightheaded tonight too . . ."

Her eyes flared with surprise. I wasn't sure if it was our proximity or my words that did it, but apparently, I was better at this than I thought. Flirting with Paige was addictive, and after one night I was hooked.

I stepped back, giving us both space to breathe. "We can pick up where we left off tomorrow."

I started to walk to my room, but she called after me.

"You promise?" Something in her voice made my stomach dip with anticipation.

"I promise."

Apparently, I wasn't just at risk of ruining our friendship, I was also at risk of falling deeper and harder for Paige than I ever had before.

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Chapter 12

Paige

My heart was fluttering in a strange and unfamiliar way as I stared at Grayson's closed door. It wasn't butterflies; definitely not. No, it was more a sense of surprise and anticipation. I'd never seen this side of Grayson before, and he had left me a little speechless. What girl wouldn't need to catch their breath after being flirted with like that?

"How's it coming along with your first kiss?"

I jolted and turned to find Parker in the corridor behind me, leaning against the wall.

"Where did you come from?" I gasped. More importantly, how long had he been there? He hadn't heard Grayson and I talking about coaching, had he? I really needed to pay more attention. Or perhaps not accept when Bonnie offered me suspicious-looking shots. They were making it much harder to think straight.

"The stairs. Behind me." Parker appeared to be holding back laughter. "This is the way to my room, you know."

"Right." I shook my head. "Sorry, I didn't realize anyone else was home from Matt's party yet."

"Well, I am, and I hear you had to come back too after you spilled a drink all over yourself while chatting up the newest Ransom Devil."

"You heard about that?" I groaned.

"It happened in the middle of a party. Are you really surprised I found out?"

"I was kind of hoping no one had noticed and I could take the secret to my grave. It's so embarrassing."

"It's not too bad. If it makes you feel any better, a girl once got so nervous talking to me, she accidentally fell in a pool. She ended up far more wet than you. But I thought it was cute."

I laughed. “Oddly enough, that does make me feel better. Thanks, Parker.”

I started for Cammie’s bedroom. I was happy to call it a night, but Parker skipped ahead of me and propped himself up against the doorway. “So, is Damien the guy you want to be your first kiss?”

“Uh, that’s none of your business, Parker.”

“Because if you spilled your drink on yourself while talking to him, I’m guessing that means you two are no closer to locking lips.”

I glared at him. “It was just an accident. I’ll do better next time.”

“And what do you plan to do differently?”

“I have it under control.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I do!” I insisted, though it was clear he didn’t believe me.

“Also, say tonight had gone according to plan,” Parker continued. “Is making out with a guy at a party really the way you want your first kiss to go?”

“I guess?”

“Because I always thought you were more romantic than that.”

“Did you?”

“Sure. I figured you’d want the full experience. You know, start with a bit of flirting, then maybe a cute first date. For the lucky guy to whisper sweet nothings to you on a quiet beach at sunset. For there to be sparks and chemistry and anticipation. Not some dance-floor hookup while everyone’s watching.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’ve really thought about these things?”

“Of course. Even *my* first kiss was special.”

That caught me by surprise. “Special? Really?”

“Yep.”

“What happened?”

He smirked. “I was on the ice, taking penalty shots against a girl I liked. I scored an epic goal. She bet I couldn’t score against her. I wagered a kiss.”

“So, you scored the goal?”

“Nope, I missed on purpose and told her I didn’t want to win the kiss. I was going to wait for her to kiss me because she wanted to. And, soon enough, she did.”

It was an incredibly cute story. Too cute for Parker. “Did you just make that up, or are you secretly all mushy and gooey inside?”

“That’s not important,” he said with a wink. “What’s important is the fact I know you’re mushy and gooey all over. Which is why I’m shocked you don’t want more from your first time kissing a guy.”

“It’s just a kiss, Parker.” I was surprised by how unconvincing I sounded. It *was* just a kiss, right? No big deal. I didn’t need all that extra stuff. Although, Parker had made kissing someone in front of a crowded, rowdy high school party sound very unappealing. It was bad enough people saw my attempt at flirting. I didn’t need anyone witnessing my first kiss, because that would probably end in embarrassment too.

Parker shrugged. “I’m just saying, you only get your first kiss once. I figured you’d want it to be special.”

“Well, I don’t.” Again, I failed to convince even myself. Were Parker’s words really getting to me? “Was there something else you wanted?”

“Not really.” He darted into Cammie’s room and stole a charger off the wall. “I just came to grab this. Night, Paige.”

I didn’t have a chance to respond before he disappeared down the hallway to his room. I was left staring after him, wondering how one quick conversation could make me question myself so much. Parker was the last person I would have expected that advice from. If even he thought having my first kiss at a party was a bad idea, then it must truly be terrible.

Bonnie had encouraged the idea, but she’d been kissing people for ages. And, now that I thought about it, her first kiss had been a super-cute moment in a tree house with the boy who lived next door. Maybe I had this all wrong. Maybe I did need the date and the chemistry and the excitement and everything that went along with a first kiss. And, maybe, my new coach would be able to help with that too.

“You’re not a fan of ice skating either?” Violet sat beside me on the bench overlooking the frozen lake. It was a perfect afternoon in Ransom, and Gray and his siblings had dragged us here for a skate before Sunday dinner. The sun was dipping low in the sky and the clouds had turned the color of cotton candy. The soft pink glow was reflected across the ice like something out of a dream.

Reed and Gray were already racing each other around the lake’s perimeter, while Cammie had made her way to the center of the lake and was carving perfect circles. We’d only just arrived, but Parker had found a group of girls and was already trying his best to get each of their numbers.

They looked like they were old enough to be in college, but that didn't seem to matter to Parker.

"I normally don't mind it," I said. "It's just a little less enjoyable when the ground is refusing to stay still. I only had two shots last night, but clearly my body hates tequila."

Violet gave me a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry I missed you at the party."

"I wasn't there long. I spilled a drink down my top and made Gray take me home."

"He's a good friend."

"Yeah, the best."

The race had finished and Reed was celebrating while Gray rolled his eyes. The moment he turned away from his brother though, his mouth twitched as though he were fighting a smile. The afternoon sun was hitting his hair at the perfect angle, almost creating a kind of halo. In moments like these it was easy to see why girls at school were so intrigued by him.

"How about you?" I nodded at the skates Violet was yet to put on.

"Uh . . . me and skating don't get along. But it's not so bad when Reed's helping me."

It was impossible not to notice the way her eyes warmed when she talked about Reed. A small twinge of jealousy panged inside me. I wish I had a guy to light up over. All hope wasn't lost though. Things may not have gone as I'd hoped with Damien last night, but I had a new strategy.

"Was Reed your first kiss?" I asked.

"Uh, no." Violet shuddered like a cold wind had rushed under her jacket. "I wish."

I laughed at her reaction. "What do you mean?"

"My first kiss was bad. It was with a boy back home in California. He slobbered all over me and left me with a massive cold sore."

"Oh no!" I raised both hands to my mouth to smother my laughter.

"Awful, right?"

"The worst!"

"It was right before school pictures too," she said, shuddering again. "My cousin Mia found the photo and set it as my caller ID picture, so it pops up whenever I call her. She said she needs the daily reminder to never settle for a guy that would give her a cold sore."

"That's pretty solid advice," I admitted with a grin.

“Stop laughing. It was horrific at the time.”

“Sorry.” I did my best to straighten my face, but Violet’s lips curved in a smile.

“Why do you ask? What was your first kiss like?”

“Uh, it’s a work in progress.”

Her eyes filled with disbelief. “You’ve never kissed anyone?”

“Not yet,” I replied with a shrug.

“How is that possible?”

“I’m not very good with boys.” As I’d proven last night. Grayson’s negative contribution to the situation was practically a blip next to my own disastrous actions. Now that I thought about it, I wondered if he’d actually been doing me a favor. How many more embarrassing moments would I have endured if I’d ended up close to kissing any of the boys he’d scared away?

“I find that hard to believe,” Violet replied. “They should be flocking to you; you’re one of the friendliest people I’ve met here.”

“That’s only because I don’t want to kiss you. If I did, I’d be acting like a total gremlin right now.”

She laughed. “A gremlin?”

“Yep. Glowing red eyes, pointy horns, sharp claws. You’d be running for the hills.”

“Well, maybe some guys are into that sort of thing.”

“Hopefully.” I playfully lifted my hands to show my fingers were crossed.

“Just, when you do find one, don’t make the same mistake as me. Check his lips for any blemishes first.”

I laughed again and nodded. “Oh, I will.”

Reed collapsed onto the bench at Violet’s side. “Are you two planning on joining us anytime soon?”

“I can’t,” I replied. “The ice won’t stay still.”

Reed frowned with confusion. “Uh, Paige, it’s frozen solid.”

“The ice is not the problem . . .”

“Okay.” He laughed uncertainly, before he turned his attention to Violet. “What about you, Sunshine?”

“I think I might be allergic to ice and snow,” she replied.

“Allergic, huh?”

“Deathly,” she added. “Such a shame. But at least the view from the bench is pretty great.”

“I guess we’ll have to enjoy it together then.”

Violet had turned Reed into such a softy. I’d never seen him act that way around anyone. He definitely would not have given up an afternoon skating to sit on a bench with a girl before.

Gray cleared his throat. He’d skated to the edge of the lake and was standing in front of me with his hand held out.

“I’m allergic to ice and snow too,” I told him.

“Then try not to touch it if you fall.”

My eyes narrowed on him. Where was the sympathy?

“Come on, Pidge.” His eyes were practically sparkling, and I found them incredibly inviting.

“I haven’t skated in ages, and the world is still spinning after the shots Bonnie gave me last night.”

“All I’m hearing are excuses.”

“Valid ones. I really don’t feel like falling on my ass today.”

“Do you think I’d let anything bad happen to you?”

“I think I have a better chance of keeping my butt ice-free if I’m not skating.”

“Just get on the ice, Paige.”

“Okay. Okay,” I grumbled. “I’m coming.” He could be so stubborn when he knew what he wanted.

I took his offered hand, knowing I was far more likely to stay upright if I kept close to him. It’s not that I was a bad skater, but I didn’t get out on the ice as much as I used to, and I really was feeling slightly dizzy after last night.

“Let’s just avoid going near Cammie,” I said as we set out. “Watching her spin is making me feel ill.”

“Are you really that bad?”

“Only when I breathe.”

Gray let out a low chuckle. “How about I distract you?”

“Okay, how?”

He answered my question by spinning around in front of me so he was skating backward while holding both my hands. It was definitely distracting, especially when he gave me a cautious smile. Gray’s smiles

were hard-earned, so whenever he looked at me that way it sent a cozy warmth spreading to every point of my body.

“Is your pretty face the distraction?” I asked. If it was, then I had to admit, it was seriously working.

His smile lifted a little more. “You think I’m pretty?”

“I think I was promised a distraction and you’re not holding up your end of the bargain.”

Amusement danced in his eyes. “Okay, why don’t you tell me more about what this whole coaching thing involves? That should take your mind off things.”

“Oh, that . . .” I scrunched up my nose. It had seemed like a brilliant idea last night. Now, in the all-too-bright light of day, I wasn’t so sure. Especially not when I was rethinking my whole stance on first kisses. Was it too much to get Grayson to help me with more than just a little harmless flirting?

“Bonnie’s first kiss was in a tree house,” I blurted out.

Gray tilted his head and his brow furrowed with confusion.

“Violet chose the wrong guy and got a cold sore.”

“Okay . . .”

“Even Parker’s first kiss was sweet.”

He stopped skating, pulling me to a halt with him. “You’ve been talking about kissing with Parker?”

“For like half a second.” I shrugged the question off. “But I’ve been thinking, perhaps I don’t want my first time to be some meaningless kiss at a party. I want it to be more special than that. I want to feel sparks with a guy. I want there to be fireworks. I want to be asked out, to get dressed up and taken on a date. I don’t want a cold sore. I want that . . .” I gestured across the ice.

Grayson followed my gaze to where Violet and Reed were still sitting on the bench. Even from here you could see the natural chemistry between them as they laughed together. The two of them were magnetic.

When Grayson glanced back at me, he looked even more confused. “You want my brother?”

“What? No!”

“You want Violet?”

“I don’t want *them*.” Clearly I was going to have to spell it out. “I want what they have. I want that chemistry. And I want a kiss that stems from

more than a couple of shots followed by some awkward giggling."

"And how exactly do I help with all that?"

"Well, I'm certain you can help me with the flirting after your performance last night," I said. "But I need to practice more than just flirting if I want to pull this off. I've never been asked out, so I clearly don't know how to catch a guy's attention. And I have no idea how to act on a date. Not to mention I've totally lost all confidence after my string of embarrassing rejections."

"Uh, anything else?"

"Yeah, Bonnie says I need a makeover."

"A makeover?" He spat out the word as though it was something dirty in his mouth and he took personal offense to it. "Why on earth would you need a makeover?"

"She says I dress like a librarian."

"Librarians can be sexy."

"*What* librarians?"

"I don't know. The ones in movies?"

"Grayson, what kind of movies have you been watching?"

"Uh, no, I didn't mean . . ."

He looked so embarrassed I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm only messing with you, Gray."

An amused flicker flashed in his eyes, but he went right on back to looking unimpressed. "So, you want me to teach you how to flirt, get Damien to ask you out, practice what to do on a date, *and* give you a makeover?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"You know, you don't really need help, right? And you don't need to change anything. You're perfect just as you are."

When he said things like that, I had to wonder how some girl hadn't already fallen madly in love with him. He was so sweet, but he was totally wrong.

"If I was perfect, I wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. And I wouldn't have failed quite so miserably with Damien last night," I replied. "Please, Gray. I'm clueless, and I don't want to mess this up again. If I'm going to get another shot with him, I need to wow his socks off."

Grayson lifted one eyebrow at me. "Wow his socks off?"

“Yep. I need to be cool and flirty and confident and so gorgeous his socks go flying right off him.”

He scoffed, but it felt like his frustration was shifting closer to acceptance.

“I know this isn’t what you signed up for, but will you help me? Will you be my DRC?”

“DRC?”

“Dating and Relationships Coach,” I explained. “It’s a pretty big promotion from Flirting Coach. Congratulations.”

He released a heavy breath. I was tempted to remind him that he was part of the reason I was so desperate for help. But I knew I was just as much to blame. I was asking a lot, so I didn’t want to force him into it.

His eyes were wary as he returned my gaze. “Fine, I’ll help. But not with the makeover.”

That was close enough for me. “Thanks, Gray.” I smiled and he grumbled his response.

“Come on, let’s keep skating before I change my mind.”

I nodded but quietly groaned as we started off again. It had been nice to stop for a minute. It was far too hard to talk and skate at the same time.

“So, are you going to practice your flirting on me?” he asked.

“Now?”

“I don’t see why not. According to your new plan, we’ve got a lot of stuff to get through, haven’t we?”

“I guess, but do you really expect me to flirt and skate at the same time? It’s like you want me to fall over and die.”

“I’m holding your hands, Pidge. You’re not going to die.”

“Debatable.”

But he ignored my complaint. “Come on, wow my socks off.”

“Fine.” My mind scrambled for something flirty to say. Unfortunately, all I could think of were the pickup lines Bonnie had texted me last night. They were terrible, but something was better than nothing, so I rattled off the first one that came to mind. “You know, I forgot to pack my teddy bear. Will you sleep with me tonight instead?”

“What?” I couldn’t tell if he was shocked, disappointed, or embarrassed by my pickup line.

“I forgot to pack my—”

“No, I heard you.” I could have sworn his cheeks were turning pink.

“And are your socks still on?”

“Firmly,” he replied without hesitation. “Is that really the best you can do? A cheesy line that probably came from Parker?”

“Uh, it was Bonnie, actually.”

The look on his face suggested he thought that made it even worse. “Look, here’s flirting lesson one: don’t use pickup lines. Lesson two: don’t glare at the guy when you say them. If this is what we’re working with, maybe you do need my help after all.”

“You put me on the spot!” I huffed. He was really taking this coaching job seriously all of a sudden. Next he’d be making me skate laps of the lake as punishment.

“I was still expecting better.”

I dropped his hands and jerked to a halt. He wanted better flirting? Fine. But I most definitely wasn’t trying it while moving. He’d stopped a few yards away, probably thinking I had every intention of yelling at him. Little did he know, I planned on proving him wrong. Only problem was, I had no idea how I was supposed to do that.

But as I watched him, I was struck by inspiration. I remembered a trick I’d seen girls pull out here on the lake plenty of times before. I wasn’t sure if I was capable of repeating it myself, but I was so annoyed at Grayson I was willing to try just about anything. Perhaps I really would kill myself trying to flirt while skating.

Before I could rethink it or chicken out, I closed the distance between us, and pretended to slip on the ice, falling gracefully into his arms.

He swore but caught me easily. “Are you okay?”

“Whoops.” I gave a soft laugh. “Told you I was clumsy today.”

My hands were pressed against his chest, and my stomach dipped at the feel of him. His arms were wrapped tightly around my waist as he held me up. I’d always known Grayson was athletic, but it was something else to actually run my fingers over his muscles.

“You’re so strong,” I murmured. The words were out of me before I realized what I’d said. I wasn’t sure if I meant for them to escape my lips, but I quickly added a cautious smile as I glanced up at him from under my eyelashes. I was supposed to be flirting; might as well commit to it now. “Have you been working out?”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Uh, you know I exercise every day.”

“Mm. But you must be benching a lot these days.”

“I guess.”

“Do you think you could bench-press me?”

“Ah . . .” He swallowed again. “Probably.”

I slowly crept my hands up his chest until my arms were around his neck and my fingers were toying with his hair. My stomach quivered with an unexpected rush as I stared up at him. I thought I knew everything about Gray, but I’d never noticed how his blue eyes had a subtle ring of green around the center.

I was getting distracted. I needed to focus on the task at hand. His socks still needed blowing off. I pulled myself up a little higher so I could whisper in his ear. “Maybe we should go back to your house, and get a workout in together?”

He spluttered and coughed to clear his throat. “We should *what*?”

His eyes were so wide they looked like they were about to burst out of his skull. Was this how guys were supposed to react? Either way, I was enjoying this far more than last night when I’d been giggling like an idiot and spilling drinks on myself. Flirting was so much more fun when you weren’t actually trying to get the boy to like you. I stared deeply into Gray’s eyes a moment longer, before I grinned and pulled away.

“How’d I do?”

“What?”

“My flirting? How was it? You said you expected better—that had to be an improvement. Right?”

The shock in his eyes eased as he rubbed a hand on the back of his neck, where my hands had just been resting. “Right. Flirting.” He took another few breaths before he continued. “Sure, it was an improvement. Were those some of Bonnie’s lines too?”

“No.” I was still grinning. “But they were a little cheesy. I’m surprised you played along for as long as you did.”

“Yeah.” He gave an awkward laugh. “Your delivery was much better this time. But you weren’t exactly under pressure, so I wouldn’t get too cocky just yet. We’ll see how you do next time . . .”

“I guess,” I muttered. It wasn’t the glowing review I’d hoped for, but at least he’d admitted I was making progress.

Laughter drew my attention across the ice to where Parker was still talking with the group of girls. They all seemed far more skilled at flirting

than me. Even their giggles sounded cute and enticing. Not at all embarrassing like mine had been last night.

“Do you think Parker is actually going to get all those girls’ numbers?” I asked.

Gray glanced in the direction of his brother. “I hope not. He’ll be bragging the whole week if he does.”

“He certainly looks like he knows what he’s doing. They can’t get enough of him.”

“If Parker’s such a pro, why didn’t you ask *him* for help?”

I turned back to look at Grayson, surprised by his question. “Because I trust you,” I said. “I feel comfortable with you. There’s no one else I could do this with.”

He nodded slowly, as though he was considering my response carefully.

“Plus, I keep telling you how impressive you were last night. I bet Parker could learn a few things from you too.” I paused for a moment, as something I’d never really considered before crossed my mind. “How come I never see you trying to get girls’ numbers?”

“I’m not Parker.”

“Obviously.” I laughed, before turning serious again. “But you clearly know what you’re doing, so you must have a bit of experience. Why don’t I ever see you with other girls?”

“I’m too busy with hockey.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant. Was he saying he was too busy to commit to a girlfriend or that he had no time for girls, period?

“Parker’s busy with hockey.”

“Please stop comparing me to my younger brother.”

“Well, Reed’s busy with hockey too, and he’s with Violet.”

I nodded across the lake to where the two of them were still huddled together on the bench.

“Reed found the right girl,” Gray said.

“So, that’s it? You haven’t found the right girl?”

He took a moment before replying. “I wouldn’t make a good boyfriend.”

“Why on earth would you think that? You’d be an amazing boyfriend.”

“Almost every year my report card reads that I’m quiet, withdrawn, and don’t play well with others,” he said. “That doesn’t sound like boyfriend material.”

“For the right girl it is,” I argued. “Maybe we can find her once we’ve sorted out my own dating situation?”

Before he could reply, someone shouted across the ice. “Look out!”

I lifted my gaze just in time to see a puck hurtling through the air toward me. I didn’t have a chance to react, but Grayson’s reflexes were like lightning. One moment he was standing opposite me, the next he’d grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the way. The force pulled me off my feet and sent me sprawling,

My heart raced, the breath stolen from my lungs. I squeezed my eyes shut as I waited for pain to erupt through my body. But, by some miracle, the puck seemed to have missed me. And I hadn’t hit the ice. Grayson had caught me and was holding me in his arms just above the lake’s hard surface.

Apart from Parker yelling at the guys who’d sent the puck flying our way, the only sound I could hear was my heart beating fast as I slowly looked up at Gray. He was staring down at me and holding me so securely, yet so gently, I imagined we might have looked like a couple dipping low at the end of a romantic dance.

Gray pulled me upright and grasped my face in his hands. “Are you okay?”

Nothing was hurt, but I was shivering from the adrenaline pulsing through me. “Just a little shaken. You?”

“I’m fine.”

“The puck didn’t hit you?”

“No. It missed us both.”

“You reacted so fast.”

“I told you I wouldn’t let anything bad happen to you.”

My heart was still racing, but when he stared at me like that and said those words, I wasn’t a hundred percent certain it was just because of the puck.

But the moment shattered as his expression darkened and he glanced over my shoulder. “What were they thinking? You can’t mess around with a puck like that when there are people skating so close by.”

I grabbed his hand to calm him. There was a slightly murderous look forming in his eyes.

“Parker’s dealing with it,” I said, since I could still hear him shouting.

Gray looked primed to race off and confront the other boys, but I kept a firm grasp on his hand. “I think I’m done with skating for today. Want to go get ice cream?”

He hesitated but slowly returned his attention to me. “What I want is to kill those guys.”

“It was just an accident, Gray. And no one was hurt.”

“You both okay?” Reed shouted as he skated over to us. Violet was standing on the edge of the lake with a worried look on her face.

“We’re fine, Reed,” I called back to him. “But we’re calling it for the day. We’ll catch you guys later.”

I tugged Grayson’s hand, pulling him from the ice. The last thing I needed was for Reed to come and offer Grayson some backup. The kids playing hockey were already terrified as Parker went off at them. They didn’t need all three Darling boys defending me.

Gray was quiet as we changed back into our shoes and made our way to his truck. It was only once we were both inside that he spoke again.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever been scared on the ice,” he said.

“Really? I guess having a puck flying at you is a little different when you’ve got a helmet on.”

“No, it’s a little different when it’s flying at *you*.” The look in his eyes when they met mine was so intense I felt a lump form in my throat. “I can’t handle the thought of something bad happening to you, Paige.”

“Well, nothing bad did happen, thanks to you.”

He nodded and looked away from me, before taking a deep breath. “I saw this afternoon going a little differently.”

“How so?”

“Less pucks to the face,” he said, shaking his head. “More skating, I guess.”

He kept his eyes facing forward, and I wondered if there was something he wasn’t telling me. The truck roared to life before I could question him any further.

“So, ice cream?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” I replied.

He was clearly shaken by our near miss, and his expression remained troubled as he pulled away from the curb. He wasn’t the only one. There was nothing like a rogue puck flying past your head to get your heart rate going. But I still couldn’t be sure if that was the only thing to blame.

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Chapter 13

Grayson

So much for a successful start to coaching Paige. I'd hoped that an evening ice skating on the lake would be a good opportunity to flirt with her some more, under the guise of teaching. But the whole thing had been a disaster. We'd flirted, sure, but she'd been surprisingly good at it. So good, in fact, I was still having heart palpitations every time I thought of her stroking my chest. Paige, on the other hand, had shaken it off like it was all just a game. It was clear I was a long way from convincing her to see me as more than a friend—while I was the idiot who was falling deeper still.

That wasn't even my biggest problem right now though. Somehow, I'd ended up committing myself to much more than just flirting practice. Paige wasn't only looking to kiss Damien. She wanted the whole nine yards. A first date. Romance. Sparks. Chemistry. A drunken kiss was one thing, and would probably be forgotten in time, but all that other stuff could lead to Paige genuinely falling for Damien. How could I help her, knowing it might result in me losing her forever?

Then she'd nearly been killed by a rogue puck. I'd only just gotten her out the way in time, and I couldn't stop replaying the moment in my mind. Seeing her come so close to getting seriously injured hit me hard. Just thinking about it made a cold knot form in my gut. It was a painful reminder of just how important she was to me. Of how losing her to someone else wasn't an option.

On the drive back from the lake, Paige had taken my introspection to mean I was in a mood, and when we got home, she convinced herself I needed cheering up. So, now I was experiencing Paige's version of a pick-me-up: a facial.

"This isn't how you cheer a guy up, Paige."

She blissfully ignored me as she continued pasting my face with a strange concoction of foods she'd blended together. Right now, I was one set of painted nails away from being stuck in the friend zone forever.

"Don't be silly," she scoffed. "This is how you cheer *everyone* up. And you've been in a bad mood all afternoon."

"I haven't been in a bad mood."

"You have. Ever since skating. Not even ice cream perked you up. And you were so quiet at dinner. You barely ate a thing."

"Mom's lasagna looked highly suspect."

"It was great."

"We already know you have no tastebuds."

"Perhaps my tastebuds are on vacation. Your stomach, on the other hand, is a bottomless pit that never goes on holiday. You're always hungry. If you're not eating, the world must be ending."

"The world's not ending. Although, this sludge you're putting on my face does feel like something that could survive the apocalypse."

She laughed as she peered up at me. I may not have been enjoying the facial much, but I wasn't the least bit opposed to how close Paige got to me because of it, or the feel of her fingers spreading the goop across my skin. Maybe I didn't hate facials as much as I thought.

"Grayson, what the hell is on your face?" Reed asked, grinning broadly as he entered my room.

"Paige, I thought you closed the door!"

"Oops." She was still smiling and shrugged before turning to Reed. "We're doing facials."

"Facials?" He laughed.

"Yeah, want to join us?" Paige offered. "I can do you too?"

I jumped from my seat and quickly steered my brother toward the door. "Reed's busy."

"Actually . . ."

My gaze hardened, sending him a warning, but it didn't have the effect I was hoping for. My brother's expression only grew more amused.

"What?" he insisted. "That stuff on your face smells pretty nice."

I shoved him out the door, ignoring his laughter as I shut it firmly behind him.

"It sounded like he wanted to join," Paige said, clearly struggling not to laugh too.

“Don’t start with me. You better hope Parker doesn’t hear about this, or he’ll be taunting me forever.”

“It’ll be our little secret,” she replied, still smiling.

I let out a huff as I went back to my seat. “So, what happens now?” I’d come this far, I might as well commit to the whole experience.

“Now we watch a chick flick while it marinates. Trust me, it’ll soothe your soul.”

“Soothe my . . .” I paused, wondering why I was still fighting this. Paige was on a roll. There was no stopping her now. “Fine. Sounds good.”

She looked surprised I’d agreed so quickly. And to be honest, I was a little surprised myself.

“Just give me a minute,” I said. “I’ll need snacks if I’m going to survive a chick flick.”

She laughed as I headed for the door. “I thought you were worried about your family seeing your face.”

“Guess I’ll have to be quick then.”

I was out the door before she offered to go for me, and I headed straight for Reed’s bedroom across the hall. Unfortunately, Cammie chose that moment to emerge from her room.

“Oh my god.” She started cackling the moment she laid eyes on me. I always knew my sister could be slightly scary, but I’d never heard her utter such an evil laugh. “You’re so whipped!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My response only seemed to encourage more laughter, and she was still chuckling to herself as she continued down the hallway.

I lunged for Reed’s door and disappeared inside his room before Parker could come and investigate. I could only imagine what a hard time my younger brother would give me if he saw me like this.

Reed started grinning when he caught sight of me again. “That’s actually a good look for you, Gray. Green’s really your color.”

“Look, I only have a minute here, so save your jokes for later,” I said. “I need your help. The plan’s not working.”

“With Paige? It’s only been one day.”

“And look at me.” I waved a hand at the green gunk on my face. “I’m so lost in the friend zone, I’m beyond extraction.”

The smirk dropped from his lips and I thought he might finally be taking me seriously. He leaned forward in his desk chair. “Well, for starters,

you probably need to remove that crap on your face."

"Obviously," I growled. "Then what?"

"You tell me. You're supposed to be wooing her with your coaching. What did you have planned to teach her next?"

"That's the problem," I said. "She wants more than just flirting lessons now. She's roped me into helping her with all sorts of other stuff. She's asking me to teach her how to get a guy's attention and how to be romantic on a first date. She was even talking about me helping with a damn makeover."

I couldn't tell whether Reed was cringing or just doing his best not to start laughing again. Suddenly his expression relaxed. "Well, this is good."

"Good? How is it good? She basically wants me to help her fall in love with someone else."

"It's good," he repeated. "Because these are all opportunities for you to show a different side of yourself. So Paige starts to see you as more than just her best friend. Just like you planned."

"They are?"

"Of course. Just use each lesson to flirt with her, be romantic with her. Trust me, before you know it, she'll be falling in love with you instead."

He certainly made it sound good; too good to be true, most likely. "I'm not so sure."

"You need to be more confident about this," he said. "Look, you already made an impression on her with your flirting at the party. You just need to think about what's next. Come up with a game plan. You're never going to win the game if you don't have all your plays figured out."

"This isn't hockey, Reed. And I don't think anyone would be expected to take to the ice with a face full of green goop."

"The goop is a perfect example of what I'm talking about," he said. "You can use it to your advantage."

"How?"

"You could ask to return the favor? Offer to help with *her* face mask, or maybe see if she wants a relaxing massage as repayment. Use it as a reason to get close to her."

I wasn't sure about the massage, but I supposed his advice wasn't all bad. I could probably see if Paige wanted a facial too. As much as I'd complained, it had felt pretty good to have her close to me. Maybe my brother really did know what he was talking about.

“Any other suggestions?”

“Less scowling. You’ve been in a mood all night and didn’t eat any dinner.”

“I wasn’t hungry.” What was it with people and how much I had to eat?

“Are you sick?”

I ignored his question. “And I wasn’t scowling at her.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m certain.” Truthfully, I wasn’t sure, but I could easily correct that. “Anything else?”

“Gray, you’re just going to have to trust your instincts.”

“Because that’s been working so well for me?”

Reed laughed, apparently losing the strength to hold it in any longer. “Sorry, it’s just really hard to concentrate when you look like some creature that’s emerged from the deep.”

All the good advice in the world wasn’t worth this, so I gave up and left the room. But just as I emerged into the corridor, Cammie appeared at the top of the stairs, this time with Parker in tow.

My younger brother’s eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning, while my sister’s filled with a menacing glee.

“Told you this was worth the trip upstairs,” she said.

I swore under my breath.

“Oh, Grayson.” Parker was shaking his head. “What has she done to you?”

“Smile,” Cammie added, before pointing her phone in my direction. I lifted a hand in front of my face, hopelessly attempting to hide from the photo. I did not need Cammie and Parker having this kind of material to use against me.

“You both better sleep with one eye open,” I growled before storming back to my room, their hushed laughter floating behind me.

Paige startled as I barged through the door. I’d probably been a little rough as I’d pushed it in a hurry to get away from my siblings. She nodded at my empty hands. “No snacks?”

“No, sorry, I was a little busy avoiding the paparazzi in the corridor.”

“Paparazzi?”

“Cammie, trying to get photographic evidence to blackmail me with.”

“Oh no.” Paige grimaced. “Sorry, that’s totally my fault. I thought the facial would be relaxing for you. I messed up.”

“It’s fine, Pidge. My face smells like summer. Those idiots can take all the pictures they want.”

She smiled up at me. “Like summer, huh?”

“Yeah.”

She walked over to me and placed her hands on my chest as she reached up on her tiptoes to sniff me. I froze under the contact. Reed had suggested I use the facial as an excuse to get close to Paige, and here we were. But I had no idea what I was supposed to do next.

“Mm. You do smell good,” she said. “I kind of want to lick you.”

“Uh . . .” My throat constricted. Was she serious?

But then she laughed and pulled away all too fast. I stood still for several moments as I tried to reboot my brain and gather some coherent thoughts. Some dating coach I was. The perfect opportunity to make a move presented itself, and I froze like a rabbit in the headlights.

Paige skipped back over to the bed, made herself comfortable, and started selecting a movie on my laptop. When she caught me watching, she gently patted a spot on the bed next to her. “Come on, help me pick. You know I’ll just scroll through the entire library.”

I might have missed my chance to use the facial to my advantage, but maybe watching a movie with Paige on my bed presented a new opportunity to get closer to her. Nerves churned in my chest at the thought, and I did my best to shut them down.

“I think I better take this off,” I said, gesturing at my face. “Delightful as it is, I’d hate for you to forget I’m not dessert while we’re watching the movie.”

“Ha, ha,” she deadpanned.

I quickly rinsed my face in the bathroom before returning to the room. I switched off the overhead light and got onto the bed beside Paige. She had a bunch of pillows fluffed behind her and I rested my arm across the top of them. Even though I’d failed to get snacks from downstairs, she’d already raided the private stash of candy I kept for her.

“Want one?” She offered me the packet of gummy worms.

“Sure.” Paige loved all candy, especially gummy worms, but I’d never been a huge fan. I always ate one or two whenever she was here though, because I didn’t want her to realize I only bought them for her.

“You ready to have your soul soothed?” she asked as she took a bite of one of the worms.

I grunted in agreement and got a quiet laugh in response. A chick flick wouldn't have been my first choice for a movie, but I didn't mind them so much when I was watching with her. I'd do just about anything if it meant having Paige nearby.

The movie started and she scooted closer, resting her head against my chest. She was close enough that whenever I breathed, I inhaled a subtle scent that was uniquely her. I often thought she smelled like the first sign of spring after a cold winter, and I loved that smell more than anything.

I'd been right about the movie presenting another opportunity. Reed had told me to use every possible chance to get close to her. To touch her. To act differently. But she was only lightly pressed against me, and I was already struggling. I was too afraid to move. To breathe. Because each inhalation was pain and temptation and another reminder of how hard I was fighting to resist her.

The worst part was how oblivious she was to my inner turmoil. She was so completely immune to me that before we'd even reached the halfway point of the movie, she fell asleep. I'd let the moment pass once again. As I felt her instinctively snuggle even more deeply into my arms, I tried to focus my mind on a solution to my problem, rather than wallowing in the hopelessness of it all.

Clearly, I wasn't doing a very good job at seizing each opportunity as it arose. Maybe I needed to take Reed's advice and plan ahead, so I knew what was coming. Once Paige was satisfied we'd completed our flirting practice, she'd want to move on to getting a guy's attention. Specifically, Damien's attention. How in the world could I help her do that without sabotaging myself? Damien was already getting in the way; I didn't want to make him an even bigger obstacle.

My body tensed as Paige sighed, and I glanced down at her, still asleep against my chest. Her face was relaxed, a faint smile softening her features. She looked like she was dreaming, and I wondered where her thoughts might be. I soon regretted it when I realized they were probably on a romantic first date with Damien.

She let out another sigh, louder this time, and her lips parted. I didn't dare move, just in case she was on the verge of waking up. But then she bit down on her lower lip and let out a soft, deep moan of satisfaction.

God, now I really hoped this dream didn't include Damien. She looked like she was enjoying it far too much. I felt the sudden urge to wake her up

and drag her back to reality, with me, but before I could move, her eyes fluttered open.

Although Paige was looking directly at me, her gaze was clouded with sleep.

“Grayson,” she whispered, a content smile still on her lips. “You were . . .”

She blinked a few times, as though she was trying to fully return to wakefulness, and then looked at me again, this time with confusion in her eyes.

“Grayson?”

“Uh, yeah?”

She jolted up and out of my embrace before moving away, until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. She glanced around the room, almost as though she wasn’t completely sure where she was.

“What time is it?”

“I’m not sure. The movie’s only been on for an hour. You’ve been asleep for about half that.”

“Oh, right,” she muttered, almost to herself. “The movie. That’s what we were doing.”

“Are you okay?” I asked

“Yes,” she said, another whisper. “Of course. I was just . . . We were just . . .”

She paused and her eyes locked onto mine. I felt frozen to my spot on the bed as I waited for her to go on. Clearly, something had addled her. But then her phone broke the silence with a loud buzz.

Paige swore and grabbed it from the bedside table. “That’s my mom, I need to take this.”

She practically leaped off the bed and was out the door before I could even let out the breath I’d been holding. I wasn’t quite sure what had just happened, but for some reason it felt as though she’d been running away. And once again, I found myself wondering what, or who, she’d been dreaming about.

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Chapter 14

Paige

“Breathe, Paige,” I whispered to myself. “Breathe. It was just a dream.”

I was standing in the hallway with my back pressed against Grayson’s closed bedroom door. I felt like an idiot after fleeing his room like a frightened mouse, and I was trying to convince myself that what had just happened was no big deal.

But it wasn’t just a dream. It was a dream about my best friend.

The details of it were foggy now, but I was certain Grayson had been there. And, despite the fact I was now wide awake, I could distinctly remember the feelings. Nerves. Excitement. Breathlessness. I felt hot and was still sweating a little, but there were also faint shivers shooting across my skin. Even though I couldn’t recall it clearly, I knew for sure this was not the kind of dream you were supposed to have about your closest friend.

The funny thing was, these sensations weren’t totally new. I’d also felt the same nerves and excitement when I’d flirted with Gray on the ice earlier in the day. Right now though, it was a lot more intense.

Maybe that was it; all the flirting practice had messed with my head. Plus, I’d been lying in Grayson’s arms, watching a romcom. It was no wonder he’d managed to sneak his way into my dreams. It was nothing unusual. Nothing to worry about. Right?

My phone buzzed again, breaking the silence in the hallway, and I glanced down at the screen. I’d already missed the first call from my mom, and she hadn’t waited more than a few moments before trying again. She wasn’t kidding when she’d said she’d be checking up on me, and I’d been getting at least one of these calls a day. I knew she wouldn’t quit until she got hold of me.

Still, I didn’t answer right away; I didn’t want to disturb anyone. The house was unusually quiet, so I crept through the hallway and down the

stairs. I poked my head into the living room and found it empty, so I collapsed onto the couch.

While I'd been searching for a private place to take the call, the buzzing had stopped. Mom didn't hesitate to try again and this time, I answered immediately.

"I asked you to do one thing, Paige," she said as soon as the call connected. No "hello, Paige, how are you?" just straight down to business.

"I received an email from your career counselor," she continued. "You didn't attend your appointment with her last week, did you?"

Ugh. I'd gotten the email too, but I'd been hoping Mom would be too busy with work to check for emails from school. Or that perhaps by some miracle the counselor had decided not to inform my parents. It was seriously wishful thinking, since my mom practically had the woman on speed dial.

"Sorry, Mom. I totally forgot."

She released a heavy sigh. "You can't just forget these things, Paige. This is important. Especially since you missed the jobs fair a few weeks back."

"Yeah, I know."

"You need to start focusing on your future."

"I know."

Another drawn-out sigh came down the line. "Clearly, one week without me and your father is derailing you even further. I told him he needed to reschedule his trip so one of us was at home. But would he listen? No . . ."

It sounded like my mom was about to launch into yet another rant about the failings of my father. And to be honest, I didn't blame her. He was addicted to work and had been for most of my life. My mom wasn't much better though. I suspected that was the only reason their marriage worked. They were both too busy to realize our homelife was a shambles.

"I'll have to see if I can get out of my meetings next week and come home sooner," she said.

"No!" I almost shouted, then quickly calmed myself. "I mean, you don't have to do that. I'm sorry for missing my session with the counselor, Mom. It really was an accident. I know how important your trip is. Please don't cut it short for me. I won't miss my next appointment, I promise."

The other end of the line went quiet for a moment. “Okay,” she finally said. “It’s been rescheduled for Wednesday at ten a.m. Make sure you’re there. The decisions you make now will affect your whole future.”

No pressure, Paige. It’s only your entire life that’s on the line if you don’t choose the right pathway now. Such a cheery thought to end the weekend on.

“I’ll be there,” I said.

“Good. I’ve got to make another call, so I’ll check in with you tomorrow. Good night, Paige.”

“Night, Mom.” The words were only halfway out of my mouth when the line went dead. My mother had a true talent for making me feel like crap, even from hundreds of miles away. I closed my eyes and took in a long breath before releasing it as slowly as I could, trying to push out all the negative vibes that were now prickling my skin.

“You okay, Paige?”

I opened my eyes to see Grayson’s dad had entered the living room. He’d been out all evening helping someone with an emergency tow and must have only just arrived home.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you frown before,” he added.

I sighed. “Clearly you’ve never seen me around my mom.”

He sat on the couch opposite me. “Want to talk about it?” He said it so gently, I knew I didn’t have to tell him anything if I didn’t want to, but he was also giving me the space to vent if I needed. I wished my dad was more like Danny Darling.

“She wants me to make a plan for my future,” I explained. “But I have no idea what I want to do with my life.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Well, it’s never a bad idea to have a plan. They don’t always work out, but it can help point you in the right direction.”

I knew that Danny, like his sons, had been a hockey player with hopes of playing professionally. Everyone always said he was destined for the NHL, but that dream came to an end when he injured his knee in college. He’d ended up working as a mechanic and now he owned his own garage. It wasn’t his original plan, but it was easy to see how much he loved what he did.

“How did you decide you wanted to work with cars?” I asked.

“I’ve always liked them,” he replied. “And I’m good at fixing things, so it all came quite naturally.”

“And what about Amy?” I asked. “Did she always want to be an accountant?”

“I don’t know about that.” He chuckled. “But she always had a knack for numbers, so I guess it made sense.”

“That’s my problem,” I explained. “There’s nothing I naturally excel at. Nothing I feel truly passionate about, the way you do. I’ve been working through a list of things this year, trying to find something I’m good at, but I swear I’m hopeless at everything.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Danny said. “You’re pretty good at talking to people.”

He wouldn’t be saying that if he’d seen my display with Damien on Saturday night.

“You make Grayson smile,” he continued. “Which is a near impossible task. And you’ve always been great at finding the good in not-so-good situations.”

“Not sure my mom would approve if I told her I want to make a career out of chatting with people, being positive, and making Gray smile,” I said.

Danny laughed. “I suppose not. But don’t discount those qualities either. They’re skills you can use in lots of different careers. It’s great you’ve been trying new things, but don’t put too much pressure on yourself to have it all figured out today. You’ve got plenty of time.”

“Do I? I’ll be graduating soon, and I haven’t even started applying to colleges. I just don’t want to make the wrong choice and be stuck somewhere I don’t want to be.”

“College is just part of the journey,” he said. “And it’s about more than helping you get a good job. Just choose somewhere you think you’ll be happy, and then enjoy the ride.”

“You think?”

“Of course.” He smiled. “Sometimes, when you stop looking ahead and focus on what’s right in front of you, that thing you’ve been looking for all along finds you.”

I felt my shoulders relax, and I smiled across the room at him. “Thanks, Danny.”

“No need to thank me, I’m just saying it how it—” He was distracted as the ceiling lights flickered and he released a heavy breath. “I really should get around to checking out those faulty wires.” He gave a quick shake of his

head and stood. “But not tonight. It’s getting late and you should get some rest. You won’t solve your problems by staying awake fretting about them.”

“No, probably not,” I agreed.

I was feeling slightly more optimistic about them anyway. Danny’s attitude was so different to my parents’. They made me feel like the world might end if I didn’t have every little detail of my future planned, while Danny made it seem as though everything would work itself out, one way or another. I wasn’t sure who had it right, but I was hoping it was Danny.

I left the living room and made my way back upstairs. But as I approached Cammie’s room, I couldn’t stop myself from looking toward Grayson’s door. A part of me wanted to go back into his room, lie down next to him, and finish our movie, but the sketchy fragments of my dream were still floating through my mind. Too scattered to piece together but clear enough to stop me from moving closer to his door. Whatever this was, I needed to sleep it off. Fast.

“You look like crap,” Parker said when I entered the kitchen the following morning. “Bad night’s sleep?”

Despite Danny’s advice, I’d lain awake far too late. My mom’s words had played on repeat in my mind, and I was nervous that sleep would bring more inappropriate thoughts about my best friend.

I stifled a yawn and tried to smooth down my hair. It had gone a little crazy overnight thanks to all my tossing and turning, and the bathroom had been occupied this morning, so I hadn’t had a chance to shower and wash my hair yet. I usually needed the fresh spray of hot water to clear away the final dregs of sleep.

“I slept just fine, thank you, Parker.” I reached over and swiped the box of cereal from his hands before taking a seat on the stool next to him at the kitchen counter.

He grinned brightly at me. “Paige Price, are you actually . . . *grumpy* this morning?”

“I’m not grumpy.”

“Ha! You totally are.”

I cast him a stern look, which only made his smile grow.

“This is amazing,” he said. “Who would have thought our little human rainbow was capable of turning into a dark and stormy cloud?”

It was far too early for this. “I’m a person, Parker. Not a cloud or a rainbow.”

“You’re definitely closer to a rainbow than a person. At least, you usually are.”

I knew I should have just stayed in bed until the shower was free.

Amy bustled into the kitchen and kissed Parker on the head. I had to smother a laugh because he looked appalled by her gesture. He didn’t complain though. That was one thing about the Darling boys that most people would never believe—they were always so sweet to their mom.

“Morning, Paige. How’d you sleep?” Amy asked as she grabbed the pot of coffee and poured some into a thermos.

“Fine, thanks.”

“How about you, Monkey?”

“Monkey?” I glanced at Parker, whose face had turned from disgruntled to horrified.

“Don’t call me that.” Parker glared at his mom before turning to me. “She doesn’t call me that.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Parker,” Amy said. “I’m sure Paige won’t tell anyone you’re still my cheeky monkey.” She ruffled his hair and left the room with her coffee before Parker could argue any further. He looked like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him.

“I’m suddenly feeling a little more rainbow-like,” I said.

“I take it back. You’re not a rainbow. You’re the evil, gold-hoarding leprechaun at the end of it.”

I laughed again.

“What’s so funny?” Grayson asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“I’m not sure.” I smirked. “Why don’t you ask Monkey?”

Parker’s eyes narrowed at me. “Definitely an evil leprechaun,” he said before he stalked from the room.

I turned to grin at Grayson, but my mouth went dry at the sight of him. He was topless, and his gray sweats hung low across his stomach. His hair was still messy from sleep, and he reached up to run his hand through it. I already knew Gray was gorgeous. And muscular. And toned. Everyone did. But right now he looked like something an ancient Greek sculptor had carved out of stone. Then he gave me a subtle sleepy smile that sweetened his hard features and made my stomach dip in an unusual way.

An image suddenly flashed into my mind, and I felt my cheeks warm as I realized this was all too similar to my dream last night. Gray had been missing a shirt then too. And smiling at me just like that. I quickly averted my eyes.

“I guess that means you’ve heard mom’s nickname for Parker,” Gray said as he strolled over and took the cereal box from my hands. I hadn’t poured any into my bowl yet, so Gray went to fill it up for me.

“Is this what you want?” he asked.

This was even starting to *sound* like my dream. I gave a small nod. Once he was done, he lifted the milk carton over my bowl and started to pour.

“Just tell me to stop.”

I choked out a cough and almost fell off my stool. Now he was straight-up quoting my dream. It was suddenly all coming back to me in shocking, vivid detail, and I became even more certain it wasn’t the kind of dream your best friend was supposed to take a starring role in. Unless—could I be dreaming right now? I lowered my hand to my leg to pinch myself and let out a quiet yelp of pain. “Ouch.”

“You okay?” Grayson asked, a slight crease in his brow.

“Oh yeah, fine,” I muttered. “You just said something similar last night.”

“Huh?”

“Uh, no, nothing, don’t worry about it,” I stuttered, shifting into a more stable position on my stool. “What have you got going on today?” I quickly changed the subject.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that,” he said, his gaze shifting uneasily away from me as he focused on his breakfast. “And as your dating coach, I’ve had some ideas for your next lesson.”

“You have?” Coaching was the last thing I felt like talking about right now. I was convinced all the flirting practice was to blame for my embarrassing dream, and the unusual feelings I was still experiencing as I cast my eyes over Grayson’s shirtless frame.

“Yeah, your attempt at flirting on the lake yesterday was a good start,” he said. “And I think it’s time to take things to the next level.”

“Really?” I didn’t know whether to feel pleased that he’d complimented my skills, or nervous about what the “next level” involved. Mostly, I think I

was shocked Grayson had taken the time to come up with a lesson plan. “You think I should try flirting with Damien again?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “That’s still too advanced for you.”

“What then?” I folded my arms, a little frustrated I wasn’t a pro yet.

“Well, you said you wanted to learn how to get a guy’s attention. That’s your next lesson.”

“Okay, go on.”

“You’re going to ignore Damien.”

“Ignore him?”

“Yep. Totally. Pretend he doesn’t exist.”

“What? How is that going to get his attention?”

“Because, right now, every other girl at school is flirting with him and falling at his feet. If you want to stand out, you’re better off doing the exact opposite. You need to play hard to get.”

“This doesn’t sound right.”

“Trust me,” Gray said. “It’s right. Do you know what drives a guy crazy?”

I slowly shook my head and inched back, because he seemed to have moved closer. He smelled so good it was driving *me* a little crazy. He was also still shirtless. Why was he still shirtless? Seriously, didn’t he feel the cold?

“Seeing something they want and knowing they can’t have it.” The way he was staring into my eyes had me wondering what it would feel like to be wanted by Grayson. And not just in a dream. He spoke like he was talking from experience, and I considered who the girl might be, whether he still wanted her, and if I had the skills to get away with murder. A surprising sense of possessiveness took hold of me. I didn’t want Gray to look at anyone that way.

It was only when he turned back to his food that I drew in a ragged breath. There was something wrong with me this morning. It had to be that stupid dream. My mom was always telling me not to have candy before bed; perhaps this was why. Too many gummy worms, and apparently nightmares became delight-mares.

“Some girl driving *you* crazy, Gray?” I asked with a laugh I didn’t quite feel. It’s how I normally would have replied, but it was a struggle to maintain my usual lighthearted attitude. I was also way too invested as I waited for his reply.

“Only you,” he responded with a playful smile.

I knew he was joking, but his words relaxed me. Maybe he’d felt that way about a former crush. At least that meant I wouldn’t have to start my day by googling *how to bury a body in the middle of winter*.

Gray finished his cereal and went to clean his bowl in the sink. With him on the other side of the kitchen, I could think a little clearer. I took a few more mouthfuls of cereal as I considered his suggestion. “So, all I have to do is ignore Damien? It sounds a little too simple.”

Gray turned to face me, leaning back against the kitchen counter. “That’s because ignoring him is only the first stage of the plan.”

“Only the first stage? What’s stage two?”

“Well.” He cleared his throat. “There’s actually one thing that drives a guy even more crazy than seeing something he wants and knowing he can’t have it.”

“Which is?”

“Seeing someone else get the thing he wants.”

“I’m lost.”

He laughed. “While you’re ignoring Damien, you flirt with someone else.”

So much for Grayson being some coaching genius. “That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. It’ll be Saturday night all over again. The only difference is this time Damien will be in the audience. How do you know I won’t fail miserably with the other guy too?”

“Because the other guy will be me, of course.”

I almost fell off my stool again. “You?”

“Yeah, why not? I’m supposed to be your coach, aren’t I?”

“I guess, but . . .” I paused. I couldn’t exactly tell Grayson I was suddenly having second thoughts about practicing flirting with him. How after just one day of coaching I was having inappropriate dreams about him, and was finding it difficult to stop my eyes from scanning his body and coming to rest on his chiseled abs.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just . . .”

“Come on, Pidge, you can tell me.”

Could I though? Could I really tell Grayson that I’d dreamed about him? Could I really tell him how good he looked wearing only a pair of loose-fitting gray sweatpants?

“I just . . .” Nope. I couldn’t do it. “I just worry he might think we’re together, or something.” It wasn’t my main concern with Grayson’s plan, but it was still a potential problem.

“He won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I made it clear to him that we’re not.”

That was news to me. “When?”

“At some point last week. You asked me to be a good wingman, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.” I just didn’t realize he’d actually gone through with it. I was also a little shocked, because part of me had never really believed Grayson was fully on board with helping me find a guy to kiss. It seemed I was wrong. “Just how clear did you make it?”

“Pretty clear.”

That answered the question of how committed Grayson was. Not only was he planning ahead, he was also going out of his way to be a good wingman. I was the one letting the team down. I needed to shake off my uncertainty and focus on the plan, just like Grayson was.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do it. When were you thinking?”

“Uh, today at lunch?” He stumbled over his answer slightly, as though he was surprised by my enthusiasm, but quickly regained his composure. “I’ll make sure I’m sitting near Damien, and you make sure you do your best to pretend he doesn’t exist.”

“Works for me.” I made myself sound confident, but it was extremely daunting. This *did* feel like a whole new level, and I wondered if I was ready after only one lesson.

“Unless, of course, you want to come up with a new plan?” he said, looking at me with a hint of concern. Could he tell I was second-guessing myself, or was he the one having second thoughts? “It’s fair enough if you’re not feeling up to flirting in public yet . . .”

Or was he just doubting my abilities?

“You don’t think I can do it?”

“I think there’s a big difference between practice and a game.”

I clenched my jaw as I stood and closed the distance between us, poking a finger into his ridiculously warm and stupidly toned chest. “You’re wrong about me, Coach. And I’ll prove it to you at lunch.”

His eyes danced with amusement. He might not have made a sound, but I knew he was enjoying this.

“I’m going to flirt with you so hard you’ll forget your own name,” I added before stalking off.

“Don’t forget, we’re driving to school together,” he called after me, spoiling my dramatic exit.

I stuck my middle finger up at him. As I left the room, I was trailed by the faint sounds of his chuckles. Flirt with Gray. Ignore Damien. Should be a piece of cake.

Just a shame I had a habit of burning anything I baked.

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Chapter 15

Grayson

Damien was talking about himself. Surprise, surprise. Today, he was bragging about how many colleges were scouting him to play hockey for them. The way he spoke, you'd think he was the only player on the Devils who had hockey prospects beyond high school. I chose not to correct him. This wasn't a competition. And if it was, I honestly didn't care who won. You might have a million offers on the table, but you could only accept one, and that was all that mattered. I had my own future to worry about. Once Reed and I had finally made it to signing day and committed to Ryker, I'd concern myself with where Damien was going next year. Hopefully, he'd end up at a school on the other side of the country. Or better yet, the other side of the world. Did they play ice hockey in Australia?

I kept my focus on my tray of food, so all I had to do was nod and murmur in agreement as Damien continued to talk. I'd been avoiding him as much as possible since he'd arrived back in town, and the only reason I was anywhere near him right now was because it was almost time for my next coaching session with Paige.

I was still questioning my decision to pitch this plan to her. Suggesting she flirt with me in front of Damien was an attempt to create an opportunity for her to look at me the way I dreamed she would. I'd been trying to take Reed's advice and be more proactive. But I was a little concerned my plan might work *too* well.

Damien was definitely interested in Paige. He'd already asked if we were together, and I'd seen the excitement in his gaze when I'd told him we weren't. It was likely Paige had already caught his attention but, knowing Damien, watching her flirt with me would get the job done in no time.

Until recently, I could have just uttered a few strong words to Damien and he'd instantly forget he was ever into Paige. But I'd sworn to her I'd

back off, so that was out of the question. To be honest, it probably wouldn't work on Damien anyway. He wasn't like the other guys around here. He didn't care about my reputation. He was too preoccupied with his own. And if Damien was anything like the kid we all hung out with years ago, he wouldn't be the least bit worried about pissing me off. In fact, I think he'd enjoy it.

My palms were sweaty as I waited for Paige to get to the cafeteria. I'd only been here ten minutes, but it felt like the longest lunch period of my life. Damien was still talking, and I had to wonder how he managed to eat and speak at the same time without muffling his words. It was quite an impressive skill. Maybe he'd get offered a college scholarship for that too.

"You hear that, Grayson?" Damien said. "They offered me a full ride."

"Yeah, that's great," I replied, with absolutely no idea what team he was talking about.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and my body stiffened when Paige spoke. "Mind if I sit here?"

I wasn't sure whether to feel relieved she had arrived, so Damien would finally shut up, or pissed because that meant it was time to start luring him in. But as I looked up at her, I forgot there were any warring feelings within me. I knew she must be nervous, but there was a sense of confidence in her gaze and mischief in the slight tilt of her lips. All I could feel was awe, because damn, my best friend was beautiful when she was going after what she wanted. I just needed to keep working to make sure that thing was me.

"I don't mind at all." My voice came out low and husky. She had absolutely no idea the effect she was already having on me.

Paige gave me a wink, then lowered herself onto my lap and twisted her hands around my neck. I froze. I'd known she was going to flirt with me, but I hadn't realized that meant she'd be using me as her own personal chair. Not that I was complaining.

She shifted on me as she got comfortable. No, I definitely wasn't complaining. Though I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself. I had no idea where to put my hands, and I settled with lightly resting them on her waist. I was wary of doing anything that might make her uncomfortable, but she didn't seem the least bit concerned by our closeness.

As she smiled down at me, I wondered how I was going to get through lunch without bursting into flames. It felt as though we were playing with

flickering sparks next to a forest of dry tinder. One wrong move and we'd set everything ablaze.

I'd gotten so good at containing my feelings. At making sure she didn't realize the depth of how much I cared for her. But for once I didn't have to restrain myself. I didn't have to pretend I wasn't in love with her. If anything, I was supposed to be doing the exact opposite. I needed to play along with her. Not that it would be any challenge. I *wanted* to kiss her. To put my hand in her hair and pull her closer to me. Though that would probably be taking my performance too far.

I wondered if she could sense the direction of my thoughts, because her eyes flickered with surprise, and she bit her lower lip as her gaze darted down to mine.

"Hey, P," Damien said from my side.

"Oh, hi, Damien," Paige replied, though her gaze didn't leave mine. She couldn't have seemed less interested in him, and while I knew she was doing it for show, it was hard not to smile in response. She was looking at me like I was the guy she wanted, and my poor heart was struggling not to fall for the act. I would do just about anything to have her look at me this way all the time. To look at me this way for real.

"Wow, Grayson." Paige smiled coyly at me as she ran her fingers across my shoulders. "Have you been working out?"

Her words broke the bubble surrounding us, reminding me this was just pretend. It was the same line she'd used on the lake yesterday. Maybe she was sticking with what worked. Only, she couldn't know just how effective it was. It wasn't the line itself, more the sound of her soft, seductive voice and the feel of her fingers trailing across my shoulders and onto the back of my neck.

"I've got to impress the girls somehow," I said, managing to compose myself enough to form a reply. "It's not exactly my friendly personality that gets them going."

"Aw, I like your personality." She laughed lightly. "Besides, there's something so sexy about broody guys."

"Is there now?" That was news to me, but I kept my tone casual and inquisitive, rather than shocked. My mom was always gushing about the broody love interests in her books, but no one wanted that guy in the real world, did they? It was the equivalent of choosing to go for a walk in a

storm instead of on a bright, sunny day. And I knew how much Paige hated storms.

“Uh-huh.” Her fingers were now slowly sliding down the center of my chest. “Especially when they’re so incredibly talented at hockey.”

Damien cleared his throat beside us. “Well, P. Lucky for you, you’re surrounded by a whole team of talented hockey players.”

Ugh. I’d almost forgotten he was there. Apparently, our little charade was working. When I glanced at Damien there was an eager look in his eyes. It was my eighth birthday all over again, but this time I wasn’t letting him steal my candles. Paige was mine, and now I’d gotten a taste of what it would be like to have her look at me like I was hers too, I wasn’t going to give her up without a fight.

“Perhaps.” Paige responded to Damien’s comment, but she was still looking at me. “But when I come to games, I’ve only got room for one number on my jersey. And I have always liked the number seven . . .”

I grinned up at her, and she returned my smile. She always wore my number to our games. I never wanted that to change. It would kill me to see her supporting someone else.

The bell rang and Paige glanced up at the sound. “Oh, is lunch over already?”

She went to stand, but I instinctively gripped her waist tighter, keeping her firmly seated on my lap. Her mouth popped open, as though I’d caught her by surprise, but then she smirked. “Aren’t you going to let me go?”

“Never.”

“N-never?” she stammered her reply, making me realize how serious I sounded, how intently I’d been looking up at her when I spoke, and how shallow her breathing had become. Had I gone too far? Revealed too much? I considered backing down, but I was tired of doing that. If I wanted to make progress with Paige, I was better off doubling down. I might only get to play this game with her once, so I wasn’t going to half-ass it.

I leaned in a little closer. “Why would I, when I’ve got you right where I want you?”

She inhaled a sharp but silent breath, her eyes darting down to my lips again. It really did feel like I had her right where I wanted her, in more ways than one, but then she let out a light laugh, shattering the illusion.

“Well, you have to sometime,” she said. “I’ll be late for class. You wouldn’t want me to get in trouble, would you?” She attempted to lift

herself off my lap once again, and this time, I let my hands fall from her sides. I hated the cold air that replaced her soft warmth. “I’ll catch you later, Gray.”

As I watched her leave, I wished the bell hadn’t rung so soon, so we could have kept playing pretend forever.

Damien was watching her walk away too, and he gave a low, drawn-out whistle. “If I’d known Paige had such a thing for hockey players, I would have talked up my skills more on Saturday night.”

I ignored his comment and stood from the table, intending to put as much distance between Damien and myself as possible. I’d done my part, clearly too well.

He caught up to me though as I left the cafeteria. “You two really aren’t together?”

“No.” I was short with him, hoping he’d take the hint. But as always, he remained oblivious.

“So, she’s free for the taking?”

I stopped in the middle of the corridor and faced him. “You don’t just *take* her,” I said. “She’s a person.”

He smirked. “You know what I mean.”

“I know that if any guy hurts her, they’ll have me to answer to.”

I realized too late that I’d broken my promise to Paige. I wasn’t allowed to intimidate other guys, and I certainly wasn’t supposed to be directly threatening Damien. But I couldn’t stand by and say nothing. Not when he was talking about her like that. I was always going to protect her, promise or not, and Damien needed to realize that Paige wasn’t just some toy you could pick up and then toss aside once you got bored.

Damien sniggered in response. “Okay, man, I got it.”

“I’m not joking,” I growled.

“Yeah, because that would be a first, right?” He laughed again before slapping me on the shoulder. “See you later, Gray.”

I stood there, staring after him. Damien truly wasn’t afraid of me. He hadn’t even noticed my threatening tone. That really was a first. It wasn’t all that surprising, given how self-absorbed the guy was. But it did worry me. If Damien went after Paige, there was nothing I could do to stop him from breaking her heart. I was just going to have to stick with my plan so he wouldn’t even be a factor.

As if my thoughts alone had summoned her, Paige appeared before me, her eyes sparkling and filled with hope. “Well, how was that, Coach?”

“You were very convincing,” I said, trying not to sound disappointed. Paige had certainly put on a good show, but it had both sparked Damien’s interest and added fuel to the fire already burning inside me.

“Really?”

“Yep. I forgot my name and everything.”

“You weren’t so bad yourself.” She laughed and glanced away from me before tucking her hair behind her ear. “Especially that line about never letting me go.” She kept her eyes focused on her feet, which she scuffed on the hard floor. “Where did that come from?”

It had come straight from my heart, where I usually kept all my secret feelings for Paige locked tightly away. Coaching her was allowing me to briefly release them into the wild though, and it felt good. Terrifying, but good.

“I guess you just inspired me.”

Her gaze finally lifted to meet mine and she smiled. But then she looked over my shoulder and nodded to where Damien was disappearing down the hallway.

“Do you think it worked on him?” She sounded cautiously hopeful, and I hated it.

“Yeah, I think it did.”

“You really think I caught his attention? So, what do I do now?”

I hesitated. Answering this question was much harder than she could have guessed. I didn’t want her to know just how interested Damien was, and how easily she would be able to check that first kiss off her list if she wanted. But I also couldn’t bring myself to lie to her and ruin her chances with him either. I’d just have to give her my honest opinion and hope I could claw my way out of the friend zone before Damien made his move.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing,” I said.

“What do you mean? Keep ignoring him?”

“Yep. Wait for him to come to you. You’ve laid the groundwork; you don’t want to risk ruining it by acting too interested.”

“I guess that makes sense. Anything else?”

“Keep flirting with me, of course.”

She laughed. “Oh, really?”

I tried to act casual, like just the thought of flirting with her wasn't making my heart race. "You can never have too much practice."

She was studying me closely but smiled. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind."

It was now well after the bell had rung, and we would soon be late for class, so we started making our way down the hall together. It was mostly empty, and I felt a little more confident as I continued our conversation.

"So, are broody guys really sexy?" I asked. She swatted a hand against my stomach. "Uh, ouch."

"What happens when we flirt stays when we flirt," she replied.

"Okay, okay." I held up my hands in surrender. "No need to attack me."

"I hardly touched you."

"I could be injured."

"You'll survive."

"Nope, I think it's a broken rib."

She gave me a skeptical glance. "A two-hundred-pound dude slams you into the boards and you skate away, no worries. A light tap on the stomach from a girl who's half your size and you need medical attention?"

"You're stronger than you look."

She continued walking. "Well, you're *not* as broody as you look."

"But I'm still sexy?"

She turned her eyes to the ceiling, but then they found mine again. "I wish flirting with other people was as easy as it is with you," she said. "Maybe once I've had my makeover, I'll feel just as confident when I try again with Damien."

My throat restricted at the mention of her makeover. "You're still going ahead with that?"

"Yes . . ." She frowned. "You said you weren't going to help, but that doesn't mean it's not going ahead. Since I got Damien's attention today, it's time to move onto the next stage, right?"

"I guess," I grunted. "When's it happening?"

"Tonight," she replied with an uncertain smile. "Bonnie's taking me shopping. She's going to make me irresistible."

"Is this really what you want?" I asked.

"Who doesn't want to be irresistible?"

"I mean, do you really want to change the way you look?"

Paige glanced down at her outfit and shrugged. "It's not about what I want. This is about what I need."

I was only growing increasingly anti-makeover. And it didn't sound like she was very enthusiastic about the whole thing either. I was particularly concerned about Bonnie taking charge of the transformation. Their taste in clothes couldn't be more different, and I feared she'd leave Paige looking nothing like herself.

"I'll take you." The words slipped from my lips before I'd really considered them.

"What?"

"I'll take you," I slowly repeated.

Paige stopped in her tracks and faced me. "You don't want to take me shopping."

"Sure, I do." I kept walking so she couldn't analyze my response too closely, and she had to jog to keep up.

"Don't you have hockey practice tonight?"

"I'll make an excuse and skip it."

"But you never miss practice." She was eyeing me with suspicion. "You didn't even skip when you were practically dying of flu last month. Plus, isn't the coach from Ryker coming to watch you this weekend?"

"That's this weekend. He's not coming to watch me practice tonight. The team will survive if I miss one session."

Her brow pinched and she scanned my features, as if she were searching for any sign of what was going on beneath my stoic exterior. She was going to be searching a while if she wanted answers; my expression was completely locked down.

"You don't want to come shopping with me!" She threw her hands up in the air to emphasize her point. "I know you don't."

It was true. There were few things I enjoyed less than shopping. But I didn't want Paige to feel forced to wear clothes she wasn't comfortable in just to impress some guy. Besides, my little chat with Damien had made it clear I was running out of time. Who knew, maybe the shopping expedition would present another opportunity to get closer to her.

"As your dating coach, I think it's pretty important that I'm there," I said. "Don't you want a guy's opinion?"

"I guess." Her lips pressed together as she considered it.

"And maybe it'll be fun." Now she was looking at me like she was worried an alien had transplanted itself into my brain. I'd probably oversold

my enthusiasm, so I nodded at the classroom we'd just reached. "This is you . . ."

"Right." She glanced at the doorway. "Are you sure about this?"

"I wouldn't offer if I wasn't sure."

"Okay . . ." She still didn't look convinced and gave me one final look of skepticism before she headed into the classroom. I tried to smile reassuringly, but it probably came out more like a grimace.

Had I really decided to skip hockey practice to go shopping?

Paige must have thought I'd lost my mind. Perhaps I finally had.

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Chapter 16

Paige

“I’m never trusting Abby to write up a hockey game again,” Bonnie huffed as she met me by my locker at the end of the school day.

I stopped putting my books away and turned to her. “Oh no, what happened?”

“Well, she got half the players’ names wrong. Then she gave the incorrect final score. And don’t get me started on her general abuse of the English language. I spent my entire lunch period correcting her article. If this wasn’t a high school newspaper, I’d fire her so quick.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Bon.”

“Oh, don’t be, I’m used to it. I bet the editors at the *New York Times* don’t have to deal with this—” She gasped suddenly and reached out to grab my arm. “Oh my gosh, how could you let me blab on about Abby for so long! How’d it go?”

“How’d what go?”

“Uh, what else?” she scoffed. “Lunchtime. You. Damien. Grayson. Flirting. Jealousy. Drama. I missed the show, so you have to tell me everything.”

There hadn’t been much drama, and I wasn’t sure about the jealousy, but there was certainly flirting. “You didn’t miss much,” I said as calmly as I could. “But it went well.”

Bonnie gave me a look of disapproval. “Okay, I’m going to need way more details than that,” she said. “How did Damien react? Did he challenge Gray to a duel for your heart? Was he foaming at the mouth? Were any drinks spilled? Oh no. You didn’t do your nervous laugh again, did you?”

She really had no faith in me. I guess that wasn’t surprising, after my very public flirting failure with Damien. But this time, with Grayson, it had been totally different. I’d been so nervous before I entered the cafeteria,

afraid the lingering effects of my dream last night, or Damien's proximity, might throw me off. But I'd taken a deep breath and gone for it. And from the moment I sat on Gray's lap and crept my fingers along his firm shoulders, my nerves had almost entirely melted away.

Now, when I thought about it, a smile pulled at my lips and every inch of my skin tingled. It had been so fun to flirt with Gray. My lines hadn't been particularly original, and I probably still needed more practice, but I couldn't stop thinking of how he'd grinned up at me when I'd told him his number was the only one I'd wear. Gray's smiles were so hard to come by, it always left me on a high when I finally brought one to the surface. And then his response, that he would never let me go . . .

That comment had briefly brought the nerves back. He'd said it so firmly that it took me by surprise. I knew he was probably just giving the performance a fittingly grand finale, but I couldn't shake the feeling in the pit of my stomach that there was a little more to it.

"Uh, no, my nervous laugh didn't show its ugly face today, thank God." I shook my head, both to answer her question and to try and cool my warm cheeks. "And there were no drinks spilled, and definitely no duel, but I think Damien took the bait." That was what I should have been excited about. Instead, I was wondering when I'd get a chance to flirt with Grayson again, and whether he'd enjoyed it as much as me.

"And . . ." Bonnie prompted.

"And there's not much more to say." I shrugged. "I was supposed to be ignoring Damien, remember?"

"You must be missing something. Did he say anything?"

"Um, yeah, I told Gray he was great at hockey, and Damien said something about there being other talented players on the team."

"Oh, that's definitely a good sign," she said, nodding in approval. But she tilted her head as she watched me. "Anything else?"

"No, that's pretty much it."

"Paige, what aren't you telling me?" Apparently, she wasn't satisfied with my answer.

"What? Nothing."

She tilted her head further and raised an eyebrow.

"I swear."

Bonnie continued watching me, waiting for me to spill whatever she thought I was holding back. There was nothing more I needed to tell her.

Well, nothing more about Damien.

“I just kind of enjoyed flirting with Gray, is all.”

“You *did*?”

“Yeah. It was fun,” I explained. “Kind of how I imagine it’s meant to feel when you flirt. Maybe I’m getting better at it.”

Bonnie glanced around at the other students passing us by before she leaned in close. “Do you like him?”

“What?”

“Grayson. Do you *like* him?” She gave the word “like” even more emphasis the second time, to make sure I was under no illusion about what she was getting at.

“No, of course I don’t,” I protested. “You know we’re just friends. That’s what made the flirting so fun.”

“You seem far more excited about the fun you had with Gray than you do about how Damien reacted.”

I scoffed. “I’m just on a high from a successful mission.”

“Sounds like the mission went in a different direction than you intended.”

“No, it went *exactly* as intended.” I frowned at her. “It was just a little harmless flirting, Bon. The fact I enjoyed it doesn’t mean anything.”

She shook her head. “I think the fact you enjoyed it means you’re going after the wrong guy.”

“I think you’ve spent far too long editing newspaper articles today. You’re seeing stories where they don’t exist.”

“Or maybe I’ve just uncovered the best story of the year . . .”

“You’re crazy,” I said, closing my locker.

“Crazy observant,” she replied. “My reporter’s nose can catch wind of these things a mile off.”

“Well, your nose must be wrong. Even sniffer dogs aren’t always completely accurate.” I swung my bag over my shoulder and started for the exit, hoping that might put an end to her conspiracy theories.

She quickly fell into step beside me. “Okay, maybe you’re right, but you better be careful. All this flirting practice with your bestie sounds like it’s going to your head.”

It was hard to completely disagree with her, especially after my dream last night. But she was seriously reaching if she thought there was more to my feelings than friendship. It was just a little bit of pretend flirting. It

would mess with anyone's head. Bonnie's nose was off this time, I was sure of it.

"Perhaps our retail therapy tonight will get my senses back on the right track," she added.

"About that . . ." I started. "Grayson wants to come."

Bonnie's eyes practically popped out of her head. "He does?"

"Yeah, he thinks I need a guy's opinion."

"I mean, I guess a guy's opinion couldn't hurt. I just didn't think clothes shopping was his thing."

"It's not," I replied. "But he's trying his best to help."

"Well, you need all the help you can get if you want to fix this." She waved a hand at my outfit.

I actually thought I'd done quite well today. I was wearing a bright blue dress and a cute navy cardigan. The blue was to catch Damien's eye and the navy . . . Well, the navy cardigan was just because I'd gotten cold, but still, I honestly had no idea how the outfit could be improved. The last time I'd worn the dress, Gray had commented on how this shade of blue suited me. I figured if it was nice enough for Grayson to compliment me, it was nice enough to entice Damien with.

I looked up at Bonnie. "I like what I'm wearing."

"So does Ms. Shannon . . ." She nodded down the hallway to where our English teacher had just emerged from the staff room. She was wearing an outfit almost identical to mine.

"That's a slightly different dress," I muttered, although I wasn't completely sure that was true. There was only one clothing store in the main street of Ransom, and it looked like I was no longer the only person from school who shopped there. Nope, it was just me and our elderly English teacher. Everyone else went to the big luxury mall just outside Sunshine Hills.

"Paige, you're even wearing the same sensible shoes as her."

I grimaced when I glanced down to find I was in fact wearing an identical pair.

"Okay, so, maybe my outfit happens to look a little bit like our super-cool teacher's . . ."

Bonnie laughed. "Don't worry. By tomorrow you'll look like a super-cool seventeen-year-old." She grinned and nudged her shoulder into mine when I glared at her. "This is going to be fun. You'll see."

When we emerged into the parking lot, I immediately caught sight of Grayson leaning against his truck. His arms were folded over his chest, and from this distance, it was clear why people were a little cautious around him. He was such an imposing figure, and his default facial expression was far from welcoming. But the moment his eyes landed on me they started to sparkle, and it was suddenly impossible to fathom how anyone could consider him scary.

"I'm parked over here," Bonnie said. "I can just meet you at the mall."

"You don't want to go together? Grayson can drive us."

"Uh, no, that's okay. Once we're done, I've got to pick up some baby formula for my mom and then head straight home. She was freaking out earlier because she's almost run out." She glanced over at Gray, who was still propped up against his truck waiting for us. "Plus, I think your bestie would rather the two of you rode alone . . ."

"Don't be silly. He wouldn't mind."

"Uh, let's not take the risk," she replied. "I already spend far too much time skirting the edge of his shit list. Let's not do something drastic and place my name firmly at the top of it."

"He doesn't have a shit list."

"That boy was *born* with one." She laughed before walking toward her car. "I'll see you there."

I was suddenly wondering if shopping with Bonnie and Gray was a recipe for disaster. The two of them rarely agreed on anything—I could only imagine how much their opinions would differ on what kind of clothes I should wear.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked as I approached Grayson's truck.

He responded by opening the passenger door for me. "I want to do everything with you, Pidge."

That feeling in the pit of my stomach was back. Why did my mind automatically go to places it shouldn't? Seriously, how did Grayson not have a girlfriend already? I tried to remember if he'd always said things like this to me. He must have. But for some reason his sweetness wasn't just washing over me like a cool breeze on a warm day. It was cutting deeper, sending shivers across my skin. Maybe I was coming down with something. A bad flu *had* been going around . . .

“I really don’t think you need this makeover,” Grayson said before I could respond. He was still waiting by the open door of the truck, so I shook off my thoughts and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Well, sometimes, Grayson Darling, you are wrong. The makeover needs to happen. No guy is going to ask me out when I dress like this. Especially not someone like Damien.”

“You could wear a paper bag, and I still wouldn’t think you needed a makeover.”

God, he was stubborn. But I didn’t get a chance to tell him, because he closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side.

“Actually, the paper bag would probably be an improvement,” I said once he was in the truck. “I was literally wearing the same outfit as a teacher today, Gray.”

That took a little of the wind out of his sails. “I’m sure the teacher just has good taste.”

“It was Ms. Shannon.”

I couldn’t tell if Gray wanted to laugh or cringe. His eyes were certainly wide with surprise.

“Then I guess we should go shopping.” He started the engine. “But for the record, Ms. Shannon is pretty cool for an eighty-year-old.”

I laughed. Perhaps shopping wouldn’t be so bad after all.

When we arrived at the mall, I got a text from Bonnie telling me to hurry up because she was already in the department store. I had no idea how she’d gotten here so much quicker than us, but by the time we’d made our way from the parking lot to the store, she was already rushing between the racks, her arms laden with clothes. Grayson watched in horror. He was probably already feeling out of place, and the sight of all the clothes Bonnie was carrying couldn’t be helping.

“Sorry, I didn’t wait,” Bonnie said as she continued adding to her pile. “I can’t stay . . .”

“You can’t?” She’d been the one pushing for this makeover. How could she bail on me before we had even got started?

She pulled another dress off a hook before scrunching her nose up and quickly placing it back. “My mom just called. Turns out she’s already run out of baby formula and Tabi won’t stop crying. She needs me to pick some up and bring it home now.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay, we can do this another night.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she replied. “Your wardrobe won’t survive another night without major surgery. Damien’s never going to ask you out while you look like you might give him detention if he talks out of turn.”

She gave the shop floor one final scan and sighed. “This will have to do,” she said before walking over and dumping all the clothing she’d selected into my arms.

“It looks like plenty,” Gray muttered.

Bonnie ignored him as she went on. “I’ve tried to find you a few options, but all of them are a little more revealing than the stuff you’d usually go for. And you want something that highlights your curves instead of swallowing them up. Make sure you try them all, okay? There has to be at least one outfit you like.”

“Uh, okay.”

Bonnie then turned to Grayson and pointed a finger at him. “I’m putting you in charge, Grayson. Don’t let me down.”

“Yeah, uh, I won’t.” He looked slightly unnerved by the idea and, maybe for the first time ever, I wondered if Gray was a little intimidated.

“Good. Now, don’t have too much fun without me.”

And, like a whirlwind passing by, she was gone. The aftermath of her frenzy was the towering mountain of clothes in my arms. I pasted on a smile as I turned to Gray.

“So, we should probably start looking through this stuff for the perfect mix of revealing and figure-hugging . . .” My voice trailed off when I noticed how hard he was scowling at Bonnie’s selection of outfits. I suspected he was already regretting his decision to come, but his cheeks were also tinged with the softest hint of pink. Was he embarrassed too?

“Let’s just get this over with,” he said as he eased the clothes from my arms so he could carry them for me. I jumped as his skin brushed against mine. What was with me today? There wasn’t anything different about the way Gray was acting. There was certainly no reason to jolt because his hands had brushed my arms.

He gave me a strange look and I tried to laugh it off. “I knew you weren’t excited about shopping.”

“What are you talking about? Clearly, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

There’s no way that was true, especially as he could have been playing hockey right now, but I was grateful he was here. Especially since Bonnie had to bail.

“Well, I appreciate it either way,” I said. “And cheer up. I’ll repay you with ice cream after.”

“I’m going to need a whole lot more than ice cream in payment for this,” he grumbled.

I realized my eyes had instinctively dropped to his lips, and I quickly turned in search of the fitting rooms. I could have sworn he’d glanced at mine too, but surely I’d just imagined that.

“It’s all in your head, Paige,” I mumbled to myself. “It’s all in your head.”

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Chapter 17

Grayson

I hated shopping more than anything. More than heights. More than an empty stomach. Even more than I hated when the weather got above 75 degrees. It was essentially my idea of hell. The fact I was here with Paige when I should have been at practice was hard to believe. But more unbelievable than that? I was enjoying it. Paige could turn just about anything into something fun. I just wished we weren't working toward getting some other guy to ask her out.

"So, what do you think?" she asked, stepping out of the fitting room with a flourish.

She was wearing a long teal-colored dress. It looked innocent enough at first, but then she spun to reveal it was backless. The straps were just a thin line of fabric, and it swept from the neckline in an uninterrupted curve to her waist. The style really suited her, but it was too easy to imagine Damien placing a hand against the exposed skin on her lower back, so I had no choice but to hate it on principle.

"You look beautiful, Paige."

She rolled her eyes. "You said that about the last two outfits."

"I guess you looked beautiful in them too."

"Well, we have to pick one." She sighed and went back into the fitting room, pulling the curtain closed. She raised her voice so I could hear her from the other side. "I need you to start giving me some constructive criticism, or we'll never make a decision."

I hadn't been lying. She'd looked amazing in all the outfits she'd tried on, but she hadn't looked like herself. It didn't feel like she was convinced by Bonnie's fashion choices either. It was easy to tell when Paige was excited about something, because her whole face lit up and enthusiasm radiated from every pore of her body. Unlike me, there was never any doubt

about what emotion Paige was feeling, and so far, it was obvious to me she was underwhelmed at best, and uncomfortable at worst.

When she reappeared in her next outfit, I felt like I was going to have a heart attack.

"You want to wear that to school?" She was in a pair of jeans that were so skintight they looked like they were painted on, and her dark top was low cut and fitted, I didn't know where to look. I clenched my hands on my lap as I scanned the outfit, resisting the urge to let my eyes linger anywhere they shouldn't. This outfit seemed to meet Bonnie's strict criteria: more revealing than what Paige usually wore, and figure-hugging. If she showed up in this outfit at school, we were both going to get expelled. Paige for breaking the dress code, and me for breaking the nose of the first guy who checked her out.

"Okay, I know I wanted some constructive criticism, but I didn't expect such a strong reaction," she said, looking down at the outfit. "I don't look good?"

"That's not what I said." She definitely looked good. Too good, if anything. But like all the other outfits Bonnie had picked, it just wasn't *Paige*.

"But that's what you wanted to say?"

"No," I protested. "It's just different to what you normally wear, that's all."

"That's the whole point, Gray," she replied with a laugh. "I'm supposed to look different. And see, the top has little stars on it. You know how much I love stars . . ."

I squinted slightly at the top and saw there were small stars faintly imprinted in the dark material. I shrugged. "You love stargazing. This isn't that. And the stars aren't the problem."

She crossed her arms as she stared at me. "What's the problem then?"

"I can tell you're not comfortable."

"Yeah, my butt kind of feels like it's about to pop the seams," she said, laughing again. "And I think if I bend over, my boobs might fall right out of this top."

Calm thoughts, I told myself. *Calm thoughts.*

Thankfully, I was a master at hiding my emotions. "That's not what I mean," I said. "The outfit is fine. You look great. But you always look

great. You could rock up at school in your PJs and still look great. But you don't seem comfortable in it. You don't seem like yourself."

"This is what guys want though, right?"

"Uh, some guys, I suppose."

She placed a hand on her hip and lifted a questioning brow. "Guys like Damien?"

My hands were clenched so tightly now I was certain my nails were leaving marks on my palm. "Probably."

"What about you?" she continued. "Would you want a girl if she was dressed like this?"

"I wouldn't want a girl *just* because she dressed like this." We were talking about Paige though, and that was a totally different matter. Of course I wanted *her* when she was dressed like this. I also wanted her when she was dressed in the old pair of blue and pink checked pajamas she had back at our house. Hell, I even wanted her in sophomore year when she'd gone to Cory Carter's Halloween party dressed as an octopus. That had been a confusing evening.

"Come on, I get this isn't exactly my style, but are you really saying you wouldn't check me out if I walked past you wearing this?"

I shrugged.

"Grayson Darling." The corner of her mouth lifted. "Are you a prude?"

My eyes narrowed. "I'm just concerned about how many guys are going to be checking you out."

Her face lit up and I realized that was exactly the wrong thing to say if I wanted to steer her away from choosing this outfit.

"So, this *is* the one I should get?"

"Let's just see the next option."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Next outfit, Pidge."

She was still grinning as she disappeared back inside the fitting room. I didn't want to know what she was trying on next. I just had to pray it was less revealing than the last one. I didn't know if my heart could take another shock.

My phone had been buzzing like crazy in my pocket, and I reluctantly took it out, if only as a distraction from what was going on behind the curtain in front of me. The group chat Parker had started for his so-called

“Operation Shrek” was blowing up. It also appeared to have a new name: “Ogres Are Like Onions.” With a heavy sigh I opened the chat.

Matt: Where the hell are you, Gray?

Reed: Coach said there was an emergency???

Owen: What’s wrong?

Parker: You’re not ditching practice to get another facial, are you?

Matt: ANOTHER facial?

Missing practice might not cost me my spot on the team, or my place at Ryker, but it might just cost me my dignity.

Me: I’m helping Paige. She’s the one with the emergency.

Reed: Is she okay?

Matt: I had last period with her. She seemed fine.

Parker: It’s totally a facial. I called it.

Matt: What’s with Grayson and facials????

Owen: Is this a part of her coaching?

Parker: Grayson likes his skin to smell like raindrops and his face to feel smooth as a baby’s bottom.

I should have known they’d want more of an explanation. Damn it. Why didn’t I just leave my phone in my pocket. I’d been doing a pretty good job of pretending this text thread didn’t exist until now. Apparently, watching Paige try on all these outfits had completely clouded my judgment. I knew there was no avoiding the truth though. If I didn’t say something soon, they’d just start asking more questions about my facial.

Me: We’re shopping for clothes.

I sighed when I saw the notification that immediately came up on screen: *Parker is typing . . .*

Parker: Hahhahahahahahaha.

Parker: Dude. That’s so much worse!

Reed: Why did you skip practice for that?

Me: It seemed like a good idea at the time. You told me to take every opportunity I could.

Reed: I didn’t mean skip practice and go SHOPPING.

Matt: You could always just leave. You might still be able to make it here in time.

Owen: He can’t leave. Paige needs his help and he’s trying to win her over.

Parker: First a facial. Now this. Are you even trying to get out of the friend zone?

Screw Parker. I was just following their advice and finally doing something about my unrequited feelings for Paige. I just hadn’t figured out exactly how being in this store was helping. Sitting here judging outfits certainly didn’t feel like it was getting me anywhere.

I quickly stuffed my phone back in my pocket as the fitting room curtain started to peel back. This time, when Paige emerged, she had a warm and genuine smile on her face, and I mirrored her expression when I took in her outfit.

She was wearing a soft pink dress with tiny white flowers dotted all over it. The fabric looked light and delicate, and it gently hugged her waist but flared around her knees. It wasn’t that different to the dresses already lining Paige’s closet, and I was surprised it had made its way into Bonnie’s

pile. It was such a contrast to the previous outfit, but, damn, she looked perfect in it. My heart thumped a little harder as if to echo its agreement.

"Now *that's* beautiful," I said. "Forget what I said about the others."

Her face shone even brighter as she smiled back at me. Then she looked down at the dress and brushed her hands over it. "Thank you," she said. "I love it, but it's not really what I came here for."

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't meet Bonnie's criteria."

"Well, she picked it, didn't she?"

Paige looked back up at me and scrunched her nose. "Not exactly. I may have grabbed this one myself while we were walking over to the fitting rooms. I couldn't help it!"

I felt a smile tease my lips as I imagined how outraged Bonnie would be if she was here. At least this explained why Paige liked the dress so much.

"I guess that means I can't get it." She sighed.

"Why not? I think you should wear what makes you happy. And you look pretty happy right now."

"Maybe that's not just because of the dress," she whispered. "I'm having a good time with you."

That really brought out my smile. I wanted to take her words as some small hint that this was all starting to pay off. But I knew she didn't mean anything by it.

She turned to look in the mirror once more and sighed again. "I better take this off."

"I vote we get this dress and then we go get ice cream."

"You would vote that."

"What can I say, I'm an easy man to please."

"Not particularly hard when all you want in life is hockey and food."

"And you . . ." I muttered as she returned to the fitting room. I'd said it so softly I was shocked when she spun to face me.

"What?"

"Uh, fondue," I stuttered. "All I want is hockey, food, and fondue."

She frowned at me, then laughed. "I think fondue falls under the food category, Gray."

"Right. You know I can't think straight when I'm hungry. It's been hours since lunch."

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’ll be quick. There’s only one more outfit, and then we have to make a decision.” I sighed as she disappeared behind the curtain again. Fondue? Was that really the best I could come up with? Parker was right. I needed to try harder, or I was going to fall even deeper into the friend zone. A part of me wished I’d just told her the truth about what I’d said. Told her she was all I wanted and everything I needed. But I knew she wasn’t ready to hear that—it would only freak her out.

Paige’s voice drifted over to me from behind the curtain. “Can you give me a hand?”

“What was that?” I swallowed. Had I heard her correctly?

“Can you give me a hand?”

“Uh, sure, what do you need?

Paige responded by pulling back the curtain and I felt my breath catch in my throat. She was wearing a short black dress. It was sleek and fitted and cut at all the right angles. Short enough to show off her perfect legs, but there was also still enough material to leave something to the imagination. I didn’t think I’d ever seen her wear an outfit like this before, and while it was definitely one of Bonnie’s selections, she looked incredible. I went to tell her she looked beautiful, like I had with almost every other outfit, but I found my mouth was suddenly dry and all I could do was let it hang open slightly. I was speechless.

“I need you to zip me up,” she said, beckoning me toward her before spinning around to reveal the zipper on the dress was open about halfway down her back. “Is that okay?” she added, glancing at me in the mirror.

Words escaped me, but somehow I managed to nod, stand up, and step toward her. When I reached her, I gently took the zipper and slowly pulled it up her back. She seemed to shiver as my fingers lightly brushed against her skin. When the zipper caught, I placed my hand on her waist to straighten it before I continued sliding it up to the base of her neck. She pulled her hair out of the way, sending the scent of her sweet shampoo washing over me. When the zip reached the top of the dress, I realized I was holding my breath. I let out a sigh of disappointment as I dropped my hand. But when she turned, I stopped breathing again.

The way her big brown eyes peered up at me had me frozen to the spot. My chest hurt from how much I wanted her, from the restraints I kept so firmly around my heart. It was time to let a little more of it go.

“Well, what do you think?” Her voice was breathy, like perhaps she was just as affected by our proximity.

“I think if you wear that dress for a second longer, I’m going to forget we’re just friends.” My voice came out as a low growl, and she inhaled sharply as sparks flared to life between us. They sizzled and hissed like a fire flaring too hot. I realized my hand was still gripping her waist, but instead of pulling my fingers away like they’d been burned, I felt the urge to pull her closer to me.

“Is that what you wanted to hear?” I murmured.

All she could do was nod her head up and down.

“How’s it going in here? Can I get you any more sizes?” A high-pitched voice pierced the silence between us and we both turned to look at the enthusiastic sales assistant who had just entered the fitting area.

“Oh,” she said, when she saw us standing on either side of the entrance to Paige’s fitting room, barely an inch between us. “I, uh . . .” She paused, and her lips twitched into a subtle smirk. “Sorry,” she added. “I see you’ve got everything you need.”

She spun on her heel and disappeared as suddenly as she’d arrived. I turned back to Paige, but she had taken a step away from me.

“So, uh, I guess this dress is guy-approved?”

Through the foggy haze clouding my thoughts, I worried I’d said too much, so I mirrored her reaction and took a quick step back.

“Yeah, I guess.”

She swallowed and nodded once more before giving me a smile. “I don’t know if I like it as much as the pink one, but I promised Bonnie, right? I think I’ll get this one and maybe the outfit with the stars. You did say that one would have all the guys checking me out after all.” She was bright and bubbly again, like she’d already forgotten whatever the moment was we’d just shared.

“Sounds good,” I said, struggling not to feel crestfallen. Had she really felt nothing? Could she not feel the sparks darting between us?

As she disappeared into the fitting room, I sunk back into my chair. Why did it feel like every time I tried to take a step forward with Paige, I actually took two steps back?

I was never coming shopping again.

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Chapter 18

Paige

“What would you do if you couldn’t play hockey?” I was lying on the floor in Grayson’s room finishing my math homework. My mom had left a string of text messages reminding me to work on my college applications, and I was doing my best to avoid thinking about them. I was also trying not to think about the fact that my heart was still fluttering after my shopping trip with Grayson today.

It was hard enough trying to solve math equations on a normal night. But it was impossible when I kept remembering the way he had slowly traced his fingers up my back as he zipped up my dress. My breath had stalled, and my skin had kept tingling even after he’d stopped touching me. But what happened next was even more unforgettable: He’d said I was going to make him forget I was just his friend. Was that just his way of complimenting me, or was it something more? Maybe Bonnie was right about this coaching situation being risky, and I wasn’t the only one who was letting it go to their head.

The fact that Grayson had just showered and all I could smell was the heady scent of his body wash also wasn’t helping. He was at his desk on the other side of the room, yet the smell of him was intoxicating. I was starting to think that the sooner Grayson’s role as my coach came to an end, and I ticked this first kiss off my list, the better. My lips were so starved, I was beginning to look at my best friend like he was a piece of meat.

“Not sure,” he replied, leaning back in his chair. “Hockey’s kind of it for me.”

Reed had his cars, and Parker was the kind of person who would fall on his feet no matter what he did. But Grayson wasn’t like his brothers. When he focused his attention on something, he was all in, leaving no room for

anything else. I wondered if he'd act the same way if he ever fell in love with a girl, but I quickly shoved that thought aside.

"What if you got injured again?"

He was rubbing his bad knee, but moved his hand away as soon as I mentioned it. "Let's just hope that doesn't happen."

"Yeah," I murmured. His dad hadn't been so lucky, and I knew just how easily the same thing could happen to Gray. I could hardly blame him for not having a Plan B for life though. I didn't even have a Plan A.

"How about you?" Gray asked. "What would you do if you couldn't cook?"

I burst out laughing, and he flashed me a smile.

"I don't know. The world just wouldn't be the same without my killer muffins, would it?" I said as seriously as I could manage. I sighed and rolled onto my back to stare at the ceiling. "I wish I loved something as much as you love hockey."

I heard movement and noticed the warmth of Gray's body as he came to lie on the floor beside me. This wasn't going to help with the whole ignoring the smell of him thing.

"You'll find your passion," he said quietly. "And while you may not play hockey, no one cusses out the opposition like you. I think you might love the game just as much as I do."

"Well, I learned all my best insults from your mom."

Gray chuckled under his breath. The sound was so soothing, I wished he'd laugh more often. It was going to be hard to return home after spending all this time together. Was it bad that I hoped my mom got so caught up with work she had to extend her trip? It wouldn't be surprising if she did.

"Seriously though. You're seventeen. It's okay if you don't have everything figured out. You've got your whole life for that."

"Tell that to my mom."

"Parents don't always know everything," he said. "Besides, I'm sure you're destined for something amazing."

"I'm not so sure," I murmured.

"I am. The care and effort you put into completing everything on your bucket list shows the kind of dedication and passion you're capable of. You don't half-ass anything in life. Once you find your thing, you'll be unstoppable."

I rolled onto my side and peered up at him. “Do you really think that?”

“I don’t think, I know.”

He was lying so close to me and looking at me with certainty and admiration, like I was already an unstoppable force. I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat, wishing I could believe in myself as much as he believed in me, and wondering how I could be so lucky to have someone like Grayson in my life. I honestly wasn’t sure I deserved him.

“I should probably get to bed,” I said, pushing up off the floor.

He sat up. “Already? It’s not even nine.”

“It’s been a long day.” I wasn’t tired. Not in the least. But I wasn’t sure I could stay here while Gray kept looking at me like I was something special. Not if I didn’t want to get any more confused about the way I was feeling right now. My head was a little dizzy under his gaze, and my heart was beating faster and faster. I was tempted to lean closer, so I was surrounded in his fresh scent. I wondered if he tasted as good as he—

Yep, I needed to go to bed asap.

“Good night, Grayson.”

“Night, Pidge.”

I ducked out of the room without another glance his way. Even though Bonnie had warned me about the dangers of all this practicing with Grayson, these new and concerning feelings for him had struck me out of nowhere. I cared about him the same way I always had, but my body seemed to have gotten different ideas. All evening it had been urging me closer to him and came alight whenever he was near. Surely it was all the talk about kissing and flirting that was doing it. It had to be. It was messing with me in ways I never expected, and it had to stop.

When I reached Cammie’s room, she was already in bed asleep for the night. I didn’t really blame her for passing out so early. She’d gotten up at five this morning and went straight to the rink before school started. She had training after school too, and I had no idea how she managed to function with such a busy schedule.

I snuck into the room and quietly changed into my pajamas before I curled up on the mattress on the floor. I tossed and turned as I tried to fall asleep and did my best to ignore the rain softly pattering against the roof. The sound of rain was soothing to many people, but I wasn’t one of them. Rain promised a storm. Tonight though I couldn’t only blame the weather for the anxious feeling building inside me. Thoughts of Grayson kept

intruding, and I felt too hot and jittery and uncomfortable in my own skin. Perhaps I really was coming down with a fever. That would be a less worrying explanation for the heat and agitation I was experiencing.

I must have finally drifted off to sleep, because I woke with a start as thunder clapped overhead. The whole house seemed to shake and I withheld a whimper. Taking a deep breath in, I tried telling myself it was just weather passing by. And I was safe inside the house. But the thunder came again, sharp and violent, like it was cracking open the sky above.

A branch scratched against the window, and vivid memories of the night a tree had come crashing down into my room overwhelmed me. I jumped up and was out the door and down the hallway before my legs could stop me.

I barreled into Grayson's darkened room but hesitated when I saw him deeply asleep in his bed. What was I doing? It was just a storm. I shouldn't be so scared. But the metal roof on Gray's house seemed to magnify the sound. Another deep rumble rolled down from the sky, shaking the walls, and the window brightened with a blinding flash.

I yelped and dived under Grayson's covers, burying my head in his chest.

"Paige?" Grayson's sleepy, raspy voice vibrated through me. "What are you—"

Another thunderclap answered his question, and he wrapped his arm around me, holding me close. "It's okay, I've got you."

I responded with a small nod, hating how pathetic I was. If I'd been at home, I never would have scurried to my parents' room like this. Probably because the thought of waking up my mom was scarier than any storm. But Gray always called me when there was thunder, and he talked to me until the storm was over. It wasn't a perfect fix, but it kept me from totally falling apart.

I drew in a deep breath as Grayson's strong arms gripped me tightly, warming and calming me. I kept my head pressed against him as the windows continued to rattle and the wind wailed outside. It sounded as though the whole world was ending. I was so busy fretting, it took me a moment to realize Grayson was talking. He seemed to be rattling off random facts about storms.

". . . and they occur when hot air rises to a much colder part of the atmosphere. When the air cools, clouds and rain are formed. Lightning

develops within the clouds and as the lightning heats the air, it causes it to expand. It's this process that causes the sound of thunder."

It was silly, but hearing him reduce the storm to a list of mundane scientific facts somehow helped soothe me. I managed to smile up at him. "Did you get all that from my cue cards?"

"Yeah, I have them memorized. We studied hard for that test, remember?"

"Sounds like I should have just gotten you to take it for me."

Despite the darkness in the room, I could see Gray's expression was still serious. "I don't want you to be afraid."

"I'm never afraid when I'm with you."

Another rumble echoed through the air, making me wince. It sounded farther away than before, but I still couldn't relax, knowing it wasn't completely gone. "Can you keep talking about storms?" I whispered.

"Well," Grayson replied, as though he was settling down to tell a long story. "When the lightning passes through the air, the temperature can be up to five times hotter than the surface of the sun . . ." He continued talking, and the sound of his voice eased the tension in my chest, keeping me distracted as the rumbles and thunderclaps grew more distant, leaving only the battering sound of the wind and lashing of rain. Until the raindrops turned to patters and I finally fell back to sleep.

When I woke, I was burning hot. Not because I'd just had a nightmare. And not because I was coming down with a fever like I'd worried. No, it was because sleeping with Grayson was like igniting a roaring fire beneath the bed covers. Wait . . . Sleeping with Grayson? My eyes burst open. I was still lying next to him, my head gently resting against his chest and his hand placed on mine. I bolted upright, the shock almost sending me sprawling out of the bed and onto the floor.

I turned to Grayson, afraid I'd woken him up, and as my gaze fell on him, all breath was stolen from my lungs. In the early morning light, he looked so beautiful and peaceful. Like a fallen angel I was lucky enough to have caught in slumber. The hard line that so frequently creased his brow had smoothed, and his lips were curved just enough to suggest a smile. I had to clench my fist to stop myself from reaching out to touch them.

The temptation took me by surprise. And the longer I stared at him, the more I became aware of how hard my heart was beating in nervous

anticipation. I could still feel the warmth of his arms after they'd held me close all night, and I desperately wanted to slide back into his embrace again. I wrapped my own arms around myself, trying to banish the sensation. Trying to ignore the direction of my thoughts.

Gray was my friend. Just my friend. So why was I starting to feel like he was more than that?

My pounding heart was becoming an ache in my chest that was both beautiful and tragic. As much as Grayson was mine, he also wasn't. And I couldn't allow myself to feel anything more, not even for a moment, because although these feelings were new, they had hit me with the strength of a sledgehammer, and I knew they had the power to destroy our friendship.

He let out a soft groan and reached across the bed in his sleep. I scrambled backward to avoid his touch, and this time, I fell right off the bed, landing with a thump on the floor. I let out a yelp and quickly clambered up to check that I hadn't disturbed him. When I was sure he was still asleep, I fled the room. I couldn't get out fast enough. Couldn't escape these feelings too quickly. I wanted Grayson in ways I most definitely shouldn't.

I rushed into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, hoping to jolt a little sense into myself. As I looked up into the mirror, I was surprised by the girl who stared back at me. My eyes were wide, my skin pale, and cheeks flushed. I looked like I'd just seen a ghost. A really hot, sweet, kind, totally gorgeous ghost.

"Okay, maybe it's not just in my head," I muttered. But that didn't mean this wouldn't turn out to be a silly little crush. Every teenager had them, right? It was only natural my stupid body would go and get inappropriate ideas about its best friend after I'd just spent the night in his arms. And Grayson really was gorgeous and sweet and kind. It was a miracle I hadn't felt this way before.

Perhaps I just needed a little time to adjust to this new reality where I couldn't stop staring at my best friend's lips. There was certainly no way I could act on that urge. Grayson was the best thing in my life. I didn't want to do anything that might mess up our friendship.

I took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled.

"It's going to be okay," I told myself. I just needed to treat these pesky feelings like last night's storm. Yes, they'd appeared out of nowhere and

were a little terrifying, but they'd be gone soon, the sun would come out again, and everything would return to normal.

The only problem was, that felt like the opposite of what I wanted.

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Chapter 19

Paige

Despite my best intentions, ignoring unwanted feelings was far easier said than done. Instead, they were all I could seem to think about, and I was a mess as I tried to get ready for school. Parker laughed at me when I arrived at breakfast with my shirt inside out. Reed had to gently reminded me to pour cereal into my bowl and not my cup. And when Grayson finally arrived in the kitchen, I got up from my chair so quickly I sent a glass of orange juice flying.

I swore under my breath as he rushed to help me. What was it with me and spilling drinks?

“It’s okay, I can clean up,” I insisted, but Grayson was already kneeling at my side, helping to wipe up the spilled juice.

“It’s no problem,” he murmured.

I hazarded a look into his eyes. He was watching me, concern clearly etched into his features. Could he tell what was going on in my head? That he was all I could think about? That I was dreaming about him, longing for him. Or did he just think I was freaking out because we’d spent the entire night in the same bed? He hadn’t seen me leave his room this morning, so maybe he didn’t know I’d been there as long as I had.

I quickly returned my attention back to the mess I’d made. The moment the floor was clean, I jumped back up, hitting my head on the table in the process. I groaned, rubbing the sore spot as I stood.

“What’s up with you this morning?” Parker asked.

“Uhhh . . .” I frantically searched for an acceptable answer.

“She’s probably just exhausted because the storm kept her up, like the rest of us.” Grayson answered for me, and I happily jumped on the excuse.

“Yeah, the storm. I couldn’t sleep.” I did my best to avoid looking at Gray, so I wouldn’t rouse any kind of suspicion. We’d get in so much

trouble if anyone found out I'd slept in his room, and I was sure his brothers would never let us hear the end of it. I also didn't need the added scrutiny. Things were pretty confusing in Paigeville right now, and I feared it wouldn't take much for someone to catch on.

Thankfully, the boys seemed to remain oblivious, and Reed stared blankly in reply. "There was a storm?"

"Not surprised you didn't hear it," Parker muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you sleep like the dead," Grayson replied.

"Even the dead heard that storm," Parker added.

"Whatever." Reed shrugged and turned to leave. "I'm going to jump in the shower."

Parker was right behind him, and he gave me a devious grin over his shoulder. "Five bucks says I can steal the bathroom before he gets there."

"Uh, sure." I wasn't even certain what I'd just agreed to.

Parker nodded and shot off like a rocket. I could hear him and Reed fighting as they tried to get up the stairs.

Gray's eyes danced with amusement as he listened to them. He seemed in a good mood this morning, especially for him, and there wasn't a hint of the awkwardness or embarrassment I was experiencing. I guessed that meant there wasn't a hint of the feelings I was having either. Still, just as it had last night, his calmness had a relaxing effect on me.

I smiled at him. "Does Reed really sleep that deeply?"

"He does. Mom thinks it's because we shared a room when we were little. Apparently, I liked to cry all night and Reed had to sleep through my screams."

"That makes sense," I said. "Though I can't really picture you as a baby. I'm not convinced you ever were one."

"That's because I actually arrived in this world six-foot-four and scowling."

I laughed and his lips looked tempted to smile in return. I loved it when Gray was so close to cracking. When he was on the very edge of sharing his fleeting smile. I realized I was staring at him again with dreamy eyes, so I quickly moved to clean my dishes. I needed some sense knocked into me. Perhaps when I got to school, I could convince Bonnie to set me straight.

"About last night . . ." Grayson murmured as he joined me by the sink.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” My stomach churned at the memory. “But thank you for being there for me. Bet you’ll be glad once I get home.”

“I’d never be glad about that.”

I didn’t give myself a chance to take his words the wrong way. To try to attach some value or meaning to them that wasn’t there. Gray was just saying that as my friend. I refused to become so blinded by a fleeting crush that I started to believe my feelings were returned. Especially when I wasn’t convinced they were real in the first place.

“Pidge?” Gray said, his voice low. “You okay?” I’d been scrubbing the same bowl for way too long and I quickly turned the water off.

I slowly looked up at him. He was standing close enough that every urge I was trying to bury and hide came rushing to the surface. He was looking at me the same way he always did. Why did it feel so much more intense? Why was it affecting me in such a visceral way? I needed a reality check from Bonnie urgently. It couldn’t wait until I got to school.

“I better finish getting ready,” I said, ducking past Grayson as I headed for the door. “I’ll see you at school.”

“You want to drive with me?” he called.

“No, thanks. Bonnie asked me for a ride.” I shot one last forced smile over my shoulder before rushing upstairs. Being in an enclosed space with Grayson was not a good idea right now. As soon as I reached Cammie’s room, I grabbed my phone from its charger and texted Bonnie.

Me: Tell your mom you’re grabbing a ride to school with me this morning.

Thankfully, Bonnie lived with her phone glued to her hand and responded instantly.

Bonnie: You’re not driving with Grayson?

Me: Not today. Also, I need you to slap some sense into me.

Bonnie: Wow, sounds serious. Okay, I’m here to help.

Everyone needed a friend like Bonnie in their life. It felt like things were seriously veering off course, and I hoped a little of her trademark

tough love would be enough to return them to the safe, familiar path where everything made sense.

“Ouch!” I flinched as Bonnie’s hand made impact. She didn’t pull her punches—well, slaps—and my cheek felt like it was on fire. “What was that?”

“You told me to slap you!”

“I didn’t mean *literally*, Bon!” I rubbed my cheek. It was lucky her mom wasn’t watching, or she’d be seriously concerned about our friendship.

“Oh.” Her eyes widened with guilt and shock. “I thought you wanted a real slap.”

“Clearly.” I laughed and shook my head. “You didn’t even hesitate. Did you miss your morning coffee or are you just feeling angry today?”

“What? It’s not every day you get asked to slap some sense into someone.”

“Well, next time I’m asking someone else.”

“Fair enough.” She turned to grab her jacket off a hook inside the house. “Bye, Mom,” she shouted before pulling the front door shut.

The two of us started walking to my car, which was parked on the street. It was bitterly cold today, and while the rain from last night had stopped, it was still quite windy. I was wearing a warm coat but the gusts that whipped across Bonnie’s front yard felt like shards of ice. It wasn’t much warmer when we got in the car, but we were at least protected from the wind.

“So, did it work?” Bonnie asked as I cranked the heating up to full power. I’d only left the car here for a few minutes, but already it was freezing inside.

“Did what work?”

“The slap. Are you filled with sense now?”

I couldn’t be sure. The only thing I could feel was my burning cheek. Perhaps once I saw Grayson again, I’d be able to tell if Bonnie’s slap had the desired effect.

“Also, why exactly do you need sense knocked into you?” she added.

I was somewhat surprised she didn’t ask that question before she slapped me.

“I’ve been having doubts about this whole thing.” It wasn’t a lie. It was just extremely vague.

“Doubts about what whole thing?”

Apparently, extremely vague wasn’t going to cut it. “The whole first-kiss thing.”

“You’re reconsidering?” Her brow creased. “I knew I shouldn’t have left you at the mall last night. The outfits I chose didn’t scare you off, did they?”

“What? No, it wasn’t the clothes.”

“So, what is it? You still want to kiss Damien, right?”

My uncertainty must have been plastered across my face because she nodded, like she already knew the answer to her question, and continued. “I thought you were into him. But we can go back to the drawing board. Is there someone else you want to kiss?”

“Uh . . .”

“Or did you finally come around to my idea of making Grayson pucker up?”

I gasped. “What? No! Of course not.” But it was hard to tell myself I wasn’t lying this time, because the thought of kissing Gray vividly entered my mind.

“Well, who else is there?” Bonnie asked. “Because the main reason we picked Damien, apart from the fact that he’s totally hot, was because he’s the only guy at school who hasn’t been reduced to a whimpering mess by your big, scary friend.”

When she laid it out like that, it was difficult to argue. Damien was still the best option if I really wanted to cross this goal off my list. Why was I doubting the whole thing so much? Perhaps it had something to do with spending the night in Grayson’s heated embrace.

“I know the prospect of your first kiss can be intimidating,” she said. “Maybe you just need to give Damien a chance? Do you need me to slap you again?”

“No!” I shouted, lifting a hand to protect myself. “I think the first one worked!”

I didn’t need sense knocked into me; I needed a total brain reset. But maybe that’s what kissing Damien would do. Reboot my system and break this fixation I’d developed for my best friend. Maybe if I started to form feelings for someone else, they would replace those I had for Grayson, which were quickly growing out of control. I had to believe it was worth a try, because I couldn’t keep feeling this way about Gray.

“You’re right. It needs to be Damien. I should give him a chance.”

“Good.” Her shoulders slumped with relief. “I was beginning to worry about you.”

“It was just a momentary lapse. I’m back now.” Or, at least, I would be.

“Excellent. Now, how’d the shopping go last night? Did you get any of the outfits I chose?”

“Two.” I smiled, feeling very proud of myself. “The black dress, and the jeans and top with little stars on it. I judged each outfit based on how much it shocked Grayson. He was a bit of a prude about the whole thing.”

“That’s great! I can’t wait to see them.” She then cast her eyes up and down my current outfit. “You didn’t want to test one out at school today?”

I glanced down at what I was wearing. In my hurry to get out of the house this morning, I’d grabbed the first thing I could find: a pair of jeans with cute little embroidered flowers and a large Ransom Devils sweatshirt. It was one of Grayson’s and it almost swallowed me whole. I probably should’ve thought twice before picking it up. It smelled like him, which was only making it harder to keep him from invading my thoughts. And if Damien saw me in it, he might get the wrong idea. Perhaps he’d just think I had a lot of school spirit?

“Uh, I was rushing this morning. Just couldn’t wait to get slapped by you.”

“Well, I’m glad you were so excited,” she replied. “I was actually hoping to ask you a favor too, and it’s something that might help with the Damien situation.”

“What kind of favor?”

She clapped her hands together happily, as if I’d already agreed. “So, I’m planning for the next paper. And in the lead-up to hockey playoffs, I’m thinking of doing profiles on all the players. I was hoping you could help me out with them.”

“You want me to write player profiles? I thought you had someone covering hockey.”

“You mean Abby?”

I grimaced at the disgust in her tone. I’d almost forgotten about the troubles Abby had caused Bonnie and the paper yesterday. “Sorry. Still not going well?”

“Let’s just say I’m not letting her near another hockey article the rest of the year. Besides, this assignment is even less suited to her.”

“Why?”

“It requires interviewing the players. She goes all quiet and loses her voice whenever a guy so much as looks at her, so I don’t think she’s capable of pulling it off. I was hoping you could help me out instead?”

“Me?” I gasped. “Why do you think I’d be any better than Abby?” Had Bonnie forgotten about my traumatic experience with Damien at the party?

She flicked a hand to dismiss my concern. “Well, haven’t you been practicing?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess. But not for this.”

“You’ll be fine,” she said. “You’re friends with half the team, and you actually know hockey. It’ll be easy.”

“But I’m a horrible writer. And I’ve no idea what to ask.”

“You’re not horrible at it in the least,” she insisted. “And I’ll help you with the questions. I know you haven’t done anything like this before, but I’ll be editing the piece, so you don’t have to worry if it’s not perfect on the first try.”

“I don’t know, Bon . . .”

“Just think about it. Even if you only do the interviews and record them for me, it would be a big help. It’s going to be a great article. Not just your usual boring player stats. You’re always trying new things. Why not this?”

I considered her point as I drove. The thought of having to write the actual article and have anyone read it was daunting, but Bonnie sounded like she was going to be supporting me every step of the way. And if she wrote the questions, the interviews might not be that hard. It wasn’t exactly on my bucket list, but that was no reason not to try it. I’d been so focused on my first kiss recently, I’d kind of forgotten why the list existed in the first place. There was one important detail, however, that Bonnie hadn’t clarified yet.

“How exactly does this help me with Damien?” I asked as we pulled into the school parking lot. It was still early, and there were only a few other cars there, which was a relief because I felt like I needed a minute before we headed into school.

“You need a reason to debut your killer new clothes, right? If you talk to Damien wearing any of the outfits I made you try on, he’ll be the one spilling his drink.”

“But I’m supposed to be ignoring him. Shouldn’t I run this plan past Grayson first?”

Bonnie rolled her eyes. “Coach Darling’s ignoring tactic is only going to get you so far. And besides, Gray already said the flirting you did in front of Damien had worked. Now it’s time to seal the deal.” She added a wink for emphasis.

“I guess so,” I said, still not sure this was the right plan of attack. I pulled the car into one of the many free spaces and slumped back in my seat. The engine was still running and the heat pumping, making the idea of getting out and walking into school even more unappealing.

Bonnie continued, sensing my hesitation. “And if you’re worrying about a repeat of the last time you tried to flirt with Damien, then don’t. I’ll be giving you a whole list of questions to fall back on. It can’t fail.”

That would definitely help. Half the reason I’d made a fool of myself when I’d tried to make a move on Damien before was because I had no idea what to say. I might actually have a shot at a normal conversation if I was reading a list of prepared interview questions.

“I just need to know if you’re in by the end of school,” Bonnie continued. “Coach Ray has already agreed that someone can interview the guys during practice tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yep. Is that a problem? Have you got other plans?”

“Well, no.” Although, I thought I’d have a little more time to come to terms with the idea.

“I think you could do a really great job at this, Paige.”

I sighed and leaned forward to shut off the car. It was so much harder to turn Bonnie down when she was being this supportive. “Okay, fine.”

“Fine, as in, you’ll do it?”

“Yes, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent.” She clapped her hands. “This is going to be great for both of us. I get my article, and you get one step closer to your first kiss. It’s a win-win.”

“Yeah, hopefully.”

Hopefully, I wouldn’t ruin Bonnie’s article.

Hopefully, I wouldn’t make a fool of myself in front of Damien.

And hopefully, I would have my first kiss before the week was done.

The alternative was trudging through life with unrequited feelings for my best friend, and that just wasn’t an option.

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Chapter 20

Grayson

All day, I was sweetly tortured by the memory of Paige sleeping in my arms. The sensation of holding her was branded on my skin. She had slept peacefully once the storm subsided, but all I'd been able to see when I closed my eyes was the soft smile that graced her lips as she rested against my chest.

I was almost relieved when, at breakfast, Paige had said she was going to drive herself to school, because I was losing the grip on my self-restraint. I was getting confused by what was just for practice and what was real between us. Still, I didn't dare to hope that my efforts with her might be starting to work.

We hadn't made any coaching plans for today, and now that we'd finished the makeover, I didn't really know what came next. Perhaps it was best if we took a breather. I was nearing breaking point. And the more I continued to hint at my feelings for Paige, the more I struggled not to blurt out everything that had been locked in my heart for so long. It still felt too soon and too risky, like it could potentially ruin everything.

By some miracle, I scarcely saw her during the day. She went to help Bonnie out at the school newsroom over lunch, so I dodged a small, Paige-shaped bullet in the cafeteria. Then she had a dentist appointment in the afternoon, so she was already gone when the bell rang at the end of the school day. I missed her, but I was grateful for some alone time so I could at least attempt to pull myself together.

"What's Paige doing here?" Parker asked as we started our warm-up for training late in the afternoon. I glanced over and nearly fell flat on my face when I realized she was standing near the bench with Coach Ray. She'd changed her outfit since school and was wearing the skintight jeans and the low-cut star-covered top she'd bought yesterday. All the other guys on the

ice seemed to have stopped to admire her, and I had to remind myself I wasn't allowed to fight my teammates. Hockey was my life, and I needed these players whole and healthy if I wanted us to keep winning games.

Just watching Paige talk, it was easy to see why almost every guy here had paused to look her way. She was beautiful, yes, and looked stunning in her outfit, but there was something about the way her face sparkled when she spoke that was captivating. Even chatting with someone as serious as Coach Ray, Paige's infectious laugh managed to pull a smile from him.

Perhaps that's why I was so in love with her. I was like one of those stone gargoyles perched on the walls of old churches. An impenetrable statue glaring down at the world. But the second Paige shone her light on me, I shed my stony exterior and came to life.

"Gray?" I dragged my gaze away from Paige to look at Parker, and was greeted by his annoying smirk. "What's she doing here?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Uh, because you have her schedule in your diary."

"I don't have a diary."

"Mental diary," he said with a grin. "And you keep all of Paige's appointments highlighted in pink with hearts around them."

Now that I thought about it, maybe our team would still be able to win if I disposed of just *one* player.

Parker's smile widened, like he could tell just how much he was getting to me, and I skated away before I was further tempted to wipe it from his face. Parker didn't take well to being ignored though, and immediately followed. "How's the coaching going anyway?"

"Would you keep your voice down?" I hissed.

"Sorry. How's the coaching going?" He'd lowered his voice, but only a fraction.

I considered ignoring the question, but with Paige close by I couldn't risk the very real possibility that Parker would shout about it until he got a response.

The truth was, I didn't know how my coaching was going. As far as I could tell, Paige still wanted to kiss Damien Stone; that's presumably why she was at our practice dressed in her brand-new outfit. But then she had been in my bed last night. While I couldn't be sure what effect this was all having on Paige, I was certain it was only causing me to fall harder for her than ever before.

“Fine,” I said, keeping my thoughts to myself. “It’s going just fine.”

“Ah, so not well then?” Parker replied. “Do you need me to make a PowerPoint presentation on how to appeal to a girl?”

“No.”

“What about a presentation on how not to scare a girl off?”

“I don’t need a PowerPoint presentation.”

“So, you don’t want my advice?”

“It hasn’t helped me so far.”

“That’s probably because you haven’t let me teach you my best moves yet.”

“If I need your moves to win her over, then she isn’t the girl for me.”

Coach’s whistle blared, echoing off the walls of the rink. Perfect timing. I was only too happy to escape my brother, and I followed the rest of the team over to the bench. Paige was still standing beside Coach Ray, a nervous smile on her lips as she clutched a notebook to her chest.

“Listen up!” Coach shouted. “The school paper is doing profiles on everyone on the team. Paige will be chatting with each of you, one at a time. Please don’t embarrass me, your teammates, or yourselves. Remember, your moms will probably read these interviews. Grayson, you’re up first. The rest of you, with me.”

He blew his whistle again, and the team followed him back to center ice, leaving me alone by the bench.

Paige had taken a seat, and she was still hugging her notebook tightly, a sign she was feeling anxious. Her eyes were on the ice, so I was sure any nerves she might be feeling would have more to do with interviewing the team rather than the fact we’d spent the night in the same bed.

“Thank God Coach Ray let you go first,” she said, patting the bench beside her.

“You’re doing the interviews?” I asked as I sat.

“Bonnie needed the help.” She nodded, but then her eyes flicked back to the ice. “She also thought it was a good chance for me to talk to Damien. And, uh, show off one of my new outfits.”

“So, this is all part of your plan?”

“I guess.” She shrugged. “And before you say anything, I know I didn’t get approval from my dating coach. But Bonnie is kind of tough to say no to. And it is a good idea, right?”

“Yeah . . .” What else was I supposed to say? She was here, looking gorgeous, ready to interview the whole team. I could hardly tell her to pack up her notebook and leave.

“Is it crazy? Me writing for the school paper?”

As far as I was concerned, that was the least crazy part about all of this. “Not at all. You’ll be a great interviewer. Do you remember that story you wrote about the puppy your parents got you? They had to send it back a week later because they realized they were too busy to look after it? Totally had me tearing up.”

“Don’t remind me. I was eight when I wrote that.”

“Most heart-wrenching thing I’ve read in my life.”

“That’s because it *was* heart-wrenching! It would have been impossible to write that story and not make the reader cry.”

“I’m just saying, I can see why Bonnie would ask you to help. If anyone can wear a sports journalist hat, it’s you.”

“Thanks, Gray.” Her gaze was soft, but then she straightened her back and opened her notebook. “Okay. Are you ready for my questions?”

“Sure.” I leaned back on the bench as I waited for her to begin.

“Is it okay if I record your answers?”

“No problem.”

She set up her phone, then looked down at her notebook. “Question number one: what’s your favorite food?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond because Paige immediately mumbled the answer to herself. “Ice cream. Especially chocolate.” She’d taken the words right out of my mouth.

“Next question,” she said, once she’d written down the first answer. “What movie can you recite line-for-line?”

Again, she answered on my behalf, almost like she was interviewing herself. “You’re going to say *Miracle* or some other hockey movie, but we both know the true answer is *Mean Girls*.”

She didn’t even take her eyes of the notebook as she scrawled the answer down.

“That’s not my fault,” I grumbled. I only watched romcoms because she wanted to. Although, I had to admit, they weren’t all bad.

“Sure it’s not,” she teased. “Okay, what’s something no one else at school knows about you?”

This time she just wrote the answer down without saying anything. I tried to crane my neck to see what she'd chosen, but I couldn't make it out.

"Wait, what are you writing? If you know it, it doesn't count."

She laughed as she looked up from the page. "I challenge you to tell me something I don't know."

I could easily think of one thing; the way my heart was racing as I stared into her eyes. That wasn't exactly something I wanted to be published in the school paper though.

"At least let me see it." I gestured for her to hand me the notebook, and she smirked as she placed it in my hands.

"His middle name is . . ." My eyes darted up to hers. "How did you know?"

She laughed and snatched her notebook back. "Oh, I have my ways."

"You can't publish that."

"What? It's not that bad."

"Not that bad? I don't want people finding out my middle name is . . ." I paused, unable to even say it aloud.

"Beauregard?"

She'd said it far too loudly, and my hand reached out of its own volition and landed against her lips. I could feel her grinning against my palm and the sensation felt like gentle sparks against my skin. I quickly dropped my hand away.

"You're going to have to edit that out," I said, brushing my hand against my leg to banish the tingling sensation. "I've got a reputation to uphold."

"Okay, okay. I'll put something else. No one else knows you can't whistle, right?"

"Aren't you supposed to let me answer at least some of the questions?"

"I already know the answers." She shrugged. "Can you come up with something better?"

She waited patiently, but I didn't have another answer to give; at least not one I'd willingly admit. I'd just have to put up with Parker whistling at me for the next couple of weeks. "It's fine. Next question." I sighed as I waited for her to continue.

"What's your type?" Her skin went pale, and she gave me a nervous look.

I cleared my throat. "My type?"

She seemed as surprised as I was as she double-checked her notebook. “Sorry about that. These are Bonnie’s questions. Must be a mistake. I’ll just go to the next one.”

“Okay . . .”

“What’s your opinion on a girl making . . .” Paige paused. “Wait, this can’t be right.” Her eyes frantically scanned the page and she started mumbling to herself as she studied the next few questions. “Soulmates? Perfect date? What the . . . Oh no.”

“Uh, is there something wrong?” It didn’t seem like there were many questions about hockey in this interview.

Paige’s expression was confused as she flicked to the next page of her notebook and then back again. “I’m going to kill her,” she muttered.

“I take it some of Bonnie’s questions aren’t what you were expecting . . .”

“Not even close!” She grabbed her phone. “Can you give me a second?”

I motioned for her to go ahead.

Her fingers flew across the screen before she lifted the phone to her ear. A moment later she hissed, “What the hell, Bonnie?”

I couldn’t hear Bonnie’s reply, but I imagined she was cackling.

“No,” Paige snapped. “I’m not asking these questions. They’re more dating profile than player profile.” She paused. “Don’t pull that ‘I’m your editor’ crap on me. I don’t care what the readers of Ransom High want. I don’t work for you.”

She was quiet while Bonnie responded. Paige made a few attempts to interrupt her friend but eventually let out a defeated sigh. “Okay. Fine. I’ll do it. But just so you know, you owe me, big-time.”

She hung up the phone with a huff. “She’s a total dictator! Apparently, these questions are just ‘trying to give the people what they want.’” Paige started rummaging around in her backpack and pulled out a bag of sweets. She grabbed a couple of sour gummy worms and angrily bit off their heads.

“You must be pretty pissed if you’re reaching for the hard stuff . . .”

Her gaze was piercing as she shoved the rest of the worms in her mouth. I might have laughed if I wasn’t genuinely concerned she might bite my head off too. It was safer to sit back and wait for the sugar to do its job.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I added. “It’s just a few questions.”

“You haven’t seen the rest of them,” she groaned. “I’m supposed to ask the entire team this stuff. Damien too! If Bonnie thought this was going to

help me talk to him, she obviously doesn't care that I might die of embarrassment first."

I tried to ignore the thick jealousy that rose up in my throat. I was quite certain Bonnie wasn't trying to embarrass her. She was clearly trying to create a cute and flirty moment for Paige and Damien. But I was here first. Maybe I could spin this to my advantage.

"Why don't you let me be the judge of how embarrassing the questions are," I said.

She peered up at me, surprised. "You want me to go ahead with the interview?"

"Sure," I replied. "It's the least I can do as your dating coach. Practice on me."

"You'll really answer them?"

"I will."

"Are you sure?"

"You're beginning to make me worry just how bad they are."

"I guess they're not that bad." She gave me a grateful smile. "But feel free to skip anything you feel uncomfortable with, and you're welcome to help me get revenge on Bonnie later."

She set her phone to record again, and bit her lower lip as she glanced up at me. "You ready?"

"Nope."

"Me neither," she agreed with a laugh, but then cleared her throat and asked, "What's your type?"

"Short, brown hair, brown eyes, smells like candy . . ."

She waved her pen at me in disapproval. "You're supposed to answer these questions seriously, Gray." Despite her dismissive tone, her lips twitched with a smile. Little did she know, I couldn't have been more serious.

"What's your opinion on a girl making the first move?"

Bonnie really wasn't being subtle with these questions. Still, I could make this work. "Uh, I'm happy for a girl to make the first move," I replied. "But only if she's five-foot-five and has a secret obsession with snow globes."

"Grayson!" Her cheeks warmed. "Stop messing around. You know we'll be printing these answers in the school paper, right?"

"I'm aware."

“And you’re happy for them to print that?”

I shrugged. “I can’t help what I find attractive.”

She didn’t respond this time, just stared at me like she was starting to wonder whether I was joking or not.

“What’s next?” I prompted.

She slowly dropped her gaze to the next question. “Do you believe in soulmates?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, really?” She lowered her notebook and focused on me, more intrigued by this answer than any other I’d given so far.

“Yeah, why not?”

“I just didn’t think you’d believe in all that stuff.”

“Maybe you don’t know everything about me.”

Her forehead creased, as if the thought disappointed her. “Okay then,” she said. “How will you know when you’ve found this soulmate?” Her tone suggested she was challenging me to prove I was serious.

I paused, racking my brain for a suitable answer. I’d already found my soulmate, but it was hard to pinpoint the exact moment I realized Paige was it. Perhaps I’d always known. When it came to Paige, it had never just felt like her and me. It had always felt like *us*. My life simply wasn’t complete without her. But I had a feeling that sentiment might be a little too intense for this interview. I decided to settle for the most recent reminder I’d had that Paige was the one girl for me.

“I guess, you just get to a point where you wake up, look over at the girl lying next to you, and it just clicks. Nothing else seems to matter but her . . .”

I could have sworn Paige gasped, but she quickly gulped down the reaction and nodded. We hadn’t really talked about last night. When I’d tried to bring it up at breakfast, she’d just apologized and moved on. But the way I’d alluded to it this time, however subtle, had definitely drawn some sort of reaction out of her. Maybe she wasn’t as unaffected by it as I’d first thought.

“Okay, uh, good. Next question . . .” she stuttered as her eyes flicked across the page of her notebook, trying to find the spot where she’d left off. When she did, she gasped again, but this time she didn’t try to hide it.

“What is it?”

“Uh, it’s just the question . . .”

“Hit me,” I said. “I’m on a roll.”

She laughed nervously, shaking off a little of the uncertainty my previous answer seemed to have caused. “If you insist.” She grimaced as she looked at the page again. “Are you a boobs or butt guy?”

She was firmly refusing to meet my eyes, and I could tell she was dying inside. I struggled to hide my amusement. “From soulmates to this?”

“I told you they were bad.”

I was actually starting to enjoy this interview.

“I’m more of a smile and eyes guy,” I replied.

She seemed pleased with my response, and her shoulders relaxed a little, but it only lasted a moment.

“Briefs or boxers?” she asked with another grimace.

“Boxers,” I answered quickly. I could see Paige wanted to get off this particular topic. “Next.”

“Blondes or brunettes?”

“I think you already know the answer to that one.” I smiled to myself as she wrote down the second option without daring to look up at me, before she quickly continued.

“What’s your idea of the perfect date?”

“I’d have to say April 25.”

She burst out laughing, and I couldn’t stop a grin from forming in response. She’d forced me to watch *Miss Congeniality* a few weeks back. Apparently, that romcom had a purpose in my life after all. The building tension between us had eased, and I used the opportunity to ask a question of my own.

“What about you? What’s your perfect date?”

“These questions aren’t for me,” she replied.

“Pretend for a second they are.”

“I guess just something romantic,” she said, her thoughts seeming to drift as she considered it. “But that’s kind of obvious. Maybe something I haven’t done before, or that I wouldn’t expect.” She shrugged and focused back on me. “I wouldn’t really know, because I’ve never been on one. Hopefully that’s about to change . . .”

She glanced toward the ice, and I did my best not to break my hockey stick in two as Damien skated past. He winked at Paige, and her eyes darted back down to her notes. She quickly read the next question.

“Tell the story of your first kiss.”

Now it was my turn to feel uncertain. My throat went tight, and I could feel the heat of embarrassment crawling up my neck. I'd met my match. There was no way I could answer this question.

But as Paige looked up and our eyes met, something shifted in the air between us. The tension was back, but it was different now. Her gaze had fallen to my lips. There was a curious, almost longing look in her eyes, as if she was imagining what it would be like to kiss me. My stomach clenched. Could she really be thinking that? Or was she just wondering what it would feel like to kiss anyone?

I was stunned into silence, and when I didn't answer, Paige spoke first. "So, your first kiss?" Her voice was slightly dry and the words came out in a whisper.

"I'm not one to kiss and tell," I replied.

Her eyes moved from my lips to her notes, and she nodded, but then she glanced back up at me. I could still see the curiosity in her eyes, and she looked like she wanted to ask a follow-up question, but I couldn't risk it.

"What's next?" I asked, changing the subject. "My best pickup line? How many kids I want to have someday?"

"No to both of those," she said, shaking her head. "Luckily, that was the last question. I can't believe I have to repeat these to every guy on the team."

"Well, I hope I helped you warm up a little," I replied. "And if not, call Bonnie and tell her she can get over here and ask the questions herself."

She smiled. "You couldn't have given me this pep talk before I asked you all that embarrassing stuff?"

"I guess I was intrigued. It wasn't that bad, was it?"

"No, it wasn't that bad." She scrunched up her nose, almost annoyed that she agreed with me. "Can you send Reed over next? I have to get a move on or there's no way I'll finish before practice ends."

That was it. I'd survived the interview, with only one skipped question. Still, I didn't feel any more confident about whether my coaching was having an impact or not. Paige had definitely reacted to a couple of my answers though, I was sure of that.

"No problem." I smiled as I stepped off the bench and back onto the ice. "Thanks for the chat, Pidge."

As I skated away, my stomach dipped. Now that my interview was over, it wasn't long before Bonnie's plan would kick into gear. Paige would have

to interview Damien and ask him all those questions. Suddenly the moments we'd shared during our interview, whatever they'd meant, didn't feel like enough. Damien had been flirting with girls from the moment he'd arrived at Ransom High. There was no way I could compete.

I did my best to return my focus to training and ignore each of my teammates as they skated over to talk to Paige. One after another, they came and went. I thought I was hiding my protective instincts quite well, and not once had I scowled at anyone. But that all went out the window the moment Damien sat at Paige's side.

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Chapter 21

Paige

I was almost at the end of the interviews, and despite my initial apprehension, it was going quite well. Surprisingly though, it had felt far easier asking Grayson's teammates the questions than it had done with him. He was usually the person I could talk to about anything, and he'd even suggested I use him as a practice run, but his interview had felt like the main race.

I knew he was mostly just joking around with me, and it had been fun, but a few of his answers threw me off. Especially the soulmate question. I'd been doing my best not to think about waking up in his arms. And I wasn't sure if he'd been messing around when he answered that way, but the mere suggestion had sent a tingling sensation dancing across my skin.

The final question of our interview had also left me intrigued. We didn't really talk about girls or relationship-type stuff—at least, we hadn't before this whole coaching thing. But I was curious why he'd been so reluctant to dive into details about his first kiss and, not for the first time, I contemplated who he might have shared it with.

Still, after doing a few interviews, I started to relax more and more. Matt was currently in the hot seat, and he was chuckling as my line of questioning turned more personal. We were on the boxers or briefs question, which I was certain Bonnie had put in as revenge after I stopped her snooping through the Darling boys' drawers.

"You really want to know what underwear I have on?" he asked, before leaning in close. "It's like you want Gray to kill me."

"Gray's not here . . ." I already knew he was on the other side of the rink doing defensive drills—not that I was keeping tabs on him. "And everyone else was more than happy to tell me."

"I'm not like everyone else. I don't have a death wish."

“So, I’ll just write no underwear then?” I asked with a smirk.

He gave me a curious look. “How’d you know?”

I laughed and moved to the next question. “Blondes or brunettes?”

“I don’t like to pick favorites.”

“What’s your idea of a perfect date?”

“Just what kind of article is this, Paige?”

“A fun one,” I replied with a smile. “So?”

“A hike,” he replied.

“That’s really your idea of a perfect date?”

“Sure. You have time to talk, you get nice scenery, and you can see if the girl has stamina. If she starts complaining two miles in, you’ve got an idea of what she might be like in a relationship.”

“Or maybe she just doesn’t like hiking?”

“Then maybe she’s not the girl for me.”

I laughed again and shook my head, surprised by how much thought he’d put into his dating strategy. “Last one: tell me the story of your first kiss.”

“Oh, man.” He rubbed a hand across his jaw as he considered it. “It was at one of my first house parties. Turns out girls love a party host . . .”

“We do?”

“Oh yeah. Why else do you think I’ve thrown so many since freshman year?”

“And here I was thinking you just wanted to celebrate with your teammates after each victory.”

“Sure, that too.” He grinned.

Like the other guys on the team, Matt had answered the question easily. It left me wondering again why Grayson had been so secretive. I guess he’d had years to talk to me about his kissing exploits and never had, so I shouldn’t have been surprised he didn’t start today.

“Okay, well, that’s everything,” I said. “You’re free.”

“Great. Thanks, Paige. I actually enjoyed that,” he said as he jumped up off the bench. “I can’t tell you how dull the last interview we did for the paper was.”

I was smiling as I watched Matt skate back to the team, but I felt a lump form in my throat when my gaze landed on Grayson chasing the puck across the rink.

Once again, my thoughts kept creeping back to the way I'd woken up in his arms this morning. He didn't notice me watching him, as he was completely focused on his practice. The way he skated was a little mesmerizing. He was so strong and powerful as he moved on the ice; it was hard to believe his arms could have cradled me so gently.

We hadn't properly spoken about it, aside from a hurried apology from me at breakfast, and then Grayson's comment about soulmates—though that could just have been a coincidence. And even if it wasn't, he was probably joking, like with his other answers. I certainly wasn't in a place where I could joke about it yet. Could Grayson really have been so unfazed by the whole thing? I guess he'd just been doing his job as my best friend and calming me during a storm. I was an idiot for running in there in the first place. I needed to become as unbothered as him.

"Hey, P."

I jumped at the sound of a deep voice next to me and pulled my eyes from Grayson. Damien had arrived at the bench for his interview.

"Hey, Damien." I gave him a smile, which he warmly returned.

"It's good to see you," he said, sitting down. "You look great tonight."

I glanced down. "Oh, uh, thanks." I should have been pleased my new outfit had caught his eye, but I couldn't stop myself from wondering why Grayson hadn't noticed it. This was one of the outfits that had nearly knocked him off his feet at the mall, but he hadn't said a word during our interview.

While the shock Damien had given me when he arrived had quickened my pulse, I was surprised by how quickly it calmed. It was only a few days ago that I'd stumbled over my words and spilled a drink on myself because of him, but as he took a seat by my side, I was remarkably in control. I kept waiting for my cheeks to warm and my speech to become muddled, but it didn't happen. Perhaps all this practicing with Gray was finally producing results.

My eyes were drawn back to Grayson, and my heartbeat picked up a gear again when I saw him frowning our way. He looked like he wanted to decapitate Damien. It probably should have concerned me, but instead I felt a spark of excitement in my chest. Was that jealousy in his eyes? Or was he just scowling like he always did? It was impossible to know.

"Okay," I said, turning back to Damien. "Ready for the interrogation?"

He laughed nervously. "Interrogation?"

“Interview! I mean interview, obviously.” Perhaps I wasn’t quite as calm and in control as I thought. Though I didn’t think Damien was to blame this time.

“That’s a relief,” he replied. “I didn’t know you worked on the school newspaper.”

“I don’t normally. I’m helping my friend.”

“Ah, well, lucky for me, I guess. I’ve been wanting to catch up with you ever since I got back.”

“You have?”

“Of course.” He laughed lightly. “We were friends before I left Ransom, and I know I’ve been busy settling back in, but it’s been weird, being here and not hanging out with you.”

“Well, I’m always around to hang.”

“How about Saturday night? Want to grab dinner?”

“Dinner?” I practically choked on the word. Had Damien Stone just asked me out? Bonnie was convinced this outfit and the interview would catch his eye, but I hadn’t expected either of them to work their magic so soon. Was he really asking me out? Or did he simply want to hang out as friends? How was I supposed to know the difference?

“Yeah,” he continued. “I know we have a game in the afternoon, but I’m always starving after we finish.”

“You want to get dinner together? Like a date?”

“Yes, like a date.” He chuckled. “If that works for you?”

“Uh . . .” My voice trailed off as I wondered what Grayson would say. I wasn’t sure why I wanted his opinion. I didn’t need his permission or approval to respond to Damien, and this should have been the easiest question and answer to happen on this bench all evening. So, what was stopping me from saying yes?

“Unless, of course, you’re already spoken for,” Damien said.

“Spoken for?” My attention snapped back to him, and I saw he was looking across the ice. “What do you mean?”

“You and Grayson . . .”

“Me and Grayson, what?”

“You guys are close . . .”

“We’re just friends.” It was the same response I always gave, so why did it sound like I’d answered too quickly? Why did it sound like I was lying?

“I know, I know.” Damien nodded. “Grayson already told me. He was pretty adamant there was nothing going on between you. But you guys are so close these days, I wanted to check with you too.”

Grayson was “adamant”? Just how adamant were we talking? Hearing confirmation of his all-too-platonic feelings should have been the final push I needed to accept Damien’s invitation. But still, I wavered.

“I probably can’t do Saturday night,” I said. “The boys are signing their letters of intent after the game . . .”

“Sunday then?”

I was shocked by how interested he sounded. But my reluctance was even more surprising. It was just dinner, and this was all part of my plan. Date Damien, kiss him, tick it off my bucket list and break the silly crush I’d developed on my best friend. I was supposed to want this. I was frozen though, unable to just say yes.

Damien must have noticed my hesitation because he eventually broke the silence. “Or whenever works best for you. Think about it and let me know, okay?”

There was nothing to think about. The right answer was clear. But I found myself nodding gratefully in reply.

He smiled and gestured to my notebook. “Anyway, I hear you’ve got some questions for me?”

I felt guilty for not giving him an immediate response about the date, but the ease with which he moved on reminded me why I’d always liked Damien. He was so carefree as a kid, and it seemed he’d retained that cheerful, lighthearted personality as he grew up. If I could keep up my newfound confidence around him, I knew a date with him would be a breeze.

“Right, yes.” I cleared my throat and dived back in, relieved to be off the topic of dinner dates, at least for now.

As we worked through the interview, I nodded along with all his answers and laughed when he cracked jokes. He knew all the lines to *Superbad*, and his idea of a perfect date was rock climbing. He casually admitted to being a boxers and boobs man, and that his first kiss was under the bleachers during a football game. He was fun to talk to and had no qualms about answering my intrusive questions. It was entertaining, interesting, and fun. Like catching up with an old friend was supposed to be.

“Are you sure you’ve got everything you need?” Damien asked when we were done. The interview had flown by.

“Yeah, that’s everything,” I said. “Thanks, Damien.”

“Great. I better rejoin the team. I’ve got to earn my spot here after all.”

He gave me a friendly smile before skating off. It was only as I watched him go that I realized I still hadn’t answered his date invitation. I’d had plenty of time to think it through while we were talking. How could I have let him skate off without responding?

What was wrong with me? What was I thinking? Had I really just let that opportunity pass me by?

I needed help, and I reached for my phone as I packed away my notebook.

“I knew we were still friends,” Bonnie cheered as she answered. “You love me far too much to stay mad.”

“Love you? I’m not sure I even *like* you right now.”

“How’d the interviews go?” she continued, completely ignoring my comment. “You didn’t chicken out, did you?”

“No, I didn’t chicken out. I’m not ready to forgive you for those questions though.”

“What? The questions were great. I told you I wanted to spice up the profiles a little. I’m trying to get people to actually read the school newspaper.”

“They don’t want to read about hockey players’ underwear!”

“Oh my gosh, you actually asked them that?”

“Of course I did. It was on the list.”

Her laughter rang out clearly down the line. “Brilliant. It’s been on my mind ever since you so cruelly prevented me from raiding the drawers at the Darlings’ house. But you know I was only messing around with that one, right?”

I had suspected as much. “Well, most of the players answered, so maybe I won’t share it with you now.”

“No! You have to,” she pleaded. “Give the people what they want, Paige.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “But listen, that’s not actually why I called . . .”

“It’s not?”

Practice was winding down, and the guys were gathered around Coach Ray. Gray was looking in my direction, and I gave him a small wave to let him know I was leaving.

I drew in a breath as I swung my bag over my shoulder and started for the exit. “Damien asked me out to dinner this weekend.”

Bonnie squealed so loudly I had to pull my ear away from the phone. When I was brave enough to bring it back, I could hear her mom hissing in the background, “Don’t wake the baby!”

“Sorry!” Bonnie called more quietly, then asked me, “Why didn’t you start with that?”

“Because I didn’t say yes.”

“What? Why?”

“He asked, but then I hesitated.”

“You hesitated? Why on earth would you do that? This is Damien Stone! Damien Stone!” It didn’t matter how many times she said his name, I couldn’t seem to spark the same level of excitement as her.

“I know his name, Bon. But when he asked, I wasn’t thinking straight, and I couldn’t seem to say yes.”

“Is Grayson even *trying* to coach you?”

“Of course he is. Look, I know I messed up, but I need your help to fix it. Damien told me to think about the date. Should I wait around until he finishes practice to tell him I’ll go?”

“Definitely not,” she replied. “The only thing worse than leaving a guy hanging is seeming too desperate. Wait until he asks again.”

“What if he doesn’t ask again?”

“Trust me, he will.” I had no idea how she could be so confident, but then her voice turned serious. “Can I ask why you weren’t thinking straight?”

I was nearing the entrance to the rink, and I glanced over my shoulder at the reason. Gray was leaving the ice, his brothers on either side of him as they headed for the locker room. His expression was stoic as always, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the playful side of him that had emerged when I’d been interviewing him. We’d always bantered, but this past week, the way he’d been acting had been getting under my skin, making my pulse quicken and filling me with a buzzing nervous energy I had no idea what to do with. But I knew it wasn’t real. He was just my dating coach. We were

just practicing. And as much as I wished it were different, I needed to get over it.

“You know me,” I replied. “I might be training with Gray, but I’m still stumbling over my words around Damien.”

It was a total lie, but I didn’t think I could tell Bonnie the truth. I knew how she’d react, and I already understood how these feelings could ruin my friendship with Gray. I had a plan to get over them. I just needed to stick to it.

Grayson’s flirting had just made it a little hard to think clearly today. Then Damien’s invite had taken me by surprise. If, by some miracle, he asked me out again, I wouldn’t make the same mistake.

“I didn’t know he was going to ask me out,” I told Bonnie. “Next time I’ll be ready.”

“Good,” she replied. “At least we can be thankful you didn’t have a drink in your hand this time.”

“That is one upside.” I pushed through the front door of the arena and shivered as I stepped into the cold evening air.

“I’m almost to my car, Bon. I better get going. But I’ll get these interviews written up and have them back to you tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait to read them,” she replied. “I’m especially intrigued by what Coach Ray had to say. He’s notoriously hard to pin down for an interview.”

“Wait, I was supposed to interview him too?”

She groaned. “Yes, of course! I put his questions in your notebook after the ones for the team.”

“Uh . . .” I was pretty sure she hadn’t. I started flicking through the notebook and sighed when I found the page of questions for Coach Ray.

“It’s the lead-up to the playoffs, so the Athletic Director took a lot of convincing to let us do this,” Bonnie explained. “He was worried about the players getting distracted. The only way I could make it sound more legit was by telling him we’d also be interviewing Coach Ray.”

I was tired after interviewing the entire hockey team, and I wasn’t thrilled with the thought of sitting down for another round of questions with the coach. But I didn’t want to let Bonnie down. I turned to head back inside. “Okay, okay. I’ll go get his interview.”

“Thank you!”

“But if I find any questions about his underwear in this notebook, you had better believe I’m defriending you for good.”

All I received in reply was the sound of Bonnie’s wicked laughter before she ended the call.

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Chapter 22

Paige

Thankfully, there were no inappropriate questions for Coach Ray. It ended up being a very standard hockey interview. We covered his experience as a coach, his thoughts on the season so far, and his plans for the playoffs. I'd actually found it really interesting, if a little less fun than my time with each of the players.

The whole thing took longer than I expected though, and it was late by the time I arrived back at the Darlings'. As I walked through the front door, I was surprised to find the house quiet. It was usually abuzz with noise, and it was rare not to hear sounds of the boys shouting, fighting, and laughing—or at the very least, the TV blaring, video games firing, and music thumping from Cammie's room. Right now, it was so peaceful I suspected I might be alone.

"Hello?" I called out.

"In here!" Gray replied.

I took a moment to try to dislodge a flurry of nerves that erupted in my chest. I hadn't felt quite like myself since the interview with Grayson, and I didn't know how long I could keep acting like everything between us was normal, especially if it was just the two of us here.

I followed his voice to the kitchen. "I thought you left before me," he said as I entered the room. "What took you so long?"

"I had to go back to . . ." My voice trailed off as I realized Grayson was standing by the counter with an array of ingredients laid out in front of him. "What's going on here?"

"Dinner." His deep voice was gruff. "Mom has a flat tire so I'm getting it ready. Want to help?"

I snorted with disbelief. "Uh, are you really ready for round two of my cooking? I may have enjoyed the process, but we both know I was a

disaster."

"Well, consider this a coaching session then. We're making pizza."

"You can't cook," I scoffed, but quickly began to doubt myself. "Can you?"

"Looks like there's more than one thing you don't know about me."

"I'll be the judge of that." I think I needed to see Grayson cooking to believe it.

"So, why did you have to go back?" he asked as he turned to take something out of the fridge.

"Oh, uh, to interview Coach Ray. Bonnie forgot to tell me she wanted him too."

"And . . ."

"And what?"

"Are the students of Ransom going to be horrified by the details of his first kiss?"

"No." I laughed. "His set of questions were different, thank God. No first kiss and no details about his underwear. I guess Bonnie doesn't hate me after all."

"I guess not." Grayson closed the fridge and returned to his ingredients on the counter.

"So, where is everyone?"

"Dad's still at work, Cammie's with Mom, and Parker and Reed went to help them with the flat."

"Not you?"

"Just how many Darlings do you think it takes to change a tire?"

"Hmm. I guess four is enough."

"Exactly," he replied. "Besides, Reed is the expert when it comes to cars. I think Parker went along just to watch and laugh."

"Probably," I agreed, before taking a closer look at the food laid out across the countertop. "When did you learn to cook? I'm guessing it wasn't your mom who taught you. *Definitely* not your dad." Danny knew his way around a barbeque, but the one time he'd tried to cook Sunday dinner in the kitchen he nearly burned the house down. He was pretty much banned from cooking anything after that—even toast.

"Uh, no." Grayson chuckled. "Remember how I used to mow my grandma's lawn every Sunday afternoon before family dinner?"

"Yeah . . ."

“Well, I’d help her cook dinner once I was done. I’d probably help Mom in the kitchen more often, but hockey doesn’t leave me with a lot of free time.”

“Huh.” The food at Darling family dinners had certainly gone downhill since Grayson’s grandma had moved into the nursing home and his mom took over the cooking. Gray’s training regime was pretty full-on, so it wasn’t all that surprising he didn’t have the time.

I walked over to stand at the counter beside him. “Okay, Gordon, where do we get started?”

“Gordon?”

“Yeah, Gordon Ramsay. I feel like you two have quite similar personalities. Although, I hope you’ll keep any brutal insults about my cooking skills to yourself.”

I could practically feel the heat of his scowl on me as I grinned and picked the recipe up off the table. I gave it a brief glance before dropping it back down. “This doesn’t look too hard.”

“I’m not sure you’re the best judge of that. Did you even look at the muffin recipe?”

“Of course I looked at it.”

“Did you follow it?”

“Uh, sure.” He didn’t look convinced, so I added, “Besides, this is just pizza dough and there are, like, three instructions.”

There was a pained look in his eyes that made me laugh. Gray clearly enjoyed cooking. I imagined he was going to seriously struggle with me being here to mess it all up.

“Perhaps I should be more of a quiet observer,” I suggested as he carefully measured a cup of flour and poured it into the sifter.

“Are you trying to avoid getting your hands dirty?”

“You’re sifting flour, Gray. You’re hardly getting your hands dirty. Besides, maybe I prefer watching you like this.”

“Like this?” He gave me a confused look and then glanced down at his chest and the “Kiss the Chef” apron strapped around him. “It’s the apron, isn’t it?”

I let out a giggle that was shockingly similar to my nervous laugh. I’d never seen Grayson the chef before, but I had to admit, it was a seriously good look on him. And I was way too tempted to do what it said on his apron.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” I said, causing a dazzling smile to appear on his lips.

He had absolutely no idea of the devastating effect he had on me when he smiled like that. Grayson didn’t smile often. And when he did, it was rare to see anything more than a subtle curving on his lips. But that was clearly for good reason. His unrestrained smiles made my knees go weak. They always had. Only now, I was beginning to realize that most friends didn’t make you weak at the knees. Most friends didn’t make your heart race. And most friends didn’t make your skin sizzle with a simple glance.

It seemed like my confusing feelings for Gray had appeared out of nowhere. But maybe they’d been building since the first time we met, and he stumbled over my name. I’d always cared so deeply about him, but I figured it was just part of our incredible friendship. Staring at him now, seeing that smile of his, I knew it was so much more than that.

He glanced up at me and frowned. “You okay there, Pidge?”

No wonder he was frowning, I was staring at him in wonder, like I’d just spotted a rainbow after the rain—something beautiful and unexpected that had appeared out of a storm, and I couldn’t drag my eyes away for fear it would disappear.

“Pidge?”

“Uh, yep, I’m okay.” But even the gentle way he said my nickname had my insides softening.

“You don’t look like you’re okay. I know seeing me cook is like a glitch in the matrix, but I’m not bad. I promise.”

“No, it’s not that. I’m fine.” That couldn’t have been further from the truth, and obviously I was doing an awful job of hiding it from him. He wasn’t making it easy though. I needed him to stop with the soft smiles and soothing voice. I needed him to stop looking so hot in his apron, with his sleeves rolled up above his muscular forearms. He was too much for me right now, but I couldn’t let him discover what was bubbling beneath the surface of my charged skin. I couldn’t let him discover that I’d gone and done the worst thing a friend could do. I needed a distraction.

Without another thought, I grabbed a pinch of flour and flicked it in his face.

His mouth dropped open with surprise. “What was that for?”

“I was trying to make you look more the part.”

“Really? You’re throwing flour at the guy who’s cooking your dinner?”

He looked so thoroughly unimpressed that I started to laugh. He'd finally stopped smiling, and it appeared to have broken the bubble we'd been in. Unfortunately, I'd failed to make him look any less appealing. Even with his forehead creased in a scowl, the flour caught in his hair and dusted across his cheek only made me want him more.

"You know, I never took you for the kind of girl who would attack without provocation," he said.

"I never took you for the kind of guy who would get upset over a little flour in his hair."

"Oh, I'm not upset," he replied. "Doesn't mean I'm above a little retribution though." A devilish glint flashed in his eyes, and the next thing I knew, a handful of flour came flying at my face.

I squealed as I attempted to duck out of the way, but I wasn't quick enough. The flour hit me and erupted, creating a thick cloud between us. It was everywhere. "Hey, that's way more than I threw at you."

"I never said my revenge would be fair." He smirked, grabbing another handful from the bowl.

As I backed away, I swiped the bag of flour off the countertop and gathered the biggest handful I could.

"You know this won't end well for either of us," I threatened.

"You should have thought of that sooner. Never start a fight with a Darling you don't intend to fin—"

I launched my flour at him before he could finish and raced for the other side of the kitchen counter. But Grayson was too fast, and he caught me before I could get far, wrapping his arms around me and lifting me off the ground.

"No, no, no." I laughed as flour rained down on us.

"Yes, yes, yes," Grayson answered with a deep chuckle as he spun me around. When my feet touched back down, I turned to face him, but he had me pinned against the kitchen counter, his strong arms gripping the marble top tightly on either side of me.

"Okay, I surrender," I said, lifting my hands up to show him I was out of flour.

"Maybe I don't accept." His eyes were shimmering with delight.

My heart thundered. There was almost no space between us, and my back was pressed flat against the kitchen counter. He was leaning close, towering over me, and his dark hair fell across his forehead as he looked

down. Every inch of my body felt like it was a live wire sparking, and every part of me wanted us closer still. I wanted him to take his hands off the countertop and grip my waist instead. Mine itched to reach up, touch his cheek and to draw him to me.

His smile was broad and so full of light, my breath hitched as our eyes met. I was looking at the same guy who had been my best friend for so long, but something had truly shifted. I couldn't tell if it had happened slowly, or all at once, with just one smile, or a thousand heartbeats. But I knew everything had changed. Just when I thought I'd realized the true extent of my feelings for Grayson, I fell deeper. The way I yearned for his smiles, how I relished his scowls, how I admired his strength of heart, and how I adored his quiet kindness. It was clear I'd fallen for Grayson Darling, without even realizing it. I wasn't confused anymore. I was in love with my best friend. And I think I had been for a long time.

As I stared at him, lost in my thoughts, Grayson's smile dropped. His jaw seemed to tighten, and there was a tense look in his eyes as he watched me carefully. Oh god. I'd just realized I was madly in love with this guy and it was probably written all over my face. My distraction attempt had failed spectacularly.

"Paige, I—"

"Damien asked me out!" I almost shouted the words in panic.

I had shattered the moment, but at least it was a little easier to breathe as Grayson drew back from me.

"He did?"

A nod was all I could bring myself to give him in reply. My thoughts and body were in total chaos. I hadn't intended to say that. But what else was I supposed to do? I was in love with Grayson. I loved him. And I had desperately wanted to lean in and kiss him. Even now I could feel the temptation thrumming through me. I'd been so close to sending our friendship up in flames.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that, for a moment, Grayson had been looking at me like he wanted to help light the fire. That was just my love-struck mind playing tricks on me though, right?

Right?

His expression had turned heavy and he went to speak, but a gasp sounded from behind us.

"Look at this mess! What happened in here?"

Gray jumped as his mom entered the room, and my cheeks burned when I turned to see her looking around the kitchen in horror. Flour coated almost every surface and there were still some particles floating through the air around us. Gray and I were both covered in the stuff.

“First a flat tire, and now this?” Amy was shaking her head in disbelief.

“Sorry, Amy,” I said. “It’s my fault. I’ll clean it up.”

“No, it’s my fault,” Grayson added. “I’ll do it.”

Amy let out an exasperated huff. “Why don’t you both clean it up. And quick.” She sounded frustrated, but I caught her smiling as she left the room, and I thought she might not be quite as annoyed as she appeared.

Once she was gone, Grayson went to the cupboard under the sink and pulled out some cleaning supplies. “We did kind of make a mess of things, didn’t we?” he said, peering around the kitchen.

I wished the flour was the only mess I was dealing with. My thoughts were much more of a disaster than the kitchen.

He handed me a sponge and got down on his hands and knees to start cleaning. I kneeled just across from him. My mind was still whirring as I tried to figure out what to do. My plan had been to kiss Damien and hope it banished my feelings for my best friend. But that was before I realized just how strong those feelings were. How could I go through with it now?

“So, you’ve got your date with Damien, just like you wanted,” Gray said. “That’s great.”

“It is?” My heart pounded in my ears. I didn’t want him to think it was great. I wanted him to tell me to forget Damien because there was only one guy I should be with, and he was right here in front of me. I wanted to cross the line that bordered our friendship and stray into the dangerous and unknown territory of becoming something more. But I couldn’t take that risk. He was far too important to me.

“Of course it is,” he replied. “This is what we’ve been working toward, right?”

“We?”

“Yeah, I’m still your coach, aren’t I?”

“Right.” Sometimes, I really wished Grayson was a little easier to read. His face was a mask and it was impossible to know what he was thinking. Was he actually pleased for me? Did he genuinely want me to go on this date, or was his blank stare a sign of irritation? Even if he was ecstatic about something, he might still be stomping around with his resting storm

face. I was usually pretty good at figuring him out, but right now I was at a complete loss.

"Then I guess you'll still need my help," he continued.

My stomach dipped with uncertainty. "With what?"

"I figured you'd want to practice before the big date. With me."

"A date? With you?"

"Yep, a practice date."

"Oh, uh, sure." I let out a sigh. It was hard not to feel defeated. Grayson was still set on helping me get the guy. He didn't know I'd been chasing the wrong one all along. "Sounds great," I added. "What would we do?"

Before he could answer, more voices sounded at the front of the house. Reed and Parker had arrived home.

"I'll figure something out," Grayson said as he started scrubbing the kitchen floor. "Just leave it to me."

I was in a nightmare. Grayson wanted me to go on this date with Damien, and he was even willing to help me prepare for it. At least that probably meant he hadn't picked up on my secret feelings, but it also meant I couldn't backtrack, because Gray would suspect something was up. I'd panicked, worked myself into a corner, and now I had *two* dates to worry about.

And I knew which one was making me more nervous. It might only be for practice, but the way I was feeling right now, I feared one date with Grayson might ruin me for all other guys forever.

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Chapter 23

Grayson

“Damien and Paige look pretty friendly.”

Matt was sitting in his usual seat beside me in math, and the two of us were both watching as Damien talked to Paige just outside the door. I didn’t like how closely he was leaning into her. And I flat-out despised the way she laughed at something he said. More than anything, I hated that they were going on a date.

My coaching must have worked, because Paige seemed confident and at ease as she spoke to him. The girl who was so nervous she spilled a drink on herself the last time she was in this situation was nowhere to be seen. I should have been proud of her, but instead I was miserable.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Matt continued.

“No idea.”

“Maybe he’s asking if she wants a ride on his Zamboni?”

My pencil snapped between my fingers, and I quickly tucked the broken pieces away before anyone could notice. But Matt spluttered a laugh. “It was a joke, dude. You need to work on those anger issues.”

I didn’t have anger issues. I had Paige issues. But I did my best to ignore his comment.

“Stone seems like a good addition to the team, don’t you think?”

Was Matt still talking? As if this moment could get any worse. I was already on edge, sitting here completely helpless as I watched another guy flirt with my girl.

“I can see why there are so many scouts after him.” Despite the fact I wasn’t acknowledging a thing Matt was saying, he didn’t seem to be getting the hint. Couldn’t he see this was the last thing I wanted to talk about? I was far too busy wishing my eyes were capable of shooting lasers.

Matt started to chuckle. “Don’t worry, Grayson. You and Reed are still our top players. You guys already have the future of college hockey locked down. At least, you will after you sign on Saturday, right?”

Signing day. Coach Mercer coming to our game. The continuous throbbing pain in my knee. Just more things I didn’t want to talk or think about.

I turned to Matt, hoping if I gave him some kind of response he’d leave me alone. “Yeah, right.”

My short reply had the desired effect, and he gave me a firm pat on the shoulder before he went to open his textbook.

Paige had finally stopped talking with Damien and was making her way toward us. She looked beautiful this morning, and the way she was smiling pierced the heavy clouds surrounding my heart. There was nothing I loved more than seeing her happy.

But then I remembered she was smiling because of Damien. He was still loitering by the door, smirking as he watched her walk toward me. The purring in my heart turned to a hiss and, once again, I speculated whether it was possible I might secretly be Superman, with heat vision strong enough to eviscerate a self-obsessed hockey player in one shot.

When Paige got closer, our eyes met, but she immediately looked away. Was she embarrassed about something? Maybe the fact I’d seen her swooning over Damien? She quickened her pace in a rush to get to the desk at my side, but she tripped on one of the table legs and stumbled as she walked past me.

“Are you all right?” I reached out to her, but she steadied herself and dodged my outstretched hand before I could help.

“I’m fine,” she squeaked as she lowered herself into the seat beside me.

“You sure?” I wasn’t only concerned about her tripping over the table. She had been acting distant ever since we coated the kitchen in flour the other day.

“She said she’s fine, Gray,” Matt chimed in. “You’re the one we should be worried about.” He glanced at Paige. “He’s in a mood. I think he’s hungry.”

“I’m not hungry.”

But Matt raised an eyebrow. “Dude, you’re scowling around the room like a starved animal.”

“I’m not—”

“You totally are. I just can’t quite put my finger on which one. What do you think, Paige?”

She stole a glance up at me. “Uh, mountain lion?”

“No, too scary.”

“Raccoon?”

“Too small. But he does have the bags under his eyes.”

Paige allowed herself to study me a little closer before her eyes lit up. “Panda?” she said, hopefully.

“That’s it,” Matt agreed. “A panda who’s run out of bamboo. Not something you want to mess with.”

“Here . . .” Paige said, grabbing a granola bar out of her bag and handing it over. “Always got to have something on hand for the hungry panda.” Our fingers barely brushed before she jerked them away. With a sigh I opened the bar and took a bite. It did make me feel slightly better.

“So, what did he want?” I grumbled, taking another bite of the bar.

“He?” She looked confused until I nodded toward the door. “Oh, Damien?”

I hated the sound of his name on her lips. “Yes, him.”

“Uh.” She was avoiding eye contact again. “He was just saying hi . . .”

“Looked like a little more than that,” Matt said, raising one eyebrow.

“Yeah, uh, maybe.” She tucked a stray hair behind one ear, her focus on pretty much anything but me. “He may have asked me out again.”

“*Again?*” I tried my best not to choke on my granola bar.

“Well, I didn’t really answer him last time.”

“Interesting,” Matt jumped in, saving me from having to respond. “What did you say?”

“Uh, I said yes. We’re going out on Sunday night.” She turned to me, but kept her gaze low. “Sorry, I guess I’ll have to skip Darling family dinner. Although with my mom coming back Sunday, Amy probably wasn’t expecting me anyway . . .”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure that’s fine.” I was doing my best to sound unbothered. But now the date was confirmed I was starting to sweat. “It doesn’t leave us much time to prepare, though. How about Friday night for our practice date?”

She shifted awkwardly in her seat, and her eyes darted to Matt. He was now talking to a girl on his other side, but Paige still leaned in close and lowered her voice as she replied.

“Tomorrow? You still want to help with that? What did you have in mind?”

There was plenty on my mind, but it was a little hard not to second-guess myself when she still seemed so fixated on Damien. I’d stayed up late last night, trying to come up with the perfect practice date for Paige. It was my one last chance to win her over. But reality was starting to sink in. She was going on a date with Damien, and she was excited about it. My whole reason for coaching Paige had been to make her realize she had feelings for me, but it was starting to look like my plan had backfired.

“I’ve had a few ideas,” I replied, trying my best to ignore the doubts gnawing at me. “So, are you free on Friday?”

“Oh. Um, yeah, I can do Friday night.” She was blushing, but there was also a look of anticipation in her eyes. I couldn’t keep up with her today. One moment she was tripping over her own feet, the next everything seemed normal, then a moment later she was embarrassed and coy. Damien must have really rattled her.

“Okay then, it’s a date. But if you call me a hungry panda again, I might have to reconsider.”

She was smiling again now. “But it’s such a cute nickname for you.”

“I don’t want a cute nickname.”

“Need something more manly, huh? How about grizzly panda?”

“No, I don’t think—”

“Or grumpy panda?” Matt suggested. Apparently, he’d rejoined the conversation.

Paige clapped her hands. “Oh, I like that.”

“Thanks,” Matt replied. “I thought it matched the twitching muscle in his forehead.”

“It’s perfect,” she agreed. “And we can call him GP for short.”

I lowered my head into my heads and did my best to ignore the two of them. I’d thought Paige talking about dating someone else was bad, but this was nearly as painful.

The teacher entered the room, drawing everyone’s attention, but I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. There was a new message in the group chat I had with the guys. Parker had changed the name of the group again, this time to: “The Friend Zoners.” I knew I was going to regret opening the chat, but curiosity got the better of me.

Reed: I’m in class with Damien. He says he has a date with Paige on Sunday??

Parker: Are we surprised? She looked pretty hot when we did those interviews on Tuesday night.

Matt: GP already knows. He nearly choked on a granola bar when he found out.

Parker: GP?

With a sigh I started to type.

Me: If you answer that, Cleaver, you’re dead to me.

Matt looked up at me from his phone and winked. I scowled and turned back to the group chat.

Owen: Don’t stress, Grayson. She’s going to realize you’re the guy for her.

Parker: Did GP really choke on a granola bar? More importantly, did anyone get that on video?

Me: Don’t call me GP.

Parker: Tell me what it stands for and I’ll stop.

Me: No.

Reed: Who changed the group picture to an angry-looking panda?

I glared at Matt again, but his eyes were fixed on his phone as his fingers flew across the screen. Still, I could easily make out the smirk on his face.

Matt: I thought it would lift Grayson’s spirits.

Parker: Is it because male pandas have no game?

Reed: What are you talking about, Parker?

Parker: Trust me, it's true. Zoos have to give them panda porn. Pandas are literally on the way to extinction because they don't know what they're doing. They're almost as bad as Grayson.

Reed: I seriously worry about you, little brother.

Owen: I'm sure Grayson knows what he's doing!

Me: I thought this group was set up to help me. So far, it's not doing a very good job.

Parker: Oh, you want our help? We thought you'd never ask. We've just been making fun of you while we wait.

I took a deep breath. Did I really want their help? I'd already set up a practice date with Paige. It was all up to me now. Getting a little coaching of my own couldn't really hurt though, could it? No one went into a big game without support. Despite my apprehension, I started typing.

Me: Tomorrow night, I'm helping her practice for her date with Damien. It's my last shot. So, any final words of advice?

Matt: Be charming.

Parker: I'd like to see that.

Owen: Lots of eye contact.

Parker: That doesn't sound at all creepy.

Reed: Just be yourself. Show her what it would be like to be with you for real.

Owen: Reed's right.

Matt: Yeah, man. Just be yourself. You got this.

Parker: I feel like this goes against everything I've been suggesting for the last two weeks, but actually, I think they're right. Be more Grayson.

"Matt and Grayson, phones away during class!"

I glanced up to see the teacher glaring at the two of us from the front of the room. It was rare for a teacher to come down on me so hard—they'd heard the rumors about the Darling brothers too after all. Still, I quickly did as I was told and shoved my phone back in my pocket, relieved to escape the group chat.

Paige giggled quietly as the teacher turned his attention to the whiteboard again. "What was so important?" she whispered.

"Nothing. Just checking some player stats." The lie slipped easily from my lips. I couldn't exactly let her know I had a whole group chat dedicated to my feelings for her.

As I listened to the teacher and stared up at the whiteboard, the guys' advice repeated over and over in my head. Everything rested on this practice date. It was my final chance to show my best friend how much more we could become. Being Grayson hadn't worked for me over the last ten years, so what difference was one more night going to make?

But I had no other options left. I just had to hope I would be enough.

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Chapter 24

Paige

Bonnie dragged me to Hug in a Mug after school. We were planning to go over my Ransom Devils player interviews, but she was exhausted and insisted she needed a decent latte if she was expected to work. It was hardly surprising; she was seriously addicted to coffee, and this had only been exacerbated since Tabitha's sleepless nights had begun. The coffee shop was in the town across the river from Ransom, but it was one of the few places that stayed open late on weeknights.

Sunshine Hills was like a different world compared to our hometown. It was wealthier and filled with upmarket shops and fancy restaurants. Even the streets appeared cleaner and everything seemed to sparkle, despite today's overcast weather. While Sunshine was only a five-minute drive from Ransom, I never really felt welcome. The people seemed to look down their noses at us and hold their purses a little tighter whenever we passed. I knew our town wasn't as affluent, but just because people in Ransom weren't rich didn't mean we were thieves. Violet lived in Sunshine Hills, and she was one of the few exceptions. I was happy to see her working behind the counter when we arrived at Hug in a Mug.

When we walked through the door and the bell above it chimed, Violet looked up and a smile spread across her face. "Hey, Paige. This is a nice surprise."

The coffee shop was mostly empty, probably because it was the end of the day and the weather outside was getting worse.

"Hey, Violet." I returned her smile. "I was hoping you might be working today. Bonnie is in desperate need of a caffeine hit. Apparently, she can't survive the evening without one."

"I really can't," Bonnie replied. "Right now, I need a latte more than I need air to breathe."

“Well, you guys are in the right place,” Violet said with a warm laugh. “How about you, Paige?”

“Uh, just a cookie would be great,” I replied. “Nobody wants to see what caffeine does to me.”

“It’s bad,” Bonnie agreed. “She had a Red Bull last year, and I had to keep reminding her she hadn’t actually grown wings. She lost it.”

Violet laughed. “Okay, a cookie and a latte. You guys find a table and I’ll bring them right out.”

We made our way over to one of the booths by the window, and Bonnie collapsed onto the seat. “I don’t know why we don’t come here more often,” she said. “Sunshine Hills is so pleasant.”

“Only when there’s no one around,” I said. “Don’t the people here make you feel a little uncomfortable?”

“Screw them.” Bonnie shrugged. “Besides, not everyone here has a problem with Ransom. Reed’s girlfriend seems nice.”

“Yeah, Violet’s great. But she’s also not originally from here.”

“Ah, that explains it then. Also explains why she wasn’t too chicken to go out with Reed. Most people are terrified to talk to the Darling Devils, much less date one of them,” Bonnie said. “I certainly couldn’t imagine doing it.”

I didn’t agree, but I nodded all the same. In truth, it was easy for me to imagine dating a Darling Devil. I was supposed to be doing just that tomorrow night. I was still struggling to come to terms with my feelings for Grayson and doing my best to avoid them entirely. But that was going to be hard when we were out on a date, practice or not.

“I guess you’ve got your own date to think about,” she went on. “Tell me all about how Damien begged you to go out with him, not once, but twice.” She was oblivious to the fact that the date *I* was thinking about wasn’t with Damien.

“He didn’t beg.”

“But he did corner you and ask you out again,” she said with a smug smile. “I’d say that shows how much he wants this. Your first kiss is just around the corner.”

I gave her a tight smile. My first kiss was the least of my worries right now.

Thankfully, our conversation was interrupted as Violet came over with Bonnie’s latte and my cookie. She placed them both down on the table.

“Here you go, guys.”

“Thanks, Vi—” I lost my words in a laugh as I got a look at the cookie. It was in the shape of a hockey jersey and decorated with the colors of the Sunshine Hills Saints—our school’s biggest rivals. “Uh, maybe we don’t tell any of the Darlings I ate this.”

Violet’s hand lifted to her lips as she realized what she’d given me. “Oh no. I’m so sorry, Paige. I wasn’t thinking. My manager has a kid on the Saints and is all about school spirit. Can I get you something else?”

“It’s fine. It’s just a cookie.”

“Okay, well, you can always think of eating it as doing your part to ensure there’s one less Saints jersey in the world.”

“Good idea, I’ll do that.” I laughed again and took a rather aggressive bite out of one of the sleeves. I was ready to hate the cookie on principle, but it practically melted in my mouth. Yum. I had to control a groan. I might have considered getting Grayson one, but he’d probably never speak to me again.

Meanwhile, Bonnie was already downing her drink. “Mm. This is so good.”

“Feeling better?” Violet asked.

“Much.” Bonnie grinned.

“Will you be at the game on Saturday, Violet?” I knew she liked to watch Reed play whenever she got the chance, but couldn’t always make it because she had to work.

“Yeah, I managed to switch my shift so I can come. Reed said they’ll be signing their scholarship letters afterward and that their college coach is coming to watch the game too. It sounds like a pretty big deal. Will you both be there?”

“Yep,” I said. “Wouldn’t miss it.” I knew Gray would hate all the extra attention, but I couldn’t wait to see him sign his letter of intent. Years of work had built to this moment, and while he might not say it out loud, I knew this was his dream come true.

The bell over the door chimed as a customer walked in, and Violet glanced over at them before turning back to us. “I better get back to work, but let me know if I can get you anything else.”

“Thanks, Violet.”

As she made her way back to the counter, I returned my attention to Bonnie, and gasped when I realized she’d already finished her drink.

“What happened to your latte?”

“What? I needed it.” She shrugged. “Plus, it was amazing. Maybe I should get another?”

“You’re not serious.”

“I’ll ask for a single shot.”

“You do not need more coffee!”

“Sure, I do. You know the saying: two coffees a day keep the doctor away.”

“That’s not the saying. And even if it was, they wouldn’t mean two coffees in ten minutes. You’ll be worse than me after a Red Bull.”

“When the coffee is this good, it’s totally worth the risk.”

I laughed and tried to refocus her attention by passing her the player profiles I’d been working on. “Do you want to look at these or not?”

“Obviously!” Her eyes were bright with anticipation, and she practically yanked the papers from my hands. “I’m so excited to see what you came up with.”

“Well, please remember, I’ve never done this before. So, if it’s bad, be gentle with me. Like you said, you can help me edit it as much as is needed.”

“Okay, okay . . .” She fell quiet as her eyes darted across the page. The silence was only broken by occasional soft murmurs that fell from her lips as she read. I had no idea what they meant, but there was a concerning crease to her brow.

I was far more nervous as I waited for Bonnie’s reaction than I cared to admit. It was silly how much effort I’d put into the article when it wasn’t being graded. I’d even neglected my other homework the last two nights to make sure it was perfect.

“So, what do you think?” I said when enough time had passed that I knew she must have finished, and I wasn’t sure I could wait another moment to hear her opinion.

“It’s good.” She slowly started to smile. “Like, *really* good.”

“You’re not just saying that, are you?”

“You think I’d lie about something like this?”

“Well, no, probably not.”

“Definitely not,” she replied. “I’m cutthroat when it comes to my paper. And if it was crap, I’d tell you to start over. But you’re a natural at this,

Paige. I can't believe you managed to get those boys to answer all these questions. How did you convince them to open up so much?"

"I—I don't know . . ."

"And Coach Ray too?" Bonnie continued. "That man is a steel trap, and he's always far too busy for the school paper. He usually just gives one- or two-word answers. But he must have been really engaged with you. You're going to have to do more of these for me."

I was stunned. I'd been anxious about interviewing the team, and had a bit of a shaky start with it, but by the end of the process it had felt so natural. And I was surprised by how much I'd enjoyed the writing part too. It felt like I'd tried a million different things recently, but this was the first time something I did had just clicked. Like it was meant to be.

"You really think that?" I asked. I hadn't realized how important Bonnie's approval was to me until she'd given it.

"I do. It's funny and it's fresh. It could use a little finessing, but it's going to be amazing once we're done with it."

My cheeks warmed under her praise. It was quite the compliment coming from her. Bonnie wasn't known for keeping her thoughts to herself, which I knew better than anyone. She must have honestly been impressed.

"Seriously, people at school are going to eat this up," she continued. "Have you ever thought about doing something like this in college? You could study sports journalism. And maybe one day you could work in social media for a hockey team or something. You know, interviewing the players, writing game reports. You'd be great."

I opened and closed my mouth several times because it had honestly never crossed my mind. I'd always struggled with writing, finding it frustrating when my words didn't flow effortlessly onto the page. But interviewing the guys had been a lot of fun, and they'd all given such great answers that the writing part hadn't been nearly as arduous as normal. Grayson's dad had said I was good at talking to people. Maybe that was worth something after all. Could I really do something like this as a job?

"You know I'm not great at writing," I said.

"Well, it seems you are when it's about something you love." She lifted the sheet of paper as if it were proof. "I know what you've always said, but struggling to write isn't the same as being bad at it. This is brilliant, Paige. I don't think anyone else could have gotten such great interviews from the

team. And it's clear how well you know your hockey. Maybe that's where your future lies."

"I've never really thought about it."

"Well, I think you should. You're willing to give most things a try. Just because you've never thought about something doesn't mean it wouldn't be perfect for you."

"Maybe," I murmured. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten such good feedback on something. It felt nice to have finally done something right and worthy of genuine praise. Maybe Bonnie was onto something. This could be perfect for me.

I was jolted from my thoughts as my phone buzzed in my pocket. Reluctantly, I opened the message.

> Mom: I just received another concerning email from your career counselor. You didn't attend your meeting again. I knew you couldn't be trusted, but don't worry, I'm coming home a day early. See you Saturday.

"Seriously?" I muttered.

I'd been so wrapped up in preparing for the player interviews, I'd totally forgotten about the careers session. Mom sounded pissed. I closed my eyes and rubbed a finger along the ridge of my nose. The thought of her returning on Saturday didn't exactly fill me with glee. Already, I had first kisses, unwanted feelings, and two dates to contend with. I didn't need an angry mother added to the mix.

"What's wrong?" Bonnie asked.

I opened my eyes and was met by her concerned expression. "My mom texted. She's coming home early."

"Oh." She tilted her head. "Maybe that's a good thing? You must be sick of sleeping on an air mattress in Cammie Darling's bedroom."

"Yeah, I guess it'll be nice to be back in my own bed." I shrugged. "It's not a big deal. Let's get started on these edits . . ."

Maybe this was for the best. I wasn't looking forward to how angry Mom would be when she got back, but going home might give me some much-needed distance from Gray. My feelings for him had certainly escalated in the short time I'd been staying with his family, so maybe that had something to do with it. I just had to get through our practice date on

Friday, and then maybe things would return to normal. Either that, or they might never be the same again.

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Chapter 25

Grayson

I was pushing myself too hard. I knew it, and yet I couldn't get myself to stop.

It had gotten dark hours ago, and I struggled to see the puck as I skated across the frozen lake close to our house. The glow of streetlights from the nearby parking lot cast just enough light that it wasn't pitch-black, so I kept going.

I was playing in the biggest game of my life the day after tomorrow, and I should have been resting. But I needed to know how hard I could play on my broken knee. I couldn't afford to take it easy with Coach Mercer in the stands. Couldn't afford to show any weakness or give him any reason to doubt Ryker's decision to recruit me. The more I trained, the more my knee resisted, but that only seemed to spur me on, as if skating harder and faster might eventually make the pain disappear altogether.

I was also in no rush to go home. I knew Paige would be there and, right now, I had no idea what I was doing when it came to her. I was still planning for our practice date, but I was getting so sick of playing by the rules I'd set myself. So tired of playing it safe with her, constantly waiting for the perfect moment to show her we belonged together.

I just needed to try to keep it together until tomorrow night. And until then, I'd take out my frustrations on the ice instead.

"I thought I'd find you down here."

I turned as Reed made his way toward me. He tucked his hands in his pockets and carefully walked across the ice as I pulled to a stop. I was puffing hard. My knee hurt like hell. I already knew what he wanted to say. And that I didn't want to hear it.

"Leave me alone, Reed."

I was half tempted to skate away, into the darkness. I wasn't in the mood for a lecture from my brother. But if I didn't listen to it now, it would only come later.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he reached me.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm training."

"This isn't training. It's pitch-black out here. You're going to get hurt."

"I'll be fine," I grumbled. I was already hurt; that was the problem.

He heaved out a breath. "I know you must be worried about the weekend. About Coach Mercer coming to the game. But you don't need to be. You're going to be great."

It was easy enough for Reed to say. He was the star of the team. He was the talent that had drawn Ryker's attention in the first place. I was just an added extra. An afterthought. And thanks to my injury, I wasn't even a very good one.

"What are you worried about? He's not going to revoke the offer." It was as if my brother could read my thoughts.

"He might."

"He won't!" He lifted his hands in the air in frustration. "Why would he?"

Reed searched my face for an answer, and I avoided the temptation to reach down and rub my aching knee. He was well aware I'd had trouble with it, but he also knew I'd only deny it was still causing me problems.

I shrugged and he shook his head.

"Unless this is about something else . . ." he said. "Is it Paige?"

It might have been dark out, but my brother could see right through me.

"It's not because of Paige or Mercer," I said. "I'm just training before a big game. It's what we do."

"This isn't what we do," he said, waving his hand around the darkened lake. "Look, the Raiders game is about to start. Come home. Watch it with us. If you want to torture yourself, I'm sure we can find a better way."

His arms were firmly folded across his chest. He wasn't leaving without me.

"Come on, Gray. The team needs you fit and focused this weekend if we're going to beat the Wolves. I need you. We'll put on a show for Mercer together."

I knew he was trying to motivate me, but I only felt more pressure. A part of me wanted to stay out here just to spite him. But as much as I didn't

want to let myself down, the thought of letting my teammates and my brother down was worse. It was a big game for him too.

“Okay, okay. I’m coming,” I grumbled. Maybe this was the reason Reed was captain of the team. He always found ways of getting even the most stubborn of us to fall into line.

“But I really was just training.”

“If you say so.” Did he have to sound quite so smug?

When we arrived home, the Raiders game had already started and most of the family were crowded around the TV in the living room to watch it. Given the grimace on my dad’s face, my future team wasn’t playing well.

“You’re back,” Paige said, jumping up from her seat on the floor. The way her deep brown eyes sparkled with warmth as she smiled up at me was like a sledgehammer to the chest. I guess I’d found a better way to punish myself than what I’d been putting myself through on the lake.

“What’d I miss?” I grunted, nodding at the screen.

“Not much,” Paige replied.

“You don’t want to know,” Dad added.

I wasn’t exactly surprised. The Raiders were still having a rough season, and if they kept this up, Reed and I were going to have a lot of work to do when we joined them next year. My knee throbbed, reminding me I might not make it that far.

Parker was sitting on the couch next to my dad and groaned as Ryker missed another opportunity to score. “You sure you want to play for them? I know Dad went there, but the signing isn’t until Saturday, so you could still change your mind . . .”

Dad whacked him with the back of his hand.

“What?” Parker said. “It’s true.”

“No one’s changing their mind about anything,” Reed replied, giving me a pointed look as he took the free spot on the couch and made himself comfortable.

“I’m going to go hop in the shower,” Paige said, giving my arm a light squeeze as she walked past. “Maybe they’ll be winning by the time I get back.”

I instinctively followed her from the room. She was like a magnet, and I often felt like she could pull me just about anywhere. “How’d it go with Bonnie?”

“Pretty good, actually,” she said as we stepped into the hallway. “She was so impressed by my interviews she wants me to do more.”

“That’s great.”

“She even said she thought I should pursue this further. Like, in college. Or even as a job one day.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said. “You’d be great.”

Her face seemed to glow in response. The lights overhead briefly flickered, but that was nothing new in this house and I barely noticed. I was too busy looking at Paige. She gave a cautious glance upward before focusing on me again.

“It was only one comment from Bonnie. Just because she says one article turned out okay, it doesn’t mean I’m suddenly good at writing.”

“I’d say it means a lot coming from Bonnie.”

Paige shrugged and averted her eyes, but I could tell she was secretly proud of herself.

“I never really considered working in sports,” she continued. “I mean, I can’t shoot a puck to save my life.”

“There’s a lot more to hockey than the players on the ice,” I said. “And I watched you giving your interviews—the guys were so happy to talk to you. If this is something you want, I have no doubt you can do it.”

“Thanks, Gray.” When she smiled up at me, my heart lurched and I couldn’t ignore the sparks flaring between us. Her gaze seemed to intensify as she returned mine, and when she bit her lower lip, I desperately wondered what she could be thinking.

The lights flickered again and Paige glanced upward once more, breaking the moment. “Is your dad ever going to fix the wiring?”

“Probably not,” I replied. “I think he likes to live life on the edge.”

“I think so too.”

She hesitated for a second, as though she was thinking about what to say next, but then she simply smiled and turned to the stairs. I reluctantly went back to the living room and slumped into an empty chair just as a cheer went up from my dad and brothers—the Raiders had managed to tie it up with one goal apiece. My mind wasn’t on the game though. I was still picturing the way Paige had bit her lower lip.

“I guess you guys can play for them after all,” Parker said.

“I’m so glad we’ve got your approval,” Reed said drily.

Despite Parker’s newfound optimism, as we continued to watch, the Raiders still struggled to pull ahead. Occasionally the camera cut to Coach Mercer as he screamed at his players or glared at the ice, clearly unhappy with the way they were playing. Coach Ray had a temper, but it seemed like Mercer took it to another level. The game remained tied going into the final period, but in the closing minutes one of the Ryker players stole the puck and sped across the ice. The defense fumbled as they tried to chase him down.

“Come on! Come on!” Dad yelled at the screen.

“Move the puck!” demanded Reed. “Move it!”

“Go. Go. Go,” Parker urged.

“Shoot!” We all screamed in unison as the player passed the puck to his teammate who was in perfect position, right in front of the net.

We were all on our feet as he pulled back his stick and sent the puck sailing through the air toward the goal—

The house plunged into darkness and the TV went dead before we could see the outcome of the play. The power was out.

“No!”

“What the hell, Dad!”

“Are you kidding me?”

We all shouted our complaints, but over the noise I heard a squeal come from upstairs.

“Paige?” I raced out of the room and up the stairs, taking them two at a time in my hurry to get to her. I somehow managed not to trip, despite the fact it was pitch-black, but when I reached the top, I heard a loud bang from the bathroom and a hiss of pain. I wrenched open the door and staggered into the room, only to be greeted by another yelp from Paige.

“Grayson, I’m showering!”

My eyes had begun to adjust to the darkness, and I could just make out Paige standing in the bathroom clutching a towel to her chest. I almost slipped on the bathmat in my hurry to turn away. “Sorry! I—uh—didn’t see anything, I swear! I just heard you shout and wanted to make sure you were okay. The power’s out.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Okay, good. I’ll leave you to it then . . .”

“What? No. You can’t leave me in the dark. Can you help me find some light?”

“Uh, yeah. Mom always has a scented candle in here somewhere.” I started to turn toward the vanity, but Paige yelped again.

“Wait!” Then she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Not yet. Let me get my towel on first.”

I’d been doing my best not to think about the fact she was only covered by a towel. It was a lot harder to do when she said it out loud.

“Right. Of course.”

I heard the rustle of the towel as she wrapped it around herself more firmly. “Okay. I’m ready. Where’s this candle?”

“Uh, it’s usually next to the sink.” I turned back to face the room, doing my best not to look directly at Paige, and started to rummage around in the darkness. I was starting to see a little clearer now, but it was still dark, and there was so much stuff on the vanity I couldn’t make out what each item was. As I searched for the candle, I felt Paige take a step closer to me. Then —

“Ouch,” she squeaked, and as I turned, she stumbled into me. I instinctively opened my arms to catch her and then closed them tightly to keep her from falling. We were still for a moment as I held her, my hands resting on the fluffy towel, our pounding hearts the only sound breaking the silence.

When I was sure she had found her feet again, I relaxed my arms, but neither of us stepped back. I glanced down, and despite the darkness, we were so close I could easily see her gazing up at me. If I’d thought I was tortured before, being this close to her was almost unbearable. My hands were still pressed on her back, and hers were resting on my chest. Her breath caught when our eyes met and the air between us felt electric. She lightly bit her lip again, and this time it looked as though she too was fighting through something painful.

Maybe it was the blackout. Maybe I’d finally lost my mind, but I couldn’t seem to keep my feelings in anymore. They were trying to burst out of me, straining each and every seam I’d stitched so diligently to keep them contained. This wasn’t part of the plan, but I was done trying to hide a love that was ingrained so deeply in my soul.

I lifted one hand from her back and reached up to push a hair away from her face. It was still wet from the shower. I moved my hand to her cheek and lightly brushed away a bead of water that had fallen there. My hand

was shaking with nerves because, for the first time, I thought I might finally be ready to tell Paige the truth. Ready to risk everything.

"The way you're looking at me . . ." I murmured. "You have no idea how it makes me feel."

Her throat bobbed. "So, tell me."

"I can't," I replied. "But you're dangerously close to making me break all my rules."

It felt easy to admit these things in the darkened room. As though this moment wasn't real. Like time had stopped. Or I was in some alternate universe where I actually had a chance.

"Maybe your rules are worth breaking?"

She was staring up into my eyes like I was worthy. Like, despite my many flaws, I was what she wanted. What she needed. A delicate tremor rippled through me as my chest flooded with warmth.

"Paige, I . . ."

Light filled the room, and her eyes jumped away from mine. Cheers sounded, and the familiar noise of the hockey on TV drifted up from downstairs. The harsh, bright light of the bathroom felt far too revealing. I'd been so close to divulging my heart, and if Paige only looked into my eyes, I knew the truth would be only too evident for her to see.

She kept her eyes low and stepped back. That one swift movement did even more to break the moment than the lights flaring back to life. Whatever had been happening in the darkness was over.

"I better get dressed," she said. She didn't wait for my reply as she slipped past me and out into the hall. I followed her, and just as she was about to push into Cammie's room, she stole a glance my way. There was a spark of something in her eyes. Excitement? Regret? Uncertainty? She was gone before I could decide. I'd come so close to confessing my feelings, but it wasn't my last opportunity. Whatever had just happened between us in the darkness had ignited a cautious hope inside me, and I wasn't going to let the next chance pass me by.

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Chapter 26

Paige

I was such a chicken. I'd been beating myself up about it all day, and I was in a total daze as I drove home from school. I didn't think I'd heard a single word during any of my classes, and it was lucky I hadn't needed to take any tests, because I knew I would have failed them all. The only thing I could think about was the way I'd felt when I'd been stuck alone with Grayson in the dark.

I'd wanted to kiss him.

Desperately.

I'd even tried to tell him as much while the power was out. It had been barely a minute, but in those brief moments everything magnified. It was like a door had opened inside me, and I wasn't sure I could close it again. My attraction to Gray was undeniable, and I'd been so close to acting on my desires. Perhaps if we'd been in the darkness a little longer, I would have lost all control. But when the harsh lights flicked back on, my confidence vanished.

I shouldn't have run from him, but I'd been terrified of how close I'd come to ruining everything. So, I'd hidden in Cammie's room for the rest of the night, tormented as I replayed the things we'd said. More than that, I remembered the way he'd looked at me. It was as though he'd echoed my thoughts. Like maybe he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

I'd only seen him twice today. In the morning, at breakfast, he offered to make me something to eat, so I'd grabbed a banana and bolted from the room. Then at lunch he'd come and found me in the newsroom while I was working on my article with Bonnie. He'd let me know he had a team meeting after school, but he'd be home at six for our date.

I had no idea what to expect, and Grayson hadn't dropped any hints. But it felt like I was teetering on the edge of a precipice and one move either

way could be the difference between safety or doom. Deep down I knew tonight was the night I discovered which way I would fall.

Nobody was home when I arrived back at the Darlings'. It was still early on Friday night, so it wasn't that unusual. Amy and Danny were probably both still at work, the boys had their Devils' team meeting, and Cammie practically lived at the ice rink so she was rarely around anyway.

I made my way into the house, still wondering exactly what Grayson had planned for the evening. I didn't know the first thing about going on a date. And he'd been surprisingly tight-lipped about what we were doing. I guessed he was taking his job as coach seriously and wanted me to have the full date experience.

I slowly made my way up to Cammie's room, my thoughts already on the next problem. What was I supposed to wear? I started mentally shuffling through the clothes I'd brought with me, trying to remember if I had any appropriate date attire. I even considered one of the Bonnie-approved outfits I'd bought during my makeover day with Grayson, but I wasn't sure either of those was right. The clothes might have gotten a reaction out of Gray at the time, but I wanted something I felt comfortable in. Something that made me feel confident and pretty. If I was going on a date with Grayson, I wanted something perfect.

I stilled as I entered Cammie's room. There was already a dress laid out on my bed. I approached it slowly. It looked familiar, and when I reached it, I immediately recognized the small, delicate flowers printed on the pale pink fabric.

"It's my dress," I whispered.

It was the one I'd tried on when we'd been shopping. The one that had made me feel just like me. The one I hadn't bought because I didn't think being me would ever be enough to catch a guy's eye.

There was a note on it: *The perfect dress for my perfect date.*

Grayson did this? I wasn't sure I could fall any harder for this boy, but he was making it far too easy. I'd always known Gray was sweet, and kind, and generous. But the way he made me feel like I was something truly special, just for being me, was incredible. As if there was any doubt left, I knew there was no coming back from this.

My feelings for Grayson had grown roots. They'd started as nothing more than a faint stirring in the back of my mind. A tiny seed, so small they were easily overlooked. But the roots had been slowly spreading and

quietly weaving their way into my heart and thoughts. Before I knew what was happening, they'd anchored firmly within me, knitted into the very fabric of my being.

I still had a couple of hours before the date, so I took my time to do my hair and makeup. When I finally put on the dress, I couldn't have been happier. Everything had come together better than I could have dreamed. I'd never expected to feel this way before a date. Such a mixture of anticipation, and uncertainty, but the dress gave me a quiet confidence I hadn't expected, too. And while I knew this was only supposed to be a practice date, it already felt like so much more than that to me.

The doorbell rang just as I put the final touches on my makeup. I glanced at the bedroom door, wondering if I should go downstairs and answer it. This wasn't my house, but no one else was at home, so I hurried down to see who was there.

When I opened the front door, I found Gray standing on the doorstep smiling. He held his hands behind his back, and there was a nervous glint in his eye that seemed to match my own. He was dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt that hugged tightly against his muscular chest and arms. I'd always thought Gray looked his best when he was wearing hockey gear, but clearly, I hadn't spent enough time around him when he was dressed up. The way his clothes molded to his frame, and how he held himself with such quiet strength, it was like getting a glimpse of the man he'd be one day, and it was alluring in a way I wouldn't have expected.

I tried to speak, but I couldn't get the words to come out. I couldn't think of how I was supposed to react in this situation. It was too difficult to pretend I was unfazed by the sight of him looking so good. Or by how cute it was that he'd rung the doorbell of his own house to make this practice date feel more real. Perhaps it was the surprise of seeing the effort he'd gone to, or maybe it was just that I was still getting to grips with the strength of my feelings for him. But words continued to fail me. Instead, I stood there gaping at him like a fish gasping for water.

"You look beautiful, Pidge."

"And you look . . ." My voice trailed off as he pulled his hands from behind his back to reveal a large bouquet. "You got me flowers?" He'd already gone to more than enough effort, and this was the sweetest thing, but I had to do my best to mask my disappointment. Bouquets of flowers always filled me with a twinge of sadness. Why pick something so beautiful

only to let it die in a vase? But when I took them from his hands, I realized there weren't any real flowers. The bouquet was actually an arrangement of all my favorite candy.

"I know most people get flowers, but I thought you might prefer these."

"Candy?" I said. "You got me candy flowers?"

"Is that okay?"

"I love them," I murmured.

"I'm glad." A smile played at his lips. "Are you ready to go?"

I nodded and took his outstretched arm in mine. Honestly, I wasn't close to feeling ready, but I trusted Gray, so I knew, whatever happened, it would be okay.

Grayson drove us into town, and my nerves began to abate just a little when we parked outside Nino's. It was the best pizza restaurant in town, and my favorite place to eat. It was also the perfect place for a practice date. We'd been here a million times before, so I felt much more at ease knowing we'd be somewhere familiar.

"Nino's? Good choice."

"Hope you're hungry," he said.

I thought my stomach might be too full of butterflies to eat, but I nodded and shared a smile with him. "I'm always hungry for pizza."

He jumped out of the truck and came around to open my door for me, taking my hand as I climbed down. The butterflies only intensified. "Thanks, Gray," I murmured.

"You're welcome," he replied softly.

We walked into the restaurant, but after the host gave Gray a wink, he led us past all the regular tables to the door that led out to the back terrace and the garden beyond. I hesitated in the doorway. Everyone loved sitting in the outside area, but it was only open during the summer. As soon as the weather turned, Nino's closed it off.

"We can't go out there, Gray."

"Trust me," he replied, taking my hand in his once again. He gave it a squeeze, before opening the door. I gasped when I stepped outside.

The whole area was covered in fairy lights that basked the snow-covered garden in a warm orange glow. In the middle of it all was a large clear dome. It looked like a giant snow globe, and inside I could see an intimate table and two chairs had been set up. I instantly recognized it from the Winter Wonderland carnival our school had hosted last year. They'd had

about a dozen domes set up, and I'd spent the entire night snuggled inside one with a hot chocolate in my hands. I remembered going on and on about how much I'd loved them. I didn't realize Grayson remembered that too.

"The snow domes are back?" I whispered.

"For one night only . . ."

I stared at him in wonder. "You organized this?"

"Well, even if it's just for practice, I wanted your first date to be something special."

"But how?"

"I'm a Darling Devil. No one stops us from getting what we want." He donned the lethal expression I was so used to seeing whenever he was facing down an opponent on the ice.

I let out a laugh. "Seriously, Gray. How'd you do it?"

His fearsome expression vanished and he shrugged. "We didn't really have a team meeting after school today. The domes are stored in a lockup in the gym. Coach Ray pulled one out for me, and a few of the guys agreed to help me set it up. Then I just had to convince the manager at Nino's, which wasn't too hard—he's got a kid who loves hockey. I said I'd take him for a skate, and that was enough to get the go-ahead."

I was as impressed as I was surprised. Gray had really gone above and beyond. All so I'd feel special on a date that wasn't even supposed to be real. I was starting to question whether Grayson was real himself. I couldn't have dreamed up a better guy.

"Stop looking at me like that," he said. "It's no big deal. Come on . . ."

He led me into the snow dome and pulled back a seat so I could take my place at the table. Our practice date had only just started, but I was beginning to think a proper date with another guy could never compare. Gray had bought me the perfect dress, given me my favorite candy, and taken me for my favorite food in what might be the prettiest, most romantic location in town.

I stared up at the lights glittering above us like we were sitting in the middle of a snow globe, surrounded by stars.

"Is this the kind of thing you do for other girls when you take them on dates?" I asked, once he was sitting down across from me.

"What other girls?"

I couldn't decide if he was giving me a line or being serious. "I know you've been on dates before."

“I think good date etiquette is to avoid talking about past relationships,” Gray replied.

“Guess it’s lucky this isn’t a real date then.” I was too curious to let it go. “Seriously, I can’t be the first to go through the Grayson Darling date experience. There must have been other girls.” I wondered how well I was hiding my jealousy. I hated the thought of Gray going to so much effort for someone else.

“Like I said before, what other girls?” he murmured.

“Well, what about . . . Uh, didn’t you . . .” The truth was, I couldn’t say who else he’d dated. I didn’t know. Girls at school always talked about how intimidating Grayson was, but they’d do anything to go out with him all the same. He was the strong, silent type, and was generally considered one of the hottest guys in school. But when I thought about it, not once could I remember a girl saying they’d gone on a date with him.

“I’m sure there’ve been others,” I said. “You just don’t want to bore me with the details.”

“I play hockey, and I hang out with you. I promise you, there are no other girls.”

His words rattled me, and my mouth went dry, but I wasn’t giving up that easy.

“Okay, so you don’t date.” That wasn’t so unusual. Plenty of guys didn’t date. “But there must have been girls you’ve found yourself alone with in dark corners at parties, right?”

Gray shuffled uneasily in his seat, but he didn’t get a chance to answer because the server returned to take our order. She couldn’t have reappeared at a worse moment. This wasn’t the first time Gray had managed to avoid a similar question. I didn’t just want to know his answer. I needed it.

Gray gave the girl our usual order. Neither of us had even picked up the menu. I always got the same pepperoni pizza when I visited Nino’s. It was just too good. Gray went with his signature barbeque chicken pizza with extra chicken.

As soon as the server left, Grayson started talking before I could continue questioning him about girls.

“I feel like we should start with a practice conversation.”

“A practice conversation?” I laughed. “How is that different from a real one?”

“I ask you all the things a guy would ask on a date.”

“That sounds incredibly boring. We already know everything about each other.”

“You don’t know everything about me,” Gray replied.

“Didn’t I prove I did during the interview the other day?”

“That’s not how I remember it. There were a couple of things that took you by surprise, weren’t there?” He smirked slightly, and my skin sparked at the memory. “I’m sure there’s things that would surprise me about you too.”

“I doubt it, but let’s put it to the test.”

“Fire away.”

“Okay . . . where was I born?”

“Minneapolis.” He shook his head at me, as though he were disappointed. “If you’re going to test me, you could at least make it a challenge . . .”

I thought I had been. I’d lived there before moving to Ransom, but I was so young I never really talked about it. I totally thought that would have slipped him up. “Fine. What’s my favorite color?”

“The soft shade of pink at sunrise.”

“My favorite holiday?”

“Christmas—another easy one.”

“What Disney movie makes me cry?”

“What Disney movie doesn’t?”

So, perhaps I wasn’t all that good at coming up with difficult questions on the spot. I took a moment and really thought about the next one.

“Okay, if I was an animal, what would I want to be?”

“Either a butterfly or a penguin. Depends on how long it’s been since you watched *Happy Feet*.”

He was better at this than I expected. But he was also proving himself wrong.

“See, you do know everything about me. I’m not surprising at all.”

“I’m sure there are some deep, dark secrets in there somewhere.” His eyes glittered. “But maybe we don’t need to share them all on our first date.”

“Perhaps the second then.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed with a shy smile.

When he smiled like that, he awakened a flurry of delicate flutters in my chest. It was almost like the butterflies within me were lightly brushing

their wings against my heart. Grayson was right. There were things we held back from each other. And despite the fun and flirty banter, there was an unspoken tension underlying tonight.

I wasn't sure exactly where our friendship stood right now, but I didn't totally hate this place in between. It was filled with love and optimism, and it felt like anything could happen. It was kind of beautiful in its own way. And I thought I might prefer to live in this friendship no-man's-land forever rather than risk shattering the illusion of what we could be.

I cleared my throat, trying to derail that train of thought. "How do you feel about tomorrow?" I asked. "You excited to sign?"

A solemn look entered his eyes as he shrugged. "It'll be a weight off my chest when it's done. But I don't want to talk about hockey."

"No?"

"No." He leaned forward on the table, a spark reigniting his expression. "You brought up our second date, and I want to hear about what you've got planned."

"Me?" I laughed. "Maybe I'll ghost your texts and calls."

"You would never. Besides, this date isn't over yet. And there's no way you'll be ghosting my calls after tonight is through."

"Oh, really. And why is that?"

A tender smile graced his lips. "Because the best is yet to come . . ."

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Chapter 27

Grayson

As I drove Paige to the second part of our date, I was more nervous than I'd ever felt, even before big hockey games. Everything had been going well so far, but we were only partway through the evening, and there was still plenty of time for me to crash and burn.

After the restaurant, we stopped at our favorite ice-cream parlor and picked up two hot chocolates before I drove Paige out of town. A few minutes after we left Ransom, I turned off the main road onto a snow-covered dirt track.

"Where are we going?" Paige looked out the window with curiosity, but it was almost pitch-black and you could barely make out the tall trees that bordered the narrow road and towered overhead.

"You'll see."

Paige may have lived almost her whole life in Ransom, but I knew she'd never been out this way before. I'd only come here a few times myself with some of the guys. Matt's grandfather owned the land, and he surrounded the whole place with large "No Trespassing" signs, but we knew it was all for show. Besides, his farm was so big there was no way he'd know we were here.

The track ended just past the edge of the woods, and a wide-open field lay before us. I pulled the truck to a stop beyond the trees, and a faint gasp escaped Paige's lips when she saw the view. We were high up on a hill overlooking Ransom. The sun had already set, and the night sky was a deep shade of velvet blue. From our perch up high on the hillside, we could see the twinkling lights of the town below, all backlit by the moon's subtle reflection over the fresh snow.

"It's gorgeous," Paige whispered, admiring the view. "How do you even know about this place?"

“Been up here a few times with Matt and the guys in the summer,” I said.

“And you never brought me?”

“It was team bonding time.”

“You hate team bonding time.”

“True.” I chuckled. “I much prefer being here with you.”

The smile that lit her face made my heartbeat pick up a gear.

She turned to look out the window once more. “Pretty good for a first date, Gray.”

I figured if I only got one chance to take Paige on a date, then I was going to do it right.

“Well, don’t speak too soon, because that’s not the view we came for. Come on.” I grabbed the hot chocolates and climbed out of the truck. Paige followed, somewhat cautiously.

“There’s a better view out here than that?” she asked as she came around the side of the vehicle.

“Yep.” I was busy pulling the cover off the truck bed. “But you’re going to have to hop up here first.”

Paige gave me a confused look and glanced over her shoulder, scanning the field behind her through the darkness.

“No, I didn’t bring you here to look at an empty field,” I said. “Just get up there, Pidge.”

Paige hesitated, but I didn’t give her more than a moment before I gently placed my hands on her waist and lifted her off the ground.

She gave a sharp intake of breath, and when I lowered her onto the tailgate she was staring directly into my eyes. For several breaths we both remained still, and every ounce of my skin vibrated at her nearness. All I could think was how close her lips were to mine.

She cleared her throat but didn’t take her eyes off me. “So, uh, what am I supposed to be looking at?”

As much as it pained me to move from my spot in front of her, I smiled and climbed up beside her. “Let me show you.”

I’d set up a camping mattress with pillows and blankets in the truck bed behind her, and I climbed onto it. I beckoned for her to join me. She lifted one eyebrow but followed. When she was sitting next to me, I wrapped one of the blankets gently around our shoulders and layered several others over

our laps. Given the time of year, it was a mild night, but I still didn't want her to get cold.

I settled back on the cushions, which were resting against the back of the cab, and looked up. When Paige did the same, she went completely still. The night sky, clear and vast above us, was covered with stars, glittering brightly, as though they were putting on a show just for us.

"You told me that people don't spend enough time looking at the stars. Well, tonight, we have all the time in the world."

She turned to face me. "We're stargazing?"

"For as long as you want."

I'd witnessed Paige's smile thousands of times before, each one more beautiful than the last. But the one that graced her features now outdid them all, as she released a breath, tucked her head against my shoulder, and gazed up at the stars.

I lost track of time as we lay in contented silence. It could have been forever, and it wouldn't have been long enough. Lying here with Paige in my arms, everything in the world felt peaceful and perfect. Even the nerves caused by my still secret feelings had briefly subsided.

She suddenly pointed upward. "Look, a shooting star."

I watched as her eyes sparkled more brilliantly than anything in the sky. Staring at her now, my thumping heartbeat suddenly returned, and I knew I couldn't spend another moment pretending she didn't mean more to me than all the stars above us.

She turned to me, a hopeful look in her eyes. "Did you see it?"

I shook my head, nerves building. I'd been far too busy looking at her to worry about what the stars were up to.

"You missed it? How? It streaked across the whole sky. Now you don't get to make a wish."

I drew in a breath. This was it. Time to fly or fall. "I don't need a wish. Everything I've ever wanted is already right here."

"Everything you . . ." Realization slowly dawned in her eyes.

"You're everything, Pidge." My speeding heart had moved from my chest to my throat as I took her hands in mine. There was no going back now. I couldn't afford to hesitate or let any doubt set in.

"I'm sorry I've taken so long to tell you this," I continued. "But somewhere along the way, you became much more to me than just my best friend. I get butterflies when you enter a room and sparks on my skin when

we touch. I'm happiest when I'm with you, and when I'm sad, you're the person I want by my side. I know you deserve so much better than me. And I don't want to mess up what we have, but I've always believed our friendship can survive anything—including the fact I've . . ." I paused, but only for a moment. I refused to let fear take hold of me again. "I've fallen in love with you, Paige."

It was both freeing and terrifying to release those words out into the open. I could feel them lingering in the air between us, and the part of me that worried I'd never be good enough for Paige wanted to reach out and steal them back. But I couldn't keep this bottled up any longer. I'd done my best over the last couple of weeks to try to get Paige to see me differently; it had either worked, or it hadn't. There was nothing more I could do now.

"Crap," she murmured.

My heart started to sink. "You don't feel the same . . ."

"It's not that," she said. "I think I might have wasted my wish."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, either I wasted my wish, or the stars work really fast," she replied with a cautious smile. "I wished for you, Gray. I wished that this date was real. I wished that one day you'd see me as more than a friend. And I wished that you, no one else, would be my first kiss. Because I'm in love with you too, Grayson. I think I always have been. I just didn't realize it was love. I thought it was just . . . us."

"You really wished for all of that?"

"Yes." Her eyes were big and bright, and her smile so pure. The sight of her looking at me that way was more than I could have ever hoped for. It chipped away at my nerves and insecurities. It lifted the heavy weight of doubt on my heart, and my own smile started to grow in return.

"It seems like a lot to wish on one star," I replied. "Sounds a little greedy."

She opened her mouth to protest, but I leaned in, placing my hand on her cheek as I stared into her eyes. "I would have wished for all of that too."

I closed those last few inches between us and our lips finally met. I'd spent a long time imagining what it would feel like to kiss Paige, but my dreams were nothing compared to the real thing. One touch from her lips, and it was like we'd taken a torch to our friendship, burning it down and building something new in its place.

She tasted just liked she smelled, sweet and fruity. And while we were both tentative at first, when I felt the soft stroke of her tongue against mine, I lost all self-control. My hands tangled in her hair, and she gripped my jacket to pull me closer. My whole body came alight, and my heart was so full I thought it might burst. This wasn't just a kiss. I felt it everywhere, from my lips to the depths of my soul. Her kiss marked me in a permanent way, like she'd tattooed her name across my heart.

When she drew back there was a shy look in her eyes, and she bit her lower lip. "Was that okay?"

"Was that *okay*?" I shook my head in disbelief. How could she think that was anything less than earth-shattering?

"I don't have anything to compare it to, so you'll have to tell me if it was good or not." She was rambling a little, and I quickly answered to put her mind at ease.

"Trust me, that was the best kiss I've ever had."

"It was?" She perked up. "Because I thought it was pretty amazing too."

"Though, you should probably take my opinion with a grain of salt, because I don't have anything to compare it to either . . ."

She blinked slowly as though trying to understand. "You don't?"

"No, Pidge. That was my first kiss too."

"But . . . What? Who?" She blinked. "How is that possible?"

"Why would I kiss someone else, when I was waiting for you?"

Her cheeks turned pink as she smiled. But then her expression flipped, and she thumped me. "I hired you as my dating coach, even though you hadn't been kissed either?"

"Uh, firstly, *ouch*. And secondly, what do you mean *hired*? I don't remember being paid."

"Still, it's practically fraud! I should sue."

"Can you really blame me?" I asked. "I'd do anything for you."

She looked like she couldn't decide whether to kiss or thump me again. If I was at risk of receiving another punch, I might as well get another awkward conversation out of the way.

"Uh, also, while we're on the subject of coaching, you're going to need to cancel your date with Damien. I don't want to be a possessive boyfriend, but I can't exactly let you go out with somebody else now, can I?"

I tensed as I waited to see if her fist would go flying at me again. But instead, she started to smile. "Are you calling me your girlfriend, Grayson

Darling?”

“If you’ll let me.”

“Then I better cancel my other date.”

I released a low, satisfied growl in response, and she grinned as she pulled me back to her for another kiss. I wasn’t sure if it was fate, luck, or destiny. But it felt as if the stars had granted me a whole sky full of wishes, because Paige was finally mine.

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Chapter 28

Paige

I had finally ticked my first kiss off the bucket list. Never could I have imagined it would be with Grayson. Never could I have dreamed that I'd wish for him on a star, and he'd be mine just moments later. That we'd spend the entire night watching the stars together until we fell asleep in each other's arms, waking the next morning to a perfect pink sunrise.

"Next time I see a shooting star, I'm wishing for a million dollars," I said as we pulled up outside the Darlings' house. "Do you think it'll just appear in my hands like you did, or will I have to wait several business days for it to land in my bank account?"

Gray smirked and shook his head as he put the truck into park. It was still early morning, but the Darling house almost always seemed busy. We just had to hope everyone was getting a late start today.

With a sigh he turned to me. "We should probably head inside."

"Probably," I agreed, but I didn't move to leave. Even though it had started the previous evening, I wasn't ready for our date to end.

"Come on." He opened his door and climbed out, making the decision for us.

"Okay, okay." I hopped out of the truck and into the brisk morning air. Somehow it felt colder now than it had all night. Admittedly, cuddling up next to Grayson was like falling asleep in a furnace.

"On a scale of one to ten, how much trouble do you think we'll be in?" I asked as I walked around the truck to meet him. We hadn't stayed out all night on purpose, but I couldn't imagine Grayson's mom and dad being thrilled about it.

"I doubt my parents have even noticed," he said. "But it's probably best they don't find out. We'll have to be quiet going inside."

"I can do quiet. I'm practically the James Bond of stealth mode."

“Of course you are.”

I wasn’t sure he believed me, but he reached out and took my hand. It was such a simple gesture, but it legitimately made my heart sing.

“What?” he muttered as he caught sight of my broad grin.

“Nothing.” I was smiling down at our interlocked hands like an idiot, and I quickly wiped the expression from my lips. I shared everything with Gray, but perhaps it was better if I didn’t reveal quite how crazy I was about him just yet.

He eyed me with some suspicion, but thankfully didn’t dig any deeper. “Okay, 007. Let’s go.”

We tried our best to stay silent as we made our way around the back of the house, but as we neared the kitchen door, I slipped on some snow and released a squeal. It seemed to echo through the entire neighborhood, and even a few birds that were perched on the garden fence took flight. It was lucky Gray was still holding my hand, or I would probably be stretched out on the ground right now.

“That’s your stealth mode?” Gray scoffed.

“Maybe my spy skills need a little work.”

“A little?”

“Okay, a lot.”

A light chuckle left his lips. He’d been smiling and laughing a lot since last night, and it was something I could definitely get used to.

“Maybe no one heard,” I said as Grayson led me the final few steps to the back door. My optimism was misguided.

When we tiptoed into the kitchen, we found every member of the Darling family sitting at the counter, eating breakfast. The room fell silent and they all glanced up from their food. Parker, Cammie, and Reed each gave us a knowing look. Danny seemed like he was trying to cover a smile. The only person who looked upset was Amy, but when she noticed the way Gray was holding my hand, I could see a little of the concern melt from her eyes.

“How was your early morning jog?” Reed asked.

“Jog?” Gray replied.

I subtly elbowed him, and he quickly corrected himself. “Oh yeah, it was great. We both really needed the fresh air.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I love to jog.”

Parker laughed but quickly covered the sound with a cough as he gave my clothes a critical look. I was wearing the same flowery pink dress as last night. The only difference was I now had Grayson's red Devils sweatshirt over the top. It clearly wasn't jogging attire.

"But today I felt more like a walk," I quickly added, as if that would help to explain my outfit. "We both did."

"Well, it's a lovely morning for a walk," Danny agreed with a smirk, before turning to Gray's mom. "Remember when we used to go for early morning walks together, dear?"

I couldn't decide if Gray's dad playing along made this better or worse. It was obvious everyone knew we were only just getting home from the night before.

"A walk, huh?" Amy asked.

"I'm sorry!" I blurted, unable to contain my guilt. "We were out all night!"

"Paige," Gray muttered.

"But we were stargazing, and we accidentally fell asleep. We were being good, I promise. It really was an accident." Clearly, I had no hope of ever holding up under torture.

Danny laughed into his coffee. "It's okay, Paige."

Amy shot him a look and he quickly cleared his throat.

"I mean, it's not okay to be out all night, and we're very disappointed." He glanced back at Amy, as if he was checking for her approval.

"Yes, very disappointed." She nodded in agreement, but her expression and her words didn't match up at all. "Just don't do it again, you two."

"We won't," Gray and I agreed in unison. It felt like we were getting off far too easy.

Everyone returned to their breakfast, the boys still smirking into their cereal, but Amy's attention remained on us. "Paige, your mom messaged this morning to let me know she'd landed. I think she's concerned she hasn't heard from you yet today."

The news my mom was back made me grimace; I only hoped the reaction wasn't too noticeable. My phone had died yesterday evening, so I probably had a dozen missed texts from her updating me on her travel arrangements.

I wasn't ready to go back home, especially after last night. But Amy had at least given me the perfect excuse to leave the room.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said. “My phone’s dead, but I’ll go charge it now so I can text her back. I should probably start packing too.” Dreading what was next but happy to escape the kitchen, I made a quick exit and dashed upstairs.

Once I reached Cammie’s room, I plugged my phone into the charger and started gathering my things while I waited for it to power back on. The more I thought about packing, the less I wanted to go home. Especially when I was facing a grilling from my mom about why I’d missed my career meeting and what that meant for my future. I was floating so high on the fluffy cloud Grayson had placed me on, I wasn’t ready to come back down to earth.

“I think they might be on to us . . .”

I smiled and turned to find Grayson leaning against the doorframe.

“Oh no, you think so?” I feigned surprise. “How could that have happened?”

Gray laughed and walked into the room. He wrapped his arms around my waist and nervous jitters leaped in my chest as I gazed back at him. Even though things had changed so much between us since last night, being in his arms felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“What are the other spies going to say when you get back to MI6?” he asked. “First you squealed while sneaking into the house, then you took one look at my mom and told her everything.”

“One: I slipped. That could happen to anyone. Two: your mom’s a master interrogator.”

“Master interrogator? Really?”

“Okay, fine, I’d make a terrible spy. But I wasn’t exactly dressed for stealth mode.” I gestured toward his bright red sweatshirt.

“I happen to think that’s the perfect outfit for stealth mode,” he replied. “It’s also perfect for you to wear while eating, sleeping, going to school; anything really.”

“I get the feeling you like seeing your name on my back . . .”

“I’ve always liked it,” he said. “But right now, that word doesn’t begin to cover what I feel.”

“So, what word would you use?”

“Let’s just say, it makes me want to steal you away for another night and never give you back.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to keep wearing it then.” Gray was welcome to steal me away whenever he wanted, though perhaps next time we should try a little harder to not get caught.

I sighed as I glanced down at my bags. Living out of a suitcase sucked. Packing it up and leaving Grayson sucked so much more. I’d loved staying with him and the whole Darling family. But despite my reservations about going home, I had kind of missed my mom and dad. They might not be the easiest parents, but it felt strange to have been so far from them both for so long.

“You ready to go home?” Gray asked.

“Not really. My mom’s going to be so pissed. I’m the reason she cut her trip short, and I’ve probably missed a million messages from her this morning. I should have gone to see that counselor.”

“Paige, it was an accident. And sooner or later, she’s going to have to realize that you’re the one in charge of your future. Sure, she can help you, but you’re going to decide how it plays out on your own terms.”

“I don’t think she’s ever going to believe that. She wants everything mapped out now.”

“Well, if all else fails, just tell her we’re dating, and you’re planning to become an NHL WAG.”

I burst out laughing. “You really think that’s a good idea?”

“Sure.” Gray shrugged. “All I have to do is get through one more game, and by the end of today, I’ll have signed with Ryker. I’ll be one step closer to my dream career, and you can tell her you plan to ride shotgun with me the whole way.”

“Yeah, I don’t think she’ll like the sound of that.”

“Exactly,” he agreed with a wicked smirk. “She’ll be so worried that you don’t have any aspirations of your own, she’ll agree to just about anything else you suggest.”

I smiled at him. “And people say you’re just a pretty face.”

“Nobody says that.”

“Don’t they? I could have sworn—”

He cut me off with a kiss, and I smiled against his lips. Grayson was an amazing kisser, and I truly struggled to believe that he’d never done this before. When he kissed me, it made me wonder if this was what coming home should feel like. Every part of him felt familiar, and being enclosed in his arms gave me a sense of comfort I’d never experienced anywhere else.

He made me feel warm, secure and loved; like I'd arrived in the one place I would always be welcome. Like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

His kisses weren't just coziness and warmth though, and I was quickly learning that under his stern exterior he was hiding a seriously passionate side. If Grayson was my home, then it sometimes felt like we'd left too many candles burning, and the house was about to go up in flames. Things with Gray could get kind of steamy, and the more we kissed the more I was beginning to discover a whole new side to the boy that had my heart. I felt like I could spend a whole lifetime exploring Grayson Darling.

When he drew back from me, I was practically gasping for breath. "What was I saying?"

He grinned. Seeing that lopsided smile on his lips immediately made me want to drag him in for another kiss.

"Gross," Cammie groaned from the door.

I tried to jump back from Gray, but he only held me tighter and kept his eyes locked on mine.

"We're a little busy in here, Cam."

"You know you've got your own room, right, Grayson?"

Cammie's expression made it clear she wasn't joking around. I'd gotten through two weeks without incurring Cammie's wrath, and I didn't want to ruin that now.

"We were just leaving," I said, pulling out of Grayson's arms. "Thanks so much for letting me stay in your room, Cammie. I got you a little something . . ." I walked over to my bag and pulled out my gift for her.

Cammie took the box and opened it, a smile gracing her lips as she pulled out a snow globe with a small ice skater in the center of it. It was one my mom had given me years ago. The girl at its center was dressed all in black and had reminded me so much of Cammie.

"Thanks, Paige. You didn't have to get me anything."

"It's just something small, and I really am grateful." As I was speaking, my phone started lighting up where it sat charging on the bedside table. I didn't need to check to know it would be my mom, probably wondering where the hell I was. "I better get going."

Gray reached for my bags before I could tell him not to worry about it. He leaned in as we left Cammie's room. "I knew you had at least one snow globe in there."

Of course he did. Gray knew me too well, but that was what made starting a relationship with him so special. We had something no one else had. It had kind of always been that way, but now we could take our unique relationship to a whole new level.

But forging our friendship into something new came with its own risks, and as I considered all we had to lose, I started to worry. What if this didn't last? It was the first time the thought had truly entered my mind since the date, and I let my anxiety bubble up as we made our way to my car. This thing between Gray and I was still so fresh, and I didn't want to do anything that might spoil it. But this felt too important for me to stay silent. He was too important.

"What if we don't work out?" I said as we stopped by the trunk of my car. "I don't want to lose you."

Gray's expression was serious, and he placed my bags on the ground so he could take my hands in his. "You're never going to lose me."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It may not always be," he agreed. "But fighting is one of my strengths. I'm always going to fight for you. For us."

"You don't think we'd be better staying friends?"

"I've felt this way about you for a long time," he said. "Keeping those feelings bottled up and hidden from everyone was a struggle. But now that they're out in the open and I know you feel the same way, it's like a massive weight has lifted. I think if we just promise we'll always be honest with each other about what we're feeling, then whatever happens, we'll be okay."

"Whatever happens?" I frowned. "So, you're saying we could lose each other . . ."

His thoughtful expression was replaced by the bright smile I'd been seeing more and more of recently. "No, that's not what I'm saying." He laughed. "You're stuck with me forever, Pidge. I promise."

"I'll be holding you to that."

"Good."

He pulled me in for a hug, and once again I was surround by Gray's warmth, his smell, and the strength of his embrace. They were such familiar sensations, and they instantly cleared my mind of worry. We were still us, but we also weren't. Things had changed, but that was okay. It was more than okay.

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Chapter 29

Paige

I had no idea how Grayson could make carrying all my luggage look so easy. When I arrived home, I managed to lift just one of my bags out of the car and bring it to the house. It was bursting with my belongings and weighed a ton. I might have overpacked this one in my rush to gather my things at the Darlings', fully aware that every second I delayed, the more impatient my mom would become.

As I walked through the front door, the seam of the bag burst open, scattering all its contents across the floor. I cursed under my breath. Even my bag had decided it would prefer to hit its own self-destruct button than be in this house. I supposed I should at least be grateful it had waited until we were inside to call it quits.

"I'm home," I called as I stooped to clear up the mess. Mom didn't respond. Instead, I heard her clearing her throat from the kitchen. Whenever she made that sound, I knew I was in trouble. The mess could wait. I should probably face her first.

She was sitting at the kitchen table, and it looked as though she'd been waiting for me. I cringed as she pushed her chair back and stood.

"I've been home for over an hour. Where were you?"

Unsurprisingly, she was getting straight to the point. No "I missed you, Paige." No hug, no kiss on the cheek. Not even a "hello." Sometimes, I wondered whether my mom might be part robot.

"I was still at the Darlings'. I had to pack my bags." I straightened my back as I spoke, just in case she felt like berating me over my posture too. The way her mouth formed a tight, thin line, I could tell she wasn't in the mood to listen to excuses.

"How was your flight back?"

“Fine. But I was expecting you here when I arrived. I had to fish around in the garage for the spare key, which you’d know if you ever checked your messages.”

“My phone died,” I said. “But I’m here now.”

“Yes, you are. And you’d better get started . . .”

“On . . .”

“College applications.” She tapped one of her long, manicured fingernails against the lid of the laptop on the table in front of her.

“You want me to do that now?”

“Of course I do.”

“But I need to unpack, and Grayson’s game is this afternoon—”

“I don’t care.” My mom folded her arms over her chest. “You’re even further behind with everything than when I left.” She was beginning to raise her voice, which was a serious red flag. Mom was always intimidating by default, she rarely needed to change her expression when she wanted to convey her anger. Something was different today.

“Mom—” I tried to interrupt her, but she didn’t even pause for breath as she continued her rant.

“You’d understand how urgent this is if you’d actually attended the career fair. Or had a meeting with your counselor. I cannot *believe* you missed it again. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother.”

I often wondered the same. It felt like we’d had this conversation a hundred times before. And every time, I’d nodded along, claimed I understood her concerns, and promised to do what she wanted. But that wasn’t fixing anything. I hadn’t planned for my future yet, because I didn’t know which path I wanted to take. And that was okay. Forcing me to go down a certain route just because she thought it was best was only making everything harder.

“Mom . . .” I spoke a little louder this time, but there was no stopping her.

“Some of these application deadlines have already passed. More are due this week. I won’t let you mess up your future, it’s too important, so I’m not letting you put this off any longer. You’re not leaving this room until every single one of your applications is complete.”

“No!” The word erupted from me, all my frustration spilling out at once. It wasn’t often I let my temper get the better of me, and I’d even shocked

myself with my fierce response. But what else was I supposed to do when she refused to listen to me?

"No?" My mom's stern expression faltered, but then instantly hardened. "This isn't a discussion, Paige."

"You're right, it isn't. I'll apply for colleges if and when I'm ready. Not simply because you've forced an application into my hands."

Mom looked like her head was about to explode. I'd never stood up to her like this before. It was terrifying, but I also felt a sense of lightness in my chest, like I'd unshackled something deep inside.

"You live under my roof, so you'll do as you're told," she said, her voice quieter but no less demanding. "Sit down and get to work."

She pulled back a chair for me, but I refused to budge. I was done tying myself in knots in order to turn myself into the pretty bow my mother wanted. I'd had a lot of time to think while she'd been away, and it was time she understood that I could make my own choices.

"Paige . . ." She nodded at the chair.

"What's the point?" I said. "I might not even go to college."

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "You know this is what's best."

"I know it's what *you* think is best. What about what *I* want?"

She was silent for about two seconds before she dismissed my words with a sweep of her hand. "You don't know what you want."

"No, I don't," I agreed. "But that's okay! You act like it's the worst thing in the world, but it's not."

"You won't be saying that once you end up doing nothing with your life."

"Better than ending up like you!"

Suddenly the room went quiet. My mom was stunned into silence. I'd shocked myself again too. Had I meant to say that out loud? Had I meant to yell it at her? I couldn't be sure, but I took the opportunity to keep going.

"I'm going to find my way, Mom. I truly believe that. But you've got to understand that I'm not going to follow the same path you have."

I'd never seen my mom lost for words before. And while it was nice to finally express my feelings, the surprise on her face was turning to sadness, and I didn't know what to make of it. Was she still angry? Disappointed? Hurt? Either way, I knew it was time to finally get everything off my chest. She'd been pressuring me for so long that I couldn't handle it any longer.

“I know you want me to make something of myself,” I continued, keeping my tone a little softer now. “But I’m not like you and Dad. I don’t want the same things. My path isn’t straight and narrow. It’s a winding, uneven trail through the trees. I’m going to get lost occasionally, but I’ll get where I want to go, eventually. You just have to trust me.”

Mom stared at me as I waited for her to respond. But then she did the last thing I expected. She burst into tears.

“Mom?” I whispered as she collapsed back into her chair and lowered her head into her hands. I approached her slowly and cautiously. I’d never seen my mom cry before. I didn’t realize she even knew how. A feeling of guilt rushed through me. I’d wanted to stand up for myself, but I hadn’t wanted to make her cry.

“Sorry, Mom, I didn’t mean . . .”

“No, Paige,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Don’t apologize. It’s okay. You’re right.”

“I-I am?”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath, but it only seemed to release more tears. “You *don’t* want to end up like me.”

“What are you talking about?”

She looked up, her usually pristine eyeliner slightly smudged, and her face still wet with tears. “I lost my job,” she whispered.

I sunk into the seat at her side. “What? How?”

“Budget cuts.” She shook her head, and her jaw tensed. “They cut the staff in half. I can’t believe it. When they needed to drag me away from my family for weeks on end, I was indispensable. But when the going got tough, I was among the first to go.” She released a dry laugh.

I was almost more surprised to see this vulnerable side to my mom than hearing she’d lost her job. She always seemed so perfectly held together, even when she was stressed and busy. But right now, she looked broken.

“That’s awful, I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“No, I’m sorry, Paige.” She sat up and looked me in the eye. I didn’t know what she was apologizing for, but I could see she meant it. “Ever since I can remember, my goal was to get accepted into the best college possible and find the best job possible. As soon as I set foot on the corporate ladder, I started climbing, and I haven’t stopped. For years, I worked myself into the ground for that company. I missed so much time with you, with your father, with everything. But I was only ever just a

number to them. And as soon as the numbers didn't add up . . ." Her gaze fell to the floor, and she shook her head again.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

Mom closed her eyes and took a moment before she answered. "Not right now." When she opened her eyes, she looked at me once more. "But I will be. And I know you will be too."

"I-I will?"

She nodded. "My path was laid out for me from high school, and look where it's gotten me. Years of hard work suddenly feels like it was all for nothing. I don't want you to go through that."

She took a heavy breath before she continued. "You don't have to go to college if you don't want to. You can find your own way through the trees. Discover something that you truly love to do."

I stared at her in shock. Had she agreed with me? She was looking at me in earnest, her eyes wide and filled with genuine care. She was being vulnerable and open and, for once, I felt I was seeing what my mother hid behind her harsh, cold walls.

"I know I've been hard on you about college and planning for the future," she said. "But I just want you to have options. So, if it ever turns out you're heading in the wrong direction, you can easily find your way to a better route. I know you don't want to end up like me. And now I understand why. You need to find your own way. I trust you to do it. But I want you to know, I'm here to help."

I was lost for words. My mom never backed down, never gave in. I think her motto in life was to win at all costs. Surrender wasn't an option. But I think, right now, she was legitimately waving a white flag.

I usually blocked out a lot of what my mom said once she started talking about college, but this time I was listening. It finally felt like she was speaking from the heart, rather than just telling me what she thought she was supposed to. It finally felt like she understood where I was coming from.

That's all I'd ever really wanted from her. But she was also making a lot of sense. I'd never in a million years admit she was right, but keeping my options open might not be the worst idea.

"You have helped me, Mom," I said. "More than you know."

"I have?"

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I mean, I’ve been determined to defy your every wish this year. I had to get that kind of perseverance from somewhere.”

Her tears had cleared up enough that she could firmly glare at me.

I smiled. “But seriously, over the last few months, it might have seemed like I was avoiding my future, but I’ve actually been thinking about it more than ever. Maybe you haven’t seen it, but you’ve pushed me to try countless new things, get out of my comfort zone and search for my path. I might not have found it yet, but I’m getting there. I promise.”

“That’s great, Paige. I’m so glad.”

“And I guess it wouldn’t hurt to apply to a few colleges. Maybe we can work on an application together now.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” she said. “Thank you.” She gave me a smile that was so much warmer than the rigid curve I was used to seeing on her lips. She wiped one last tear from her cheek as she stood. “But there’s no rush. Let’s get your things from the car first, and then you can tell me everything you’ve been up to the last couple of weeks.”

As she walked from the kitchen, I wondered if perhaps losing her job might end up being the best thing to happen to my mom. Maybe she’d be a little more human and a little less robotic now that she wasn’t working so hard. Maybe things would be better between us.

But then I heard a groan and a yell from the hallway. “Paige! What the hell happened out here? I want this mess cleaned up yesterday!”

Well, perhaps things wouldn’t completely change between us. But it seemed we’d at least taken one step in the right direction today.

I walked out into the hallway and started gathering up my things. Among the scattered clothes and shoes and books, I found my school diary and, as I picked it up, the pink piece of paper with my bucket list written on it fell out. It floated to the floor, but I plucked it from the air.

As I cast my eyes over all the items I’d tried and failed to love, I was surprised to find I didn’t feel angry or upset or disappointed. I’d done all these things because my parents had made me feel like I needed to decide what I was going to do with my life now. And, unlike them, I wanted to make sure I was doing something I loved. But over the last two weeks I’d realized that it was okay not to have an immediate plan. It was okay if you didn’t have everything figured out. Because sometimes life threw something at you that was better than anything you could ever have dreamed up anyway. My first kiss was proof of that.

As I stared at the item at the bottom of my bucket list, I thought about ticking it off. My fingers itched to reach for a pen and finally mark it complete. But instead, in one swift movement, I tore the list in two.

I grinned as I let the pieces fall to the floor.

I was done making lists, and I was done trying to find all the answers today.

I was ready to see what life threw at me and make the best of it.

But first, I was going to sit down with my mom and fill out a college application form.

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Chapter 30

Grayson

I probably shouldn't have stayed up half the night before such an important game, but I couldn't bring myself to regret a single moment of my night under the stars with Paige. I had to stifle a yawn as I sat in the locker room tying my skates, but I knew the instant I hit the ice for our game against the Waverley Wolves, any remnants of exhaustion would melt away. I wished I could say the same about the pain in my knee.

It didn't feel too bad right now, but I wasn't expecting that to last long after the game started, especially after my failed test on the lake the other night. There was just one more game to play, and I could only hope that once today was over, I would be able to relax in the knowledge that my next year, at least, was secure.

"I thought you might look a little happier once you and Paige finally got together." Parker sat across from me in the locker room, grinning.

"Parker . . ." Reed warned our brother from beside me.

"I'm glad things worked out, though," Parker continued. "Thanks, of course, to our brilliant plan. But I guess you'll be the same old Grumpson forever." He winked, and jumped up from the bench before I could react, heading across the locker room to talk to some of the other guys.

As I glared after him, Damien entered the room. I felt an unexpected twinge of guilt as he approached. While he and Paige had never actually gone on their date, it wasn't exactly cool of me to swoop in and ask her to be my girlfriend before they did. Or to have spent the last week actively undermining his chances with her. Obviously, there was no way I was going to stand back and let him steal her away without a fight, but I still didn't feel great about winning. And, even if he didn't know we were competing, I was pretty sure Damien wouldn't like being defeated.

“Reed. Grayson.” He nodded and gave us both a friendly smile as he passed.

I stared after him, unsure how to react. He was acting like nothing was wrong. And it seemed he was being genuine.

Paige must have told him about us, right? And if she had, he must be pissed. But he looked totally unfazed. When he reached his locker, he sat beside Owen, and the two of them fell into casual conversation. He looked awfully happy for a guy who’d had a date canceled on him. This was Damien Stone. Could he really take a blow to his ego this well?

I turned to Reed. “Paige canceled her date with Damien this weekend, right?”

“I’m sure she did.”

“What if she didn’t though? Her phone was dead this morning. Then she was in a rush to get home and had to deal with her mom. Maybe she forgot?”

“You really think she wouldn’t cancel the date after you two finally got together?”

“I think she has a lot of other things on her mind at the moment.” I glanced Damien’s way again. “Should I say something to him?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Just make it clear we’re together now.”

Reed shook his head. “And I thought *I* was a possessive boyfriend. You and Paige have been officially dating for, what, twelve hours?”

“More like eighteen.”

He laughed. “But who’s counting, right?”

“Right.”

“Paige isn’t going on a date with Damien.” He tried to reassure me with a firm slap on the shoulder. “Stop stressing. She wouldn’t do that to you. Look, we have a game to win, a coach to impress, and a letter to sign. You should be thinking about that.”

I was already way too aware of all those things. And unbeknown to Reed, I also had my injury to worry about. But even though I knew I needed to start focusing, I still found myself checking on Damien, hoping to detect any sign that he might have received some bad news from Paige. Even just a hint of disappointment. But no. He was laughing at something with Owen.

Matt took a seat beside me, as I turned to Reed once more. “I don’t think she’s canceled on him yet.”

Reed ignored me and leaned forward to explain my dilemma to Matt. “Grayson might finally be with the girl of his dreams, but now he’s worried she hasn’t canceled her date with Damien.”

Matt gave me a playful nudge. “Never happy are you, GP.”

“Don’t call me that.”

His smile only widened. “I’m sure you’ve got nothing to worry about. But scowling at him across the room isn’t going to get you an answer.” Matt turned to face Damien and raised his voice. “Hey, Stoney, what’s the deal with you and Paige? Have you got a date tomorrow?”

Could he have been any less subtle? The whole team had turned to look.

Damien smirked, and I wondered if he had already noticed how agitated I was about the whole thing. “Let’s just say I won’t only be scoring on the ice this weekend.”

Scoring? I couldn’t seem to stop myself as I rose from my seat. Reed jumped up to stand in my way before I even realized I had taken two long strides toward Damien. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure what I had planned, but it wasn’t going to end well for either of us.

“Calm down, Gray.”

“Yeah,” Matt added as he joined my brother. “He was just messing around.”

“Well, I’m not,” I replied. “I’m going to kill him.”

“You don’t want to fight a teammate,” Reed said. “Not today . . .”

I did when that teammate was Damien Stone. I’d been itching to wipe that smug look off his face ever since he arrived back in town, and I finally had a good reason to do exactly that. I’d never let a guy talk about Paige that way before, and I certainly wasn’t going to start now.

“Reed’s right,” Matt said. “Coach Mercer is in the stands today. You’re hours away from signing with Ryker. Are you really that stupid?”

I clenched my teeth tighter as the sound of Damien’s laughter drifted across the locker room toward me. I looked past Reed and Matt and gave him my most lethal glare. But he only continued to laugh. I was about to force my way past Matt and my brother, but then Damien composed himself enough to speak.

“Dude, dude, I’m only joking.” He stood up, holding his hands out in front of him slightly as though he was trying to calm a wild beast. “Paige messaged me earlier. I know you guys are together. Congrats, by the way.”

“Congr—” His words only seemed to antagonize me more. “You think that was funny?”

Damien shrugged. “I don’t know, but your reaction sure was.”

“It *is* fun to poke the bear,” Parker agreed with a smirk. “Especially now that he’s unlocked boyfriend mode.”

Everyone around me had started smiling or laughing along, and I realized, with my hands raised, I kind of did look like a bear about to launch into an attack. It appeared I was now the only one in the locker room still on edge.

“Seriously, Grayson,” Damien said, stepping forward to stand just behind Matt and Reed. “I’m happy you and Paige are finally together. To be honest, I was surprised you hadn’t already hooked up when I got back here. And I’m sorry if I delayed you any further. No hard feelings.” He stretched out a hand toward me, as Reed and Matt cautiously stepped back.

I was just as surprised as everyone else when I reached out to shake Damien’s hand. “Thanks, but there’s nothing to apologize for,” I said with a nod. “We’re good, Damien.”

“Thank God for that.” Parker’s voice broke any last remnants of tension in the room. “Now, can we save some of this anger for the opposition?”

“He’s right,” Reed said, addressing the rest of the team. “Everyone get yourselves together. Let’s get out there and make the Wolves howl in pain!”

The guys all started whooping and howling in reply, sharing grins and cheers of agreement.

“Warm-ups start in two minutes,” Reed added, once the noise died down. As everyone focused on their final preparations, my brother turned to me, keeping his voice low. “You sure you’re good?”

“Well, I’m not going to prison for the murder of Damien Stone, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Day’s not over yet, Grayson,” Damien called out as he returned to his locker. His response almost had me smiling. Apparently, Damien was a little more self-aware than I gave him credit for. And perhaps he wasn’t quite as bad as I remembered.

Reed gave me a nod. “Okay, let’s get out there and remind Coach Mercer why he wants to make us Ryker Raiders.”

As I followed my brothers out to the ice, I was struggling to clear my head. Although my run-in with Damien had been a little awkward, it had at least distracted me from the variety of emotions that were coursing through

my veins ahead of the game. I couldn't work out if I was nervous about performing in front of Mercer, worried about my knee holding out, still recovering from the surge of anger I'd felt at Damien's joke, or just bubbling with anticipation that soon this would all be over and my place at Ryker next year would be locked in.

My emotions rarely got the better of me once I put on my Devils jersey. I never let nerves hold me back, or anger cloud my judgment once I took to the ice. But today I felt a cocktail of inner turmoil bubbling beneath the surface, and I longed for this day to be over.

All I needed to do was perform well in this game without revealing any hint that my knee was bothering me, make it to the final siren, sign my letter of intent, and skate off into the sunset. So, no pressure.

I wondered whether the others were feeling anxious. Reed looked tense, and even Parker was betraying his nerves with the way he kept adjusting the grip tape on his stick. With Coach Mercer in the stands, there was pressure on my younger brother too. Reed and I had already done the hard part and impressed the coach from Ryker. We just had to make sure we didn't do anything to mess that up. Parker, on the other hand, really needed to shine if he wanted a chance of joining us at college when he graduated. It was rare for one Darling Devil to be this tense before a big game, let alone all three.

The Wolves players were already warming up when we arrived. A large chunk of the crowd were dressed in their colors of gray and black, and the atmosphere was charged with anticipation. Each team started weaving through cones, taking shots at the goalies, and passing the puck around the ice.

Our opposition were the least of my concerns though. Instead, my attention was on the stands. I just needed to see Paige's smile and I knew everything would be all right. My eyes scanned the crowd, searching for her face, but I couldn't find her. My search continued as Coach Ray called us together, and I was only half-listening as he delivered his pregame pep talk. I usually spotted Paige the moment I placed my skates on the ice, but today, she was nowhere to be found.

She didn't appear during our warm-ups, and my stomach hollowed as we went to take our places for the start of the game. I still couldn't see her, and I started to wonder if something was wrong. She usually got to my games early, so it concerned me she wasn't already here. She'd been so nervous to see her mom again, and I worried she might have gotten into

trouble. Could she be grounded? Would her mom really stop her from coming to today's game? She'd messaged me to say good luck a couple of hours ago. Had something changed since then? I'd assumed everything was fine, but maybe I should have called.

I started muttering curses under my breath. They were mostly directed at myself, but a couple of Wolves players who were close by gave me strange looks and edged away. Most players were apprehensive about facing off with Grayson Darling on a regular day, but they were about to get a nasty shock. I was usually an emotionless machine. Right now, I was feeling everything, and I wasn't quite sure what that meant for me, or for the unlucky guys on the other team.

The puck dropped and I burst into action, ignoring the pain in my knee that sparked when I pushed off the ice, doing my best to block the rest of the world out and focus on the game.

We started well. Reed scored an early goal and Matt got another only a few minutes later. The Wolves were struggling to keep up with us, but they did come close to our goal a couple of times. One of their attackers was particularly quick, and my knee practically screamed at me to slow down as I raced after him to stop a breakaway. Then I had to throw myself to the ice to block a shot headed right for our goal, hurting my knee even more.

I just kept telling myself to play through the pain, but it was becoming harder and harder to convince myself that was possible. Especially when I knocked into a Wolves player and sent him flying. My knee buckled from the contact, but I managed to stay steady enough on my feet to get control of the puck and pass to Parker so he could score our third goal of the game. As my teammates celebrated, I was almost limping back to center ice for the faceoff.

Miraculously, as the game continued, no one seemed to notice how much pain I was in. My teammates were too busy tearing the Wolves to shreds. Even Damien was impressing me with his skills, and for the first time, I allowed myself to admit he was actually a decent player. Every time I tackled the opposition or made a last-ditch block, he was there to take the puck and skate off up the ice while I clambered back to my feet.

When the second period started, I still couldn't see Paige in the stands. She'd missed games before, but as more time passed, the more her absence was distracting me. Whenever I got a moment, I scanned the crowd again.

I was glancing at the stands when the puck came spinning my way. I reacted a split second later than I should have as I went to chase it down. It wasn't an obvious delay, but I already knew Coach Ray had noticed and he'd be pissed. It didn't matter how quickly I skated to make up for my momentary lapse, I'd be yelled at for not staying focused on the game. Would Coach Mercer have spotted it too?

That mistake should have been enough to get my head straight. But as I sped toward the loose puck, a flicker of red caught my vision from the stands. I knew I shouldn't look. But I was struck by a feeling deep in my gut that Paige was finally here.

Despite the fact that I was racing across the ice, I glanced up. I couldn't help it. The pull toward her was just too much to resist. I allowed my eyes to stray from the puck in front of me and quickly found Paige, just as I suspected, beaming at me. I was surprised to see she wasn't wearing her usual Devils jersey, but the same red sweatshirt I'd given her last night. I started to grin. I'd told her this morning that seeing her in it made me want to steal her away again, and it felt like she was giving me a sign—she wanted to be stolen away too.

It gave me a renewed sense of energy. Everything finally felt right. But another flash of color caught my eye. This time it was the gray and black of a Wolves player flying toward me. The same guy I'd knocked over earlier in the game. And he wasn't chasing after the puck. He was coming for me. Before I could react, he slammed into my side, and I felt my feet lift off the ground. I winced in pain as the hit shook me to my core, sending me soaring through the air. I opened my eyes just in time to see the boards and the ice hurtling toward me and then—

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Chapter 31

Paige

Nothing. Not even the slightest movement. Grayson lay still on the ice as gasps and hushed whispers rippled through the crowd. My heart was pounding in my ears, and the rest of the noise in the arena faded to a dull hum. Why wasn't he getting up? Why wasn't he moving?

Devils players skated to Grayson, and the coaching and medical staff rushed onto the ice.

"Get up. Get up. Get up," I urged, my words both a demand and a prayer. Reed, Parker, and the other players had formed a ring around Grayson and the medical staff, so I couldn't see what was going on. All the Wolves players had taken a knee and were watching with solemn faces.

I'd seen Gray get hit while playing many times before, and he'd always gotten right back up. This was taking way too long, and I could see my own concern mirrored on the people surrounding him. I felt a hand on my arm and flinched from the sudden contact. I glanced up as Violet took hold of me. She didn't say anything, but given the terrified look in her eyes, she was clearly just as worried as I was.

"Why isn't he getting up?" I asked her.

"I don't know, Paige." Her voice shook with emotion. "It was a really hard hit . . ."

"What if he's really badly hurt?" I said, daring to utter my worst fear out loud.

"Try not to jump to any conclusions just yet."

Easier said than done. Especially when I couldn't see what was happening. There were still too many people crowded around Grayson.

Dread rose from deep within me as a stretcher was brought onto the ice and laid down beside the huddle. I briefly caught sight of Gray as the crowd of people standing over him stepped aside, but I couldn't work out whether

he had moved yet, or even if his eyes were open. I desperately wanted to race down to him, but I was frozen in place.

Time felt like it was standing still, but also flooding past way too fast, and I gasped when they finally lifted the stretcher off the ground to reveal Grayson strapped tightly to it, his head and neck secured in some sort of brace. My heart lurched, propelling me down the bleacher steps, Violet chasing close behind. I had to get to Grayson. I had to know if he was okay.

As we raced onto the concourse and turned a corner, I almost collided with Cammie, who was running in the opposite direction.

"Paige, thank God, I was just coming to get you," she panted.

"Where's Grayson?"

"They're taking him to the hospital. Mom's in the ambulance with him."

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know."

"Is he . . . awake?"

"I don't know."

We shared a panicked look. When someone you loved played hockey, you were always aware there was a risk of injury. But risk and reality were completely different things.

"He'll be okay," I said. "He's got to be."

I simply couldn't imagine a world where he wasn't.

"Dad's waiting in the car, do you want to ride with us?"

"Uh, that's okay. I've got my car."

"Okay, I'll see you there." She gave me a nod before turning and running to the exit.

Violet and I followed her to the parking lot, and as we got outside, I fumbled with my purse trying to find my keys. My hand slipped, sending my bag and all its contents crashing to the ground. The clatter almost set off the tears that were building in my eyes, and I wiped a hand across my cheek as I knelt to pick everything up. I was trying so hard to hold myself together, but I was even more of a mess than the contents of my purse, which were splayed across the icy concrete. Perhaps I should have taken Cammie's offer of a ride.

Violet crouched down to help put everything back in my bag.

"Why don't you let me drive?" she suggested.

I nodded, still trying to fight the gathering tears as she gently took the keys from my hand. I wasn't good at dealing with a crisis. Especially not

when it involved Grayson being hurt. He was always so strong and unstoppable. I never would have believed anything could bring him down. I was shaking by the time we reached my car, and I couldn't seem to stop as Violet drove. My fingers tapped against my leg as I watched the streets fly by. I knew I wouldn't be okay until I saw Gray. Until I heard him say that everything was fine.

"You know how careful they have to be," Violet was saying. "Try not to worry. We're almost at the hospital, and we'll find out what's going on."

Her calming words were the only thing keeping me going right now.

Finally we pulled up to the ER entrance and rushed inside. Grayson and his mom and dad were nowhere to be seen, but Cammie was at the front desk arguing with the nurse.

"You want me to wait?" Cammie gasped. "We don't even know if he's awake."

I came to her side and touched her arm. "What's going on? Where's your dad?"

"Already in with Gray." Cammie waved toward the large double doors behind the nurse. "Apparently, I'm not allowed in, and they won't even give me an update."

"You can't tell us anything?" I asked, turning to the nurse. I was so nervous I thought I might throw up. I just needed to know he was okay.

"I understand you're all concerned," the nurse replied. "But right now the medical team are focused on providing him with the care he needs."

"There must be something you can tell us," Violet said. "Please . . ."

"Can I ask your relation to the patient?"

"He's my brother," Cammie replied. "I already told you that!"

The nurse nodded. "Okay, I'll see if I can get an update from the doctor as soon as possible."

"Yeah, you do that!" Cammie replied.

I had no idea how the nurse wasn't shaking under Cammie's glare. People often said Grayson was terrifying, but I'd never seen him look even half as threatening as Cammie did then.

"Why don't you take a seat?" the nurse suggested, indicating to the rows of plastic chairs behind us.

Cammie looked ready to yell at the woman again, but I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and steered her away. "We'll do that, thanks."

“This is ridiculous,” Cammie scoffed. “I can’t believe she won’t tell us anything or let us see him.”

“I know,” I agreed.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Do you think we should just push our way through the doors? They can’t stop all three of us.”

“Uh . . .” I wanted to storm the ER as much as she did, but I also didn’t want to get kicked out of the hospital.

“Maybe we just give the nurse a minute and see what she can find out,” Violet said, still calmer than me or Cammie.

“Okay, well, after that minute’s up, I’m giving her another earful.”

I had no doubt about that.

As we went to find a seat, I looked at all the other people in the waiting area, presumably the worried families of other patients. Was it okay that Violet and I were here? The nurse had wanted to know if we were related to Gray, and technically only Cammie was. I suddenly worried if we were intruding and turned to Grayson’s sister. “You don’t mind that we’re here, do you?”

She blinked at me. “Where the hell else would you be?”

“Well . . . This is time for family . . . And the nurse seemed concerned about whether we were related . . . I don’t want to overstep.”

“Uh, no, you *are* family. This is exactly where you’re supposed to be. Both of you.” She sunk into one of the plastic seats and shot another sharp look at the nurse behind the front desk. “I don’t care what she thinks.”

Violet and I took a seat on either side of her. Cammie continued to stare down the nurse, but thankfully Parker and Reed arrived before she could go back for round two or come up with another crazy plan to get to Gray. My nerves were just about frayed enough that I might have gone through with it if she suggested it twice.

“Any news?” Reed asked.

“Nothing yet,” Cammie replied. “Mom and Dad are with him. The nurse is apparently going to update us when she knows more. But I’ve already pissed her off so much that we might never find out. How was he on the ice?”

“He woke up once they’d put him on the stretcher,” Reed said, falling into the seat beside Violet.

“He did?” My heart felt like it started beating properly for the first time since I’d seen him fall. I could feel tears forming in my eyes again. “We

weren’t sure. We didn’t know if . . .”

Parker reached out and grabbed my hand. “We don’t know much more,” he said. “But he was awake.”

I wiped a stray tear from my cheek and closed my eyes for a moment to prevent any others from falling. Grayson was awake. I had to believe that meant he’d be okay. When I opened my eyes again, I realized Reed and Parker must have raced here straight from the ice. “You guys are still in your hockey gear.”

“You didn’t finish the game?” Violet added.

Reed shook his head. “There’s no way either of us could play. We left right after Grayson. The guys will just have to manage without us.”

“But what about the coach from Ryker?” I asked. “Your signing . . .”

“That’s not what matters right now.”

Parker nodded in agreement. His eyes were serious, and it must have been the first time I’d ever seen him look that way. He would usually be the one cracking jokes to lighten the mood, but even he couldn’t find a reason to laugh right now.

Reed leaned closer to Violet and gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” she said.

I felt Grayson’s absence more than ever. I should be at his side. We should be holding hands. Instead, I only felt cold. Parker sat across from me as Cammie went to hassle the nurse again for an update.

“It’s going to be okay, Paige.”

I tried to give him a smile, to show I agreed, but I couldn’t pull it off. I was really struggling to think positive thoughts right now.

“Grayson’s pretty tough,” Parker added. “And it takes more than a little bump on the head to keep a Darling down.”

“It’s just . . . I just . . .” I drew in a deep breath. “What if this is my fault?”

“Your fault?” Parker managed a snort. “I didn’t realize you were moonlighting as a two-hundred-pound wingman. Have you been keeping secrets from us?”

Maybe things weren’t quite that dire if Parker still had the energy for a snarky comment. “No, but I was late to the game. I got caught up at home. I promised my mom I’d fill out a college application with her and it took a lot

longer than I expected. Gray was looking for me in the crowd. He was distracted because of me."

"If Grayson's head wasn't in the game for any reason, that's his own fault, no one else's," Parker said. "He'd be the first person to tell you that."

I wrapped my arms around my waist. I couldn't see it that way. This never would have happened if I'd just arrived at the game on time.

"No update," Cammie said as she slumped down into the seat beside Parker. "The nurse hates me."

"She probably just didn't have any news," Reed replied.

"Yeah, well, that's my brother in there. She should know what's going on. Can't one of you two go up there and get some answers? What's the point of having a reputation as bad as a Darling Devil if you can't use it to get your way in an emergency?"

"I'm pretty sure that if your death stare didn't work on her, then we've all met our match," Parker replied. "You're way scarier than we'll ever be, Cam."

She gave him an icy glare that only proved him right. "So, what, we just *wait*?"

"We don't have any other choice," Reed said.

We all fell silent as the reality of his words settled in. There was nothing we could do. But the longer we sat here, the darker my thoughts became, each minute seemed longer than the last, and the weight on my chest only grew heavier.

The fluorescent lights overhead were too bright, the sterile scent of disinfectant too strong. And no matter how I positioned myself on the plastic chair, I couldn't seem to get comfortable. I knew I wasn't the only one, because the boys kept getting up to pace around the room. The tension was almost unbearable, but it finally snapped when the doors to the ER opened and Gray's mom appeared.

We all shot to our feet and rushed over to her.

"How is he?" we all said at once.

"He's got a concussion, but otherwise, he's okay." Amy's voice was filled with relief, but the way she twisted her hands revealed her nerves. "They took a lot of precautions and did a lot of tests to make sure he didn't have any more serious injuries."

The pressure on my chest eased slightly. But while Amy seemed positive, I still didn't think I could relax until I saw Grayson for myself.

“They’re sure there’s nothing more serious?” Parker asked.

“Yes, the doctor seems confident he’s going to be okay.”

Hearing those words again almost released more tears.

“Can we see him?” Cammie asked.

“We can, but he’s still quite groggy,” Amy answered. “It’s probably best we don’t bombard him all at once. And he seemed mostly concerned with seeing a certain best friend of his. Or should I say, girlfriend?”

Amy smiled at me, and my cheeks warmed in response. I wasn’t used to being called Grayson’s girlfriend, especially not by his mom.

“Why don’t you go in first, Paige?” Amy gestured at the doors behind her. “He’s the second door on the right.”

“Uh, maybe he’d rather see his actual family first,” I said.

But Parker gave me a shove toward the entrance. “Are you kidding? I think we can agree that he’d prefer not to see my ugly mug at all.”

Cammie snorted. “Yeah, it really is that ugly. I genuinely can’t believe it attracts a different girl each week.” She turned to me and nodded. “Just get in there, Paige. You’re the one he wants to see.”

With all the Darlings urging me forward, I knew I didn’t have much choice. It was hard enough to disagree with one of them; when the whole group banded together it was impossible. So, I drew in a deep breath and made my way to Grayson’s room.

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Chapter 32

Grayson

Everything hurt. I felt bruised and battered, a little like someone had stuck me in a washing machine and set it to spin. I'd taken heavy hits before, but this was the first time I'd been knocked out cold.

It was hard to recall the moments leading up to the collision, and the ride to hospital was a blur. But I clearly remembered the terror I'd felt when I woke up, strapped to a stretcher, unable to move, with my head and neck in a brace.

The medical staff had given me a very quick summary of what happened: I'd taken an illegal hit from a Wolves player, I'd been knocked unconscious, and they were taking me to the hospital on a spinal board as a precautionary measure. That hadn't done much to ease my concerns. I was scared for my health and scared for my future in hockey, but most of all I was scared thinking about how Paige and my family would be feeling, watching me from the ice and in the stands.

It was only once I arrived at the hospital, and the doctor ran her tests, that I was able to breathe a little easier. Nothing was broken, and apart from a bad concussion, I was going to be okay. They still wanted to keep me in the hospital overnight for observation, but I'd be walking away from the incident just fine.

I should have felt relieved and grateful that things hadn't turned out worse, but as I lay in my hospital bed, my only thoughts were of Paige. When my parents told me she was in the waiting room with everyone else, I knew I had to see her first. To let her know everything was going to be all right.

I was staring up at the ceiling when I heard the door to my room open and footsteps hurry across the floor to my bedside. I smiled when Paige appeared, still dressed in my sweatshirt. Her eyes were filled with worry,

but all I could think was how the doctors should have brought her to me straightaway. They'd been a bit stingy with the pain relief, but the sight of Paige was better than any medication. Her presence alone lessened the throbbing in my head, so the only pounding was coming from my chest. My heart really needed to learn how to keep calm whenever she looked my way.

"So pretty," I murmured.

"Just how many painkillers are you on?" She sat on the bed beside me, reaching out to grasp my hand, her brow puckering with concern as she looked me over. Had I said that out loud? I'd planned to say something that would instantly quell any worries she had about me, but my brain seemed to be struggling to communicate clear instructions to my mouth. Maybe my concussion was as bad as the doctor said.

"They're monitoring me for complications, so unfortunately, no painkillers," I replied. "But you're right, I must not be thinking clearly. I should have said beautiful. Pretty doesn't do you justice."

Her lips hinted at a smile, but it was warring with the worry in her eyes. Clearly, she wasn't ready to make light of the situation. "How are you feeling?"

"Annoyed. I've never let anyone take me out like that."

"I'm serious, Gray. I've been so worried about you. You were on the ice for ages. You weren't even moving. Then they brought you here and we didn't know what was wrong, and we weren't allowed to come see you. You're okay, right? You look okay. Please tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay. Just a concussion. No lasting injuries, but I might have to miss a few games." I reached up and rested a hand on her cheek, gently brushing my thumb across her soft skin. I hated seeing the anxiety etched on her features, especially knowing I'd put it there. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

"You don't need to apologize," she said, trying to contain her emotions. "And I'm sure you'll be back on the ice soon, as good as new."

Back on the ice, maybe; as good as new, no way. It might not be the reason I was in hospital right now, but the pain in my knee had been worse than ever today. For most of this season, I'd been holding myself back, cruising through games in a low gear to avoid aggravating my injury too much. But with Coach Mercer watching, I couldn't afford to take it easy. Playing hard had only proven just how bad my knee was.

"I'm not so sure about that," I muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“My knee is shot, Paige. It’s killing me. It has been for months.”

She drew in a slow breath as she stared into my eyes. “I knew it was bothering you. Is it really bad?”

My throat tightened as I nodded. “Very.”

My own fear was reflected in her eyes, and I could see her trying to keep herself together for me. She knew exactly how dire a serious knee injury would be for my future.

“Well, maybe now you can take a little time to rest,” she said. “No one’s going to hurry you back to playing after today.”

“I don’t think a little rest is going to be enough to fix this.”

Her voice was all too quiet as she responded. “Then what is?”

“I have to tell someone about it. I need to get help.”

“But what about Ryker? Your letter of intent . . .”

I knew the answer to her question. I think we both did. But that didn’t make it any easier to say aloud.

If I revealed the true extent of my injury, the Raiders could revoke my scholarship offer. But even if I kept it under wraps, Coach Mercer would surely notice as soon as I arrived at Ryker. I’d get slaughtered playing against college guys on an injured knee, and I’d probably get kicked off the team anyway. I couldn’t avoid reality anymore.

“Once they learn just how bad my knee is, there might not be a letter to sign,” I admitted. “But I’m done trying to avoid the inevitable, and I can’t keep playing this way.”

“Gray . . .” she murmured.

“It’s okay. I know the risks. Besides, if college hockey doesn’t work out, I can always open a crappy bakery with my girlfriend instead.”

Paige didn’t laugh at my joke. Instead, she shook her head, fire blazing in her eyes. “You can’t give up,” she said. “I won’t let you. This is your dream. They’re not going to rip up your scholarship just because of a little injury.”

“It’s not just a little injury though. I’m damaged goods.”

“You’re not damaged. You’re just recovering.” She was becoming more animated as she spoke, waving one hand in front of her while the other still gripped mine tightly. “I was there when the coach from Ryker first reached out to you and Reed. Do you remember what he said?

“What?”

“That he’d just witnessed the best talent he’d seen in years.”

“He was talking about Reed.”

“No, he was talking about both of you.” Her voice was firm, almost as if she was angry with me for thinking otherwise. “You always act like you’re not as good as Reed. But you’re just as talented as him, if not better. The only difference between the two of you is Reed believes in himself. You can’t give up.”

“I’m just trying to be realistic.”

“To hell with realistic,” she replied. “Don’t stop chasing your dreams until your legs fail, your arms give in, and you can’t even drag yourself toward them anymore.”

Paige’s unwavering confidence in me made me fall for her just a little more. I knew how serious our conversation was, but it was hard not to smile at her when she was looking at me like I was some fallen superhero about to rise from defeat and fight back to win the final battle.

“Okay, Pidge.” I nodded slowly. “Even if you’re right, that doesn’t change the fact it’s time for me to come clean and deal with the consequences. Sometimes, you’ve got to take a leap of faith. Look what happened the last time I did that.”

I sat up straighter in my bed and took hold of her other hand, pulling her closer.

“For years I hid how I truly felt about you because I was terrified of what might happen to our friendship if you found out. Now, the only thing I regret is not telling you sooner.”

“You were worth the wait,” she whispered.

“So were you,” I whispered back and bowed my head against hers. “I need to let this secret go too, or I’m certain I’ll regret it.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Whatever you want to do, I’ll support you. I’ll always support you. And if things don’t work out, we’ll figure out the next step together. If that’s opening a terrible bakery, we’ll do whatever it takes to make it a success. Even if I have to burn a million muffins until I figure out how to make something edible. It’ll all work out; I know it.”

As I looked up at Paige, I was almost overwhelmed by how lucky I was to have her by my side. Revealing the truth to my coaches wasn’t nearly as daunting when I knew we’d be facing the fallout together.

“I’m so in love with you, Paige Price.”

“And I’m so in love with you, Grayson Darling.”

She leaned down and pressed her lips to mine. Her kiss was gentle, nervous, like she was afraid if she pressed too hard, she could injure me further.

I might have been in a hospital bed, but my lips certainly weren't broken. I pulled Paige close and wrapped my arms around her, pressing her against me as I deepened the kiss. Electricity swirled through every cell in my body, and the connection between us felt like a wildfire as it spread across my skin—fast, hot, and completely untamable. I kept waiting for the alarm at my bedside to start ringing because my heart rate was skyrocketing.

I would have happily continued the kiss forever, but we were interrupted by the sounds of whoops and whistles coming from the door. Paige blushed as she pulled away and turned to look.

"I tried to stop them—" The nurse's voice was drowned out by the noise of the entire Devils hockey team barging into the room, yelling and cheering.

"He looks okay to me."

"Must be a part of his treatment plan."

"If this is how they tend to the patients here, can someone knock me out too?"

I shook my head but couldn't keep a smirk from my face. My teammates didn't seem too concerned about my health, but I guess I *was* feeling well enough to make out with Paige on my hospital bed.

Reed, Cammie, Violet, and Parker all walked through the door behind the crowd of fully kitted-out Devils who quickly made the room feel like a janitor's closet.

"Don't worry, little sis," Parker said with a grin. "I'm sure she was just trying to revive him with a little CPR . . ."

My teammates sniggered, and I scowled at all of them. It seemed I wasn't as intimidating when I was bedridden.

Matt was standing at the front of group, and he winked at me before raising his hands to get the team's attention. "Settle down, boys, unless you want to end up in the bed next to Grayson."

There were a few murmurs of agreement.

"How are you feeling, Gray?" Reed asked, and everyone went quiet as they waited for my reply.

“I’ll be al—” I didn’t get a chance to answer, as movement at the door caught my eye. I looked over to see my parents, Coach Ray, and Coach Mercer stepping into the room. They moved slowly, as though they were trying not to be noticed, but everyone had already turned to watch them. Each wore a stoic expression, and it was hard to predict what they might be thinking.

“I hope it’s okay if we come in,” Coach Ray said, when he realized every eye in the room was on him and Mercer. “We just wanted to check on you.”

My gut twisted with uncertainty, but I nodded. My parents had probably informed the coaches of my concussion, but they had no idea more bad news was coming. There was every chance I was about to sabotage my own career, my whole future, and I didn’t particularly want an audience to watch it happen. My family and the rest of my team didn’t seem to notice though. They were staying quiet, as if hoping I wouldn’t realize they were still hovering in the room. All they needed was a few bowls of popcorn and they could have been at the movies.

“How are you feeling?” Mercer asked.

“Not too bad, thanks. Still a little woozy.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “We spoke with your parents and the doctor already. That was a nasty hit, and concussions are no joke.”

“Absolutely,” Coach Ray agreed. “You’ll need to take at least a couple of weeks off, and we’ll monitor it from there.”

He then turned back to Mercer, and they shared a look before the Ryker coach continued.

“I know you were supposed to sign your letter of intent for me today,” he said. “But I’m happy to wait until you’re out of the hospital. We can leave it a few days, if you prefer?”

“That’s okay with me,” I said. “Provided you still want me to sign.”

“What do you mean?” Mercer’s brow creased and a few mutters of confusion rippled around the room.

I took a deep breath and gripped Paige’s hand tighter. She looked down at me and smiled, squeezing my hand right back. This was it. No regrets. Time to take another leap of faith.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I started. “All of you. I’ve been playing through an injury. My knee hasn’t been the same since I got hurt a

couple of years ago. It never fully recovered, and this season it's been worse than ever."

My words were met with a silence that lingered for longer than I liked. Was everyone waiting for me to continue, or were they just lost for words?

"It's gotten too painful to play," I added. "And if I keep this up, I'm worried the damage will be irreparable. So, even without the concussion, I think I'll be out of action for a while."

"Why didn't you say anything, Gray?" My dad was the first to speak. He looked like he was struggling to process what I'd just shared, likely reliving the moment his own hockey career was ripped away from him because of an injured knee.

"I was worried Ryker wouldn't want me if I couldn't play this season, so I pushed through the pain. But I can't do it anymore." I turned to Coach Mercer. "I understand if you want to hold off on the signing for more than a few days."

Mercer was nodding slowly and his jaw looked tight, as though he was chewing on what I'd just told him.

"Well, kid, I'm really sorry to hear this," he began. "And I appreciate you telling me. It's vitally important to us at Ryker that we get a full picture of every player we recruit, especially when it comes to injuries, both past and present. And this is certainly new information." He paused, and scanned the room, which was still packed with onlookers holding their breath in anticipation. "But personally, I don't see how this changes anything."

"You don't?" Surely I hadn't heard him correctly.

"Nope." He shrugged. "If anything, I'm more excited for you to sign than I was before. Hell, if what I saw today is you playing on a bad knee, I can't wait to see what you can do with a good one. If you're ready to put in the work to get better, then Ryker will be here to support you."

I was speechless. He still wanted me. My dream was still alive.

"You rest up," Mercer continued. "Get that knee looked at and then focus on your recovery. In the meantime, we'll set a new date for the signing. How about next week, if you're feeling better?"

"I'll wait until then too," Reed said from beside my bed before I could answer. "I'm not doing it without Grayson."

"Fair enough." Coach Mercer nodded at my brother and then at me, a warm smile on his face. "We'll leave you to rest, and I'll be in touch soon."

Both coaches said their farewells and left, and the nurse who'd clearly been itching to assert her dominance took the opportunity to wave the rest of the team from the room. "Now, all of you, out! The boy needs to rest."

The guys muttered complaints but started making their way to the door. As they passed by, most of them tapped on the foot of the bed, winked at me, or told me to get better soon. My parents, Cammie, and my brothers hung back.

"You didn't have to postpone your signing," I said, turning to Reed.

He instantly waved away my concern. "Ryker can wait. I'm not taking this next step in life without you, Gray."

I nodded, my emotions threatening to break through my stony exterior.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything about my knee." I turned to the rest of my family. "I should have gotten it looked at sooner."

"We're just glad you're okay," my mom said.

"Yeah," my dad agreed, stepping forward to grip my shoulder. "And it took guts to tell Coach Mercer about it on signing day. We're really proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Can't say we weren't worried for a second there though," Reed added.

"I wasn't worried," Parker insisted.

"Don't lie, you were more worried than anyone," Cammie said with a laugh, although she brushed a finger across her cheek as she did. Was that a tear? Surely not.

"Okay, everyone," my mom said. "Let's leave Grayson to get some rest."

They started from the room, and Paige went to jump off the side of the bed to follow, but I grabbed hold of her arm.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where do you think you're going?"

"The nurse said you need to rest." She pointed over her shoulder to where everyone else was walking through the door and disappearing into the hallway.

"I'll rest from them. But not from you. Never from you."

I lifted my arm as Paige came back to the bed and lay down next to me, snuggling in close.

As I held her, she smiled up at me. "I told you Ryker would still want you."

"Yeah, I should've known better than to doubt your psychic skills."

“It’s hardly psychic when it was clear the coach would be an idiot to let you go.” But then her lips tilted in a smile. “Or maybe you’re right. Perhaps my career path lies in psychic readings. I should add that to the list.”

Not another thing on her list.

She let out a playful laugh and shook her head. “You should see your face. The list is in the trash, Gray. I tore it up.”

“What? Why?”

“It was all about searching for something that someone else wanted me to find. And I finally told my mom I’m going to figure out my own way in life.”

“You did?”

She nodded, a sense of resolve and pride brightening her features. It couldn’t have been easy for her to stand up to her mom, or tear up the list she’d worked so hard on. But I felt confident she’d do just fine without it.

“The list wasn’t all bad,” I said. “It kind of helped bring us together after all.”

Paige blushed and ducked back into my arms. “You’re right. Kissing you is the one thing on that list I’m happy to commit to for the long-term.”

If there was any room left in my bursting heart, the gratitude I was feeling right now would have caused it to overflow. Despite everything that had happened, I’d never felt luckier. I still had an injury to recover from and a letter of intent to sign, and I knew the next few months weren’t going to be easy. But I also knew I wasn’t going to face it alone. And right now, my future felt brighter than ever before, because I had a girl who made it all worth fighting for.

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Epilogue

Grayson

I was right about my knee; it kept me out of action for far longer than my concussion. Coach Ray and my dad set me up with a specialist who recommended surgery if I wanted to make a full recovery and be fighting fit for my first season with the Ryker Raiders. I had to spend a few weeks on crutches followed by the start of a months-long program of physical therapy to build my knee back to full strength. As a result, instead of being out on the ice right now, I was sitting on the bench watching my teammates play the Sunshine Hills Saints in the state championship game.

Most people in my position would have been heartbroken, jealous even. My high school hockey career had been cut short at the last minute, and I was missing out on what would have been the biggest game of my life so far. Missing out on one final chance to play with the Ransom Devils—my friends and both my brothers.

Despite all that, I was okay. Just a few months ago, I had been in constant pain because of my knee. But the anxiety I'd suffered every time I pulled on my skates to play a game had been far worse than any physical pain. I'd been terrified my knee would finally break down and my career would be over for good, and I'd hidden that fear from everyone around me for so long.

Now, because I'd finally opened up about my injury, both the physical and mental anguish were gone, and all that remained was excitement for the future. Sitting on the bench wasn't where I'd expected to be today, but if I was out there playing on my injured knee, I knew I'd be in a much worse place.

Hockey wasn't the only reason I was optimistic about the future. The main reason was sitting right next to me, watching the Devils take to the ice.

Paige was at the hospital every day while I'd recovered from my concussion, and then she held my hand through practically every step of my knee surgery. And, of course, she was the first person I wanted to embrace when I finally put pen to paper on my scholarship with Ryker.

I knew coming clean about my knee was the right decision. But that was nothing compared to my decision to finally reveal my feelings for Paige. I'd really hit the jackpot with that one.

As always, she looked beautiful tonight, dressed in her red Devils jersey. Her hair was tied back, but loose tendrils kept escaping her ponytail and spilling across her face. She was tapping a pen against her lip as she watched the start of the game, occasionally scribbling on her notepad as she prepared her next article for the school paper.

She'd finally found a passion that stuck, and had quickly become Bonnie's top student sports journalist. Her candid interviews with the team had become a regular feature in the paper and were eagerly anticipated by the entire school, especially during the playoffs. She'd been writing articles and filming videos of us for social media throughout the weekend-long state tournament and had pretty much earned herself an honorary spot on the team. It had been amazing to watch my teammates fight their way to the championship game, but it was something truly special to do it with Paige on the Devils bench next to me.

When the puck dropped to begin the game, I tore my gaze from her and focused on the ice. It was a frenetic start, with no love lost between the two teams. As I watched Reed, Parker, Matt, Damien, and all the guys, the urge to jump over the boards and join in was almost overwhelming. I desperately wanted to help them battle our biggest rivals, but there was nothing I could do now.

I'd remained closely involved with the team over the last few weeks, showing up for every practice and game I could, essentially becoming Coach Ray's de facto assistant coach. I helped him run drills, hyped the team up when they needed it, and advised and encouraged the younger guys. Even though I was injured, my reputation hadn't been damaged, so I also made sure to pull out a stern word or a well-placed glare when anyone stepped out of line or took their eye off the puck. I was usually so laser-focused on my own game when I was playing, it was actually a nice change. But still, nothing compared to suiting up and stepping onto the ice.

I relaxed a little when Parker scored midway through the first period, and then a little more when Reed got another for the Devils. I even cheered when Damien scored our third goal, an impressive shot from center ice that really knocked the Saints' confidence. In the end, we were too strong for them, running out comfortable winners by five goals to one.

There were wild celebrations in the locker room after the final buzzer, and the guys all made me feel like I'd been out there with them. This victory wasn't just about today, and we all knew it. Winning the state championship in my senior year, with my brothers, had been four years in the making, and felt truly special.

Eventually, I left the guys to get showered and changed. They were all taking the team bus home, but I was driving back to Ransom with Paige. There would be plenty of time to continue the celebrations at Matt's victory party later. Right now, Paige was the only person I wanted to be with. She was leaning forward in the passenger seat, still writing in her notebook, looking thoughtful as soft music played in the background.

She sighed when she saw the "Welcome to Ransom" sign up ahead. I couldn't help but share her reluctance to be home. I wasn't ready for this part of the night to be over either.

Paige dropped her eyes back to her notebook, and I focused on the road. But through the darkness, I recognized a turnoff, and an idea popped into my head. I pulled off the main road and onto the snow-covered dirt track with towering trees on either side that wound its way up to the lookout point we'd come to on our practice date. I guess now I could call it our first date.

Paige glanced up as I pulled to a stop. When she saw the twinkling lights of Ransom down below, she blinked. She'd clearly been so absorbed by her work she hadn't even realized I'd taken a detour.

"What are we doing, Gray?" She sounded tired. I was too. But I needed a moment to stop before we headed home. To appreciate how far we'd both come this year before we started looking to the future again.

"You up for a little stargazing?"

A smile slowly formed on her lips. "With you? Always."

I jumped from the truck and walked around to help Paige climb out before we both got into the trailer. I wrapped a blanket around our shoulders, and we stared up at the night sky.

It felt like this was the first night in weeks that the sky was clear enough to see the stars and, although it was still cold, the crisp air hinted that spring was just around the corner.

“It’s like the end of an era,” Paige said as she rested her head against my chest. When I held her close, I felt a sense of calmness I couldn’t get anywhere else. She was my refuge, my peace, and the comfort I always craved.

“I guess it is,” I agreed. “But I’m looking forward to what comes next.”

“Yeah, me too.” She sat up and started flicking through her notebook, which I thought she’d left in the cab of the truck. Eventually, she found the page she was looking for and pulled out an envelope that was tucked inside. She looked down at it, reading whatever was on the front before handing it over to me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s what comes next. At least, I hope it is . . .”

I took the envelope from her, and my breath caught in my throat when I recognized the Ryker University emblem printed on it. It was a letter from Ryker, and it was addressed to Paige.

I sat up straight. “Seriously, what is this?”

“Well, you know how my mom convinced me to finally apply to colleges?”

“Yeah . . .”

“I’ve started getting replies.”

She was smiling at me, but through the dim light I could tell she was nervous because of the way she was glancing between me and the envelope. I reached out and tangled her fingers with mine, needing to calm my own rapidly beating heart just as much as hers.

“You applied to Ryker?” The words came out softly, as if I hadn’t been sure whether to speak them aloud.

She gave a small nod. “I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to get your hopes up, and then the letter arrived last week but it was the playoffs, and I was afraid it might distract us . . .” She stared up at me, her eyes wide with worry. “You don’t mind, do you? It’s not just that I want to be with you next year. Obviously, I want that, but I’ve realized I want to be there for me too. They have an amazing sports journalism program, and from the moment I applied I haven’t been able to imagine myself going anywhere else.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” I said. My own nerves were growing as I looked at the letter she’d placed in my hands. Since we’d gotten together, I had tried not to let myself worry too much about where we might end up next year, knowing Paige had her own dreams to chase. I haven’t even dreamed this was a possibility. But now that the letter was here, I couldn’t imagine any other future for us.

“But what if I didn’t get in? What if they rejected me? What if they all reject me?” Her voice was becoming more frantic. “I filled out my applications so late. And then they felt so rushed. Mom was right, I need options. But now I just want Ryker so badly.”

“It’s okay, Pidge.” I scooted closer and wrapped my arms around her once more. “Whatever happens, we’ll figure it out. I’ll do whatever it takes to be with you. Even if that means ditching hockey and opening Crapcakes.”

She laughed. “I didn’t know we’d settled on a name for our crappy bakery. I like it.”

I kind of liked the sound of it too. Our joke about opening a bakery was growing on me more and more. For most of my life, hockey had been the number one priority. But missing the second half of the season had allowed me to take a step back and think about other things. Hockey was still important to me, and it was still my plan for the future. But it didn’t have to be. As long as I had Paige, I knew I’d be happy.

“We probably can’t actually call it that,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because no one would buy the food!”

I nodded. “True. But that’s probably a good thing if you’re cooking it, right?”

I laughed as she elbowed me hard in the ribs and snatched the Ryker letter back from me. “Let’s just pray this option works out.”

“Okay. Are you going to open it?”

She took a deep breath, nodded, and then tore open the envelope like she was ripping off a Band-Aid. She was more careful as she pulled out the letter inside and started to read in silence.

I stayed quiet as I watched her, doing my best to keep a neutral expression as I braced myself for whatever her next words would be. When I was certain she must have read it through at least once, the suspense became too much for me.

“Well? What does it say?”

Paige was still, her eyes locked on her letter. She seemed like she was in a state of shock, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad sign.

“I’m in,” she murmured, before lifting her wide eyes to mine. “I’m in!”

She threw herself into my arms, and I hugged her tightly, tucking my head into her neck. Relief flooded through me and a smile spread across my face.

“I’m so proud of you, Pidge,” I said, pulling back to look at her.

“I’m proud of me too.” Her eyes were glittering and her expression filled with hope. “Can you believe I finally have a plan for my future?”

She grinned and dropped her gaze back down to her acceptance letter, as if she needed to read it one more time to make sure it was real.

I leaned back, relief mixing with excitement for all that was to come. As I stared up, a star streaked across the sky. Paige’s eyes were still lowered as she reread her letter, and I was tempted to point it out to her. But instead, I let the star fall without drawing her attention. I’d leave that wish for someone else. We both already had everything we wanted.

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Photo courtesy of the author

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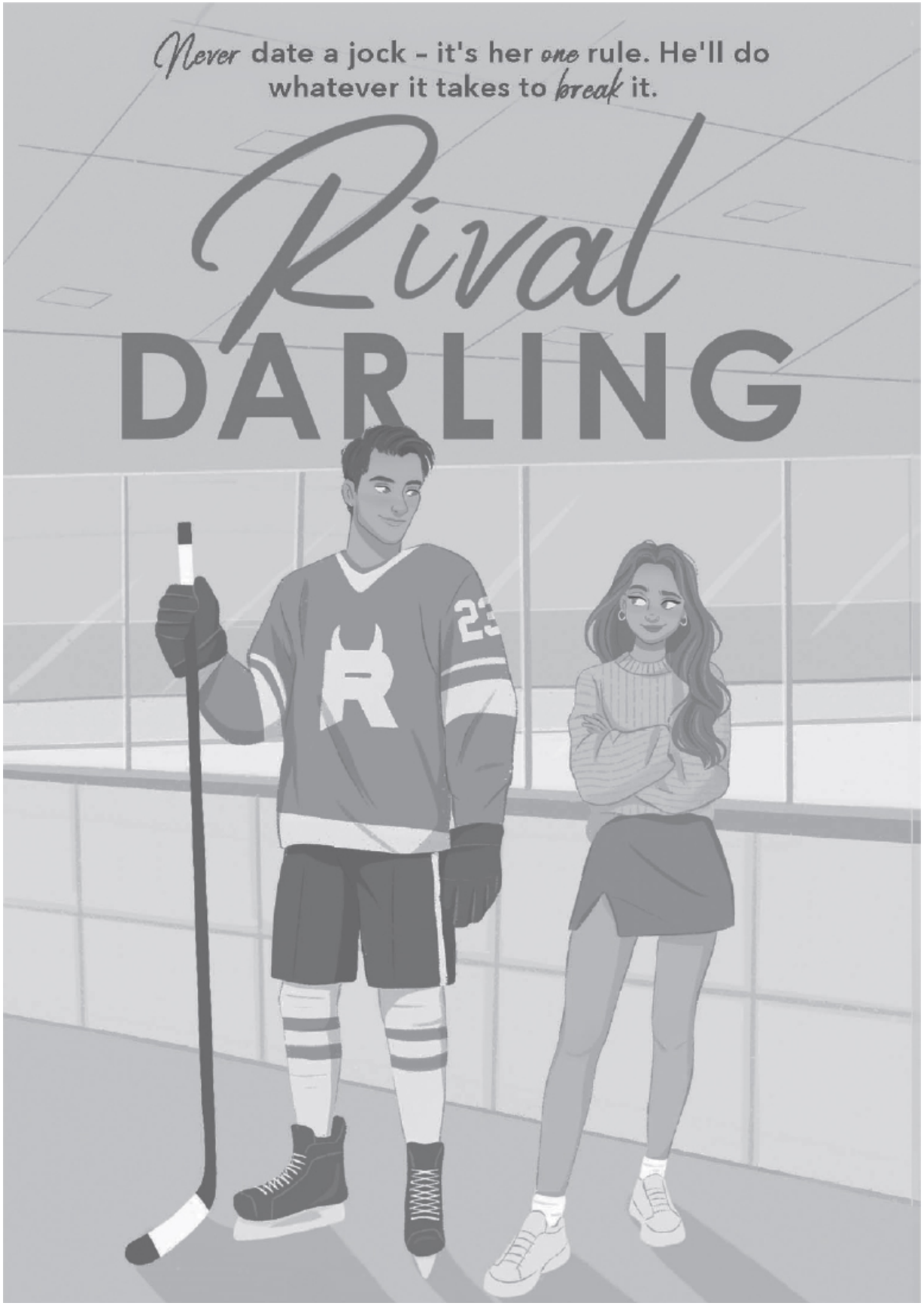
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