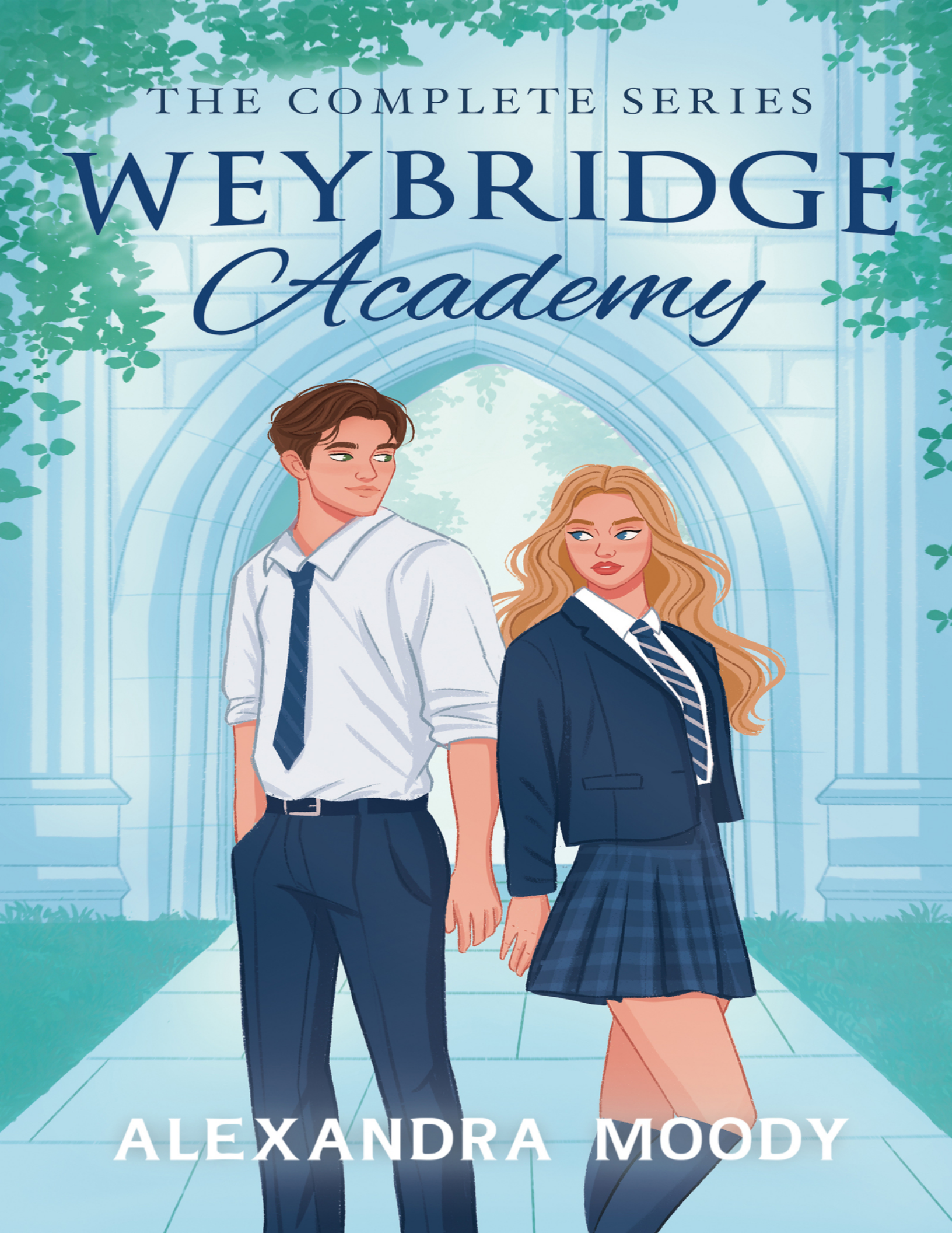
THE COMPLETE SERIES

WEYBRIDGE *Academy*



ALEXANDRA MOODY

THE COMPLETE SERIES

WEYBRIDGE *Academy*

ALEXANDRA MOODY

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CONTENTS

Sweet Heartbreak
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34

Sweet Temptation
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Epilogue

Sweet Ruin
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6

Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Epilogue

Luther

Stay Connected
Also by Alexandra Moody
About the Author

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SWEET
Heartbreak

BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

There were two certainties about summer in Rapid Bay: the unbearable heat and the unbearably wealthy. Neither was particularly pleasant to deal with, but both were an unfortunate necessity for my mom's small beach café to survive. This summer was no exception, as the vacationing elite descended on our coastal town and briefly transformed our simple, sleepy home into a bustling hive of activity.

I'd spent most of the break helping my mom by working at the café. She'd never had the money to hire extra hands for the busy season, so I'd been chipping in since I was old enough to carry a tray of food. I usually quite enjoyed the madness of a busy day serving customers. The chaotic, frantic energy made the summer days pass by in a flash, but I couldn't say the same today. Today, it seemed nothing was going right.

"Oh, sweet heaven," Norma groaned. "That penny-pinching plastic panther is back."

I looked up from the stubborn stain on the counter I was cleaning. A woman had just entered the café with her husband and teenage son in tow. I immediately recognized them as they had eaten here several times this week already, and the woman's face was pumped so full of chemicals it was kind of hard to forget.

The father and son were dressed casually and looked ready for a day out on one of the expensive yachts docked at the marina. The woman appeared to have missed the memo though. Her sky-high wedges didn't look very seaworthy, and her fitted leather dress must have been sweltering in the heat. She wore a broad-brimmed hat, even though she was indoors, and was

holding the same striking panther's head handbag she'd been toting around all week.

It had only taken one encounter for Norma and me to realize these people were the worst type of vacationers who visited our town. The father and son ignored us entirely while the woman rarely made eye contact. She wasn't much taller than me but seemed to stand a little straighter and tilt her head up so she looked down her nose when she spoke to me. She slowly dragged out the words as if she thought I wouldn't understand otherwise. I might have been waiting tables for the summer, but I was at the top of my class at school and definitely smart enough to know a job didn't equal someone's worth. It didn't help my opinion of the family that they hadn't tipped us once.

"I think it's your turn, Isobel," Norma said as she hurried out back to the kitchen.

I turned to object, but she was already gone.

"Traitor," I hissed under my breath. Norma might have been in her sixties, but she sure was quick. She'd been working for my mom as a waitress for as long as I could remember, and she was as much a part of the café as the mismatched colored chairs or the seagrass lanterns that hung from the ceiling. She was practically family, which was probably why she felt no guilt fleeing difficult customers and leaving them to me.

"I need three coffees."

I turned to find the panther had arrived at the counter. The woman had barely acknowledged me. Instead, her eyes were fixated on the phone her manicured nails were tapping against. Her husband and son weren't much better. The man was loitering by the front door on a phone call, and the son was laughing at some video he was watching on his own phone. I was completely invisible to these people.

Despite the fact she wasn't looking at me, I gave the woman a warm smile. "If you'd like to take a seat, I can bring those right over to you."

The woman defied the Botox that froze her forehead to lift one eyebrow as she finally glanced up at me. "We won't be eating today. It's a million degrees in here. You can make those coffees to go."

My cheeks flushed under her condescending gaze. She was looking at me as if it were my fault the air-conditioning was broken. It had needed replacing for a while, but Mom never had the money for that. All summer, the old girl had been coughing like she needed a good thump on the back.

Usually, a well-aimed knock to the side of the box did the trick, and her droning mechanical purr would return, but no amount of force seemed to be working this morning. I really wished she hadn't chosen the hottest morning of the summer to rasp her last dying breath.

The whole café was stifling, only made worse by the ovens and cooktops blazing in the kitchen. We had a few portable fans cranked up to their maximum power, but they were fighting a losing battle. They simply pushed the hot, humid air around the building without providing any relief. We'd only had a handful of customers all day, and like this woman, most of them had ordered their drinks to go.

"Sorry, yes, it's a bit unpleasant in here at the moment as our air-conditioning is broken. I'll grab those coffees for—"

I was interrupted as the teen son started to grumble. "Mom, this is ridiculous. I know this place is closer, but it's like waiting in a furnace. Let's just go to the Starbucks down the road."

The woman gave a short exhale as she considered her son's complaint. "Yes, dear, you're probably right. If I wanted to go to a sauna, I'd book an appointment at the spa." She placed a hand on his arm and started to guide him toward the door. "You can cancel that order," she called over her shoulder to me, once again not bothering to look my way.

I slouched down on the counter as I watched them leave. They might not have been the nicest people, but at least they were customers. Something we were seriously lacking today.

"What happened?" Norma asked, conveniently returning as soon as the woman and her family were gone.

"Apparently, this panther isn't a fan of the heat. She decided to go hunt down a coffee at the Starbucks instead."

"Ah." Norma nodded. "I don't really blame them."

"This heat really is getting ridiculous." I wiped the back of my hand across my forehead.

Norma shrugged. She must have been struggling just as much as I was, but she gave no hint of being bothered by it. She wasn't even slightly flushed; meanwhile, I was sweating like I'd just run a marathon. I had to wonder if Norma's spitfire energy somehow combatted heat waves.

"Well, sugar, be grateful you won't be here past lunch. Not with that big trip you're going on—"

“Let’s not talk about the trip.” I rushed to cut her off. I was determined not to think about where I was headed after work today until I absolutely had to. I still had a couple of hours of my shift left, and I fully intended to make the most of the blissful remaining moments when I could pretend the trip wasn’t happening.

Norma tutted. “Denial isn’t going to make it go away.”

“I’m not in denial. I’d just rather live in the moment.”

“Sounds like denial to me.”

I chose to ignore her. “Anyway, getting back to this heat,” I said before she could continue to poke holes in the happy illusion I’d created for myself. “Surely, there’s something else we can do to get some cool air in here?”

“I think we’ve tried everything, but I could always head outside and do a rain dance?”

I might have laughed, but Norma looked dead serious. “Uh, maybe we use the rain dance as a last resort. We don’t want to ruin the last few days of everyone’s vacations.”

“Ah, that’s right, summer’s almost over. School starts next week, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t remind me,” I muttered. I normally didn’t mind the start of a new school year, and I’d always thought my senior year was going to be the best year of my life. But everything was different now.

“Perhaps you could take one last look at the air conditioner?” I suggested. I knew I was probably pushing the friendship, seeing as Norma had already tried to fix it several times this morning, but I wasn’t ready to give up just yet. If anyone could bring the air conditioner back to life, it was Norma. Almost everything in the café was a million years old, but she knew the tricks that got even our most stubborn appliances to work.

She shared a doubtful smile with me. “I have a feeling it’s not long for this world, sweetie.” Norma often had feelings about things and had been proclaiming for years she was a psychic. She was almost always wrong when it came to her predictions, but she was probably right about this. “But I suppose I could see if some more Norma love will do the trick.”

“Thank you!” I exclaimed. “Just maybe don’t throw a wrench at it this time.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Norma winked before heading out back. She was a firm believer in tough love when it came to getting appliances to

work, so I imagined she was off to see if there was a baseball bat or something equally as sturdy she could use to bludgeon the machine.

There were only two customers in the café, so I made sure to cover their tables while Norma was gone. The place should have been full at this time of day, and I knew the lack of customers was really going to set my mom back. The café had been struggling ever since the new Starbucks opened down the road.

The familiar chime of the doorbell sounded, and although my ears perked up, I didn't bother to glance at the door immediately. I expected to hear the chime sound again as the customer quickly realized it was so hot you could barely breathe in here and tried to backtrack as fast as possible.

It was only after several seconds had passed without the sound of a second ding that I looked up from the table I was wiping down. The rag in my hand dropped to the ground, and I drew in a ragged breath when I saw who had entered the café.

What on earth were *they* doing here?

I wanted to escape into the safety of the kitchen, but I couldn't seem to move as I watched my ex-boyfriend walk hand in hand across the room with the girl who used to be my best friend. Could this day get any worse?

Nina and Levi slid into one of the booths, laughing at something one of them had said. The sound sliced right through me and seemed to pierce my heart with unnerving accuracy. Neither of them had noticed me, but how could they when they seemed incapable of taking their eyes off each other? I couldn't understand how I'd found the room to be so hot only moments ago because suddenly my skin felt ice cold.

My eyes darted toward the back of the restaurant, desperately searching for Norma. Nina and Levi were the last people in the world I wanted to serve. The two of them had been cheating together for months before I found out. *Months*. And the only thing worse than their betrayal was the fact I'd lost both my boyfriend and my best friend on the same day. The last few weeks of the school year had been agony, and seeing them again only had me reliving the heartbreak all over.

By some miracle, I hadn't encountered them at all during the summer break. But that was set to change when school started next week. I thought I still had a few more days before I'd have to face them again, but it seemed today's bad luck was catching.

I looked for Norma one last time before I gave up hope of any rescue and forced myself over to their table. Each step felt a little heavier than the last, and even though I did my best to put on a brave face, it was impossible to stop my hands from shaking and ignore how my legs felt powerless beneath me. Sweat clung to the back of my neck and beaded at my brow—and for the first time today, it wasn't entirely caused by the heat.

I had no idea how I was going to survive my senior year.

When I arrived at Nina and Levi's booth, it took me a moment to gather my wits enough to speak. They looked perfect together, like some picture out of an Abercrombie catalog. I'd always felt out of place around them because they came from the wealthy side of town. There weren't many locals in Rapid Bay who could compare to the rich tourists who appeared every summer, but Nina's and Levi's families owned houses on the foreshore. They didn't have to worry about how their parents were going to make rent each month or how they would pay for them to go to college. Levi's parents even owned a few of the vacation homes on the beach that they rented out to our wealthy visitors.

As I looked at them together now, I realized just how laughable it was that Levi had ever been interested in me. I must have been a phase for him. Some kind of rebellious teenage moment when he'd decided to slum it with the girl who wore clothes from thrift shops and spent all her free time working at a café just so she and her mom could get by.

"What can I get you?" Somehow, I got the question out without my voice breaking, and I was able to keep my tone neutral, almost disinterested. My expression was just as bland, and I managed to prevent the pain from showing in my eyes. The last thing I wanted was for Nina and Levi to see how hard it was for me to face them. The only hint of my true emotions was the notepad that began to bend as I gripped it tightly in my hand.

"Oh, Isobel, I forgot you work here." Nina pretty much sang out the words in the condescending tone she so often used. I'd heard her throw it at other girls a million times before but never at me. I guessed that had all changed now I wasn't the one dating the star of the school's football team.

She looked me over in one quick, assessing glance. She'd always had a talent for making me feel self-conscious without saying a word, and today was no different. The slight twitch of her lips was enough to show she didn't approve of the black apron I was wearing over my jean shorts and

work T-shirt. It had the simple Beach Street Café logo printed across the front of it in blue-green lettering, and it was hardly offensive.

“How was your summer?” she asked. “I see your hair’s still allergic to the heat.”

I gave her a tight smile and resisted the urge to pat at the flyaway hairs I could feel frizzing about my face. I had both the luck and misfortune of inheriting my mom’s blonde and somewhat untamable locks. People always commented on how beautiful my natural curls were, but the compliments vanished when there was a lick of moisture in the air. Nina must have loved the fact she’d caught me on a bad hair day.

“My summer has been fine,” I replied, but it absolutely killed me to be even slightly cordial. “And my mom owns this place. I’ve worked here as long as you’ve known me.”

Nina tittered out a laugh and flicked her long brown ponytail over her shoulder before placing a hand against Levi’s chest. “Yes, of course, how silly of me. We’ve been away at Levi’s lake house all summer, so it must have slipped my mind.”

I clenched the notepad tighter. Just a few months ago, Levi had been trying to convince me to take time off from work so I could join him at his lake house. He had been upset I didn’t want to abandon my mom, and Nina knew it. There was nothing holding her back though, and she seemed more than happy to rub it in. I couldn’t understand how I’d been friends with her for so long.

I decided to focus on my ex-boyfriend’s face instead, but that didn’t make me feel much better. We’d dated for almost a year, but looking at him now was like staring at a stranger. There was no warmth in his eyes, and the smile he’d been giving Nina dropped as he looked up at me. His appraisal of me was cold and hard and left me feeling like I was nothing more than a waitress to him now.

It was clear he no longer loved me. He probably never had. I’d always wondered how the boy the whole town adored could possibly want someone like me, and I finally had my answer: he hadn’t.

“I’ll have a coffee,” Levi said, breaking our awkward stare-off. Even if I hated him, I was grateful he’d placed an order before Nina had a chance to keep shoving their relationship in my face.

“Me too,” Nina added. “With quinoa milk.”

Was that even a thing? I'd heard some pretty obscure coffee requests in my time, but this was a first. Nina had always drunk her coffee with low-fat milk, so I knew she was being difficult for the sake of it. She was probably hoping to force a reaction out of me, but I didn't bite. I swallowed down my irritation before responding. "We don't have quinoa milk."

"Oh, really?" She looked thoroughly put out. "I guess I'll just have water then. It's so hot in here. Did you know that?"

"No, I hadn't really noticed." I forced out a smile. "I'll be right back with your order."

I walked from their table in a daze.

"Oh, sugar," Norma said as I entered the kitchen. "I just saw who was out there. You should have come and got me when *those two* came in. You know I would have covered their table for you."

I slowly nodded, feeling like I was waking from a bad dream. I'd somehow managed to get through my first encounter with Nina and Levi, but I still couldn't bear the thought of facing them every day when school started next week.

"How am I going to do this?" I whispered to Norma. "How am I going to live with a whole year of this?"

I wasn't sure I could handle it. Not when I was stuck at a school that worshiped the ground Levi walked on. Not when Nina had both stolen my boyfriend and made sure my other friends wanted nothing to do with me too. Why did high school have to suck so badly?

Norma rubbed my arm and gave me a sympathetic smile. "You made a lot of progress over the summer."

"Did I?" It was hard to agree with her, but when I thought about how I'd felt at the start of the break, I knew she probably had a point. I'd barely been able to get out of bed, let alone crack a smile. I'd been like a zombie slowly dragging my feet through each day, but I was feeling a little more human now, and the days were a little less painful.

"You did." She nodded. "And this year will fly by in a flash. You'll be off at college before you know it, and it won't be long before you're a fancy doctor or a famous lawyer or something, and those two will be a distant memory."

I let out a sigh and shook my head. "I've told you all summer I don't want to go to college anymore."

“Sure, you don’t.” She raised her eyebrows at me like she did every time I claimed I’d changed my mind about my future. I’d wanted to get out of Rapid Bay and go to college for as long as I could remember, but not anymore. College was the silly dream of a kid who didn’t realize just how much it would cost or how hard it was to get a scholarship. Besides, Mom needed my help at the café, and I knew I couldn’t abandon her.

“I’m serious,” I replied, as convincingly as I could. “I love it in Rapid Bay, so why would I ever leave?”

“Okay, honey, if you say so.” Norma’s expression had changed, and her eyes were now filled with concern.

I hated when she looked at me that way. Like I was too young to know what I wanted. Like she thought I was throwing my future away. Like I had a choice.

“Besides, I just want to concentrate on finishing high school right now,” I quickly added. The last thing I needed was another lecture about my future. I loved her to bits, but Norma was never afraid to tell me her honest opinion. And I got enough of that from my mom. “College is forever away, and anything could happen in the next year. Who knows, maybe I’ll even learn to stop my heart from shattering every time I see Nina and Levi together.”

“Oh, Isobel.” Norma gave me a sad smile. “You might not believe me, but sometimes the sweetest things in life flourish from the hardest. I have a feeling everything is going to be much better before you know it. You’ll see.”

“I hope so,” I murmured, but I wasn’t convinced. It was far more likely this was another of Norma’s doomed predictions.

“Do you want me to take over their table for you?”

“No, it’s okay. I need to do this.” It would have been so easy to agree, but I had to face Nina and Levi if I ever wanted to move on. Plus, I was far too stubborn to let them know they’d gotten to me.

“We can always spit in their coffee, if that will make you feel better?”

I laughed. “No, I have to believe much stronger karma than a bit of spit is coming their way.”

“That’s my girl,” Norma said. “But, if you change your mind, I have no problem getting in trouble with your mama for a little revenge. In fact, this might be the one time she’d be okay with it.”

“Thanks, Norma. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I took a deep breath before I headed back out onto the café floor and did my best to switch off my mind as I got back to work. My body seemed to move on autopilot as I did everything in my power to quell the surge of emotions trying to drag me under as I served them their drinks.

I wasn't sure how I managed to survive the rest of their stay at the café—especially when it seemed Nina was going out of her way to paw at Levi whenever I was close by. It was a miracle I didn't lose my composure, and I had to bite my tongue several times to stop myself from uttering the cutting remarks that so easily came to mind.

I thought the torture was finally over when the pair paid their bill, but as I headed down the hallway leading from the café to the kitchen, I heard my name being called out.

I stopped and turned to see Nina marching toward me.

"You're not supposed to be back here," I said as she stopped in front of me.

Nina shot me a strained smile that didn't reach her eyes. "You never had a problem with me coming back here before."

"Well, things were different back then."

"Yes, I guess they were."

I folded my arms over my chest, struggling to keep my cool. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The smile fell from her lips as she eyed me. "Look, I came here hoping to bury the hatchet between us before we start our senior year, but I don't know how you expect me to do that when I saw the way you were looking at Levi. I just wanted to make sure you're not going to try anything."

"Excuse me?"

"He's not your boyfriend anymore, Isobel, and it's pretty rude that you were making eyes at him when I was sitting right there."

"Are you serious?" I scoffed. "I wasn't making eyes at him."

If anything, I had been trying my hardest not to show how wounded I felt. The last thing I had on my mind was flirting with the guy who'd broken my heart.

Nina folded her arms over her chest, mirroring my stance as she stared me down. "You obviously were. It's sad enough that you haven't moved on from him, but it's clear I'm going to have to spell things out to you. Levi doesn't love you. He loves me. And I don't want you getting any ideas once school starts."

She was looking at me as though I was some evil mastermind who had spent all summer planning my revenge rather than licking my wounds.

“So, let me get this straight,” I said. “You steal my boyfriend, tell lies about me to all our friends, and, as if that’s not enough, you now feel the need to come and warn me not to do the same thing.” I shook my head, disgusted with her. “Is that why you dragged Levi in here this morning? You must be feeling pretty insecure about things between the two of you if you felt the need to shove your relationship in my face and threaten me.”

“I’m not insecure about us.”

“Right.” I raised my hand in front of her as she opened her mouth to continue. “I’m sorry, Nina, but I don’t have time for this. I have to get back to work.” I took a step to leave but paused and looked over my shoulder. “If you’re already worried about your new boyfriend dumping you or cheating on you, then perhaps you should have a think about the kind of guy you’re dating. What’s that line? Oh yeah, once a cheater, always a cheater.”

I walked away before she had a chance to respond and could practically feel the wrath radiating off her as I left. Thankfully, she didn’t follow me for round two. Although I was certain she’d have something in store for me on Monday, right now, I didn’t care. That was Monday’s problem, and I had far more pressing issues to worry about. Like the fact that while Nina had been yelling at me, my shift had ended. And that trip I’d been trying not to think about? Well, I’d rather face my ex-boyfriend again.

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CHAPTER TWO

I leaned against the office door as I pulled the grubby black apron from around my waist. My mom's head was lowered over her desk as she concentrated on various documents spread out before her. From the deep line between her eyebrows, I could tell they were bills and she was worrying about how to pay them. Rent for the premises had gone up yet again, which made the broken air conditioner an especially unwelcome expense. She couldn't afford to fix it, and she definitely couldn't afford a day like today without any customers. Not at the busiest time of year.

She looked tired. Not that Mom would ever admit it. Candice Grace was stubborn and determined. She could be falling asleep at her desk and still insist she was fresh as a daisy and keep working.

As I placed my apron on the table just inside the door, she glanced up from her stack of bills. "You're not ready," she said. "Why aren't you ready?"

"I got held up at the end of my shift. It'll only take me a minute to change."

"A minute? You don't have a minute! You're going to miss your bus…" Her voice was filled with an urgency I just didn't feel.

"Would that really be a bad thing?"

She folded her arms across her chest and lifted her eyebrows in response.

"Okay, okay. I'll be quick." I turned and dashed upstairs to our apartment. There was no time for me to shower or even run a brush through my hair. I simply changed out of my work T-shirt, threw on the first clean

clothes I could find, and grabbed the backpack I'd packed the night before. It was probably a good thing I didn't have time to contemplate what I was getting ready for. If I did, I doubted I'd be able to leave the apartment at all.

Mom was waiting for me in her car as I rushed back downstairs. The rusty old vehicle was considered ancient when she bought it ten years ago and, like the café's air conditioner, it had been running on borrowed time for a while now.

"You didn't do your hair," Mom said as I jumped into the passenger seat. She let out a long sigh, and I could hear every ounce of her exhaustion in the breath. She needed a break from work. Even just a couple of days off would do her wonders. I knew she'd never take it though. Not when this place was the one love in her life other than me. She poured everything she had into it.

"Well, the choice was either do my hair or catch my bus. I figured you'd prefer the latter."

Mom muttered something under her breath, but I didn't catch it as she turned the key in the ignition and the car spluttered to life. I glanced out the window and up at the old Beach Street Café sign that hung over the entrance to the restaurant. I was only going to be gone for one weekend, but I knew I would miss everything about this place. From the faded blue-and-white-striped awning out front to the smell of bacon that infused every inch of the kitchen and restaurant each morning. I was even going to miss the early starts and the crazy customers.

As we pulled away from the curb, I slumped in my seat and turned my attention to the road ahead. Just a block away, a line of people was building up outside the newly opened Starbucks. My mom didn't seem to notice though. Her eyes were fixed on the road, and her fingers were tapping against the steering wheel. She must have been just as anxious about today as I was.

"Have you got your bus ticket?"

"Yes."

"And you've got the cash I gave you to get a cab when you arrive?"

"Mom, you went over this a million times last night. I've got everything I need."

She slowly nodded and then glanced at me. "How are you feeling?"

I shrugged and looked out the window. It was only now I'd had a minute to stop that the reality of where I was going was starting to sink in. I

couldn’t deny it any longer.

“It’s understandable if you feel nervous…”

“I’m not nervous.” My conviction surprised me. I felt a lot of things about this trip, mainly anger, but my nerves seemed to have subsided somewhat. Facing Nina and Levi had been difficult, but I’d come through it. If I could handle them, maybe I could also handle *him.*

“But it would be completely natural if you were nervous,” my mom continued. “Talk to me.”

“You already know how I feel,” I told her. “You know I don’t want to do this. I don’t get why you think it’s such a good idea.”

“Isobel… you know why.”

“Do I? Because the last seventeen years of my life have been perfectly fine without Matthew LaFleur.” My skin bristled as I said his name out loud. *Matthew LaFleur*. It was a name I tended to avoid saying. One that had only been uttered a handful of times in our house over the years, but this past week, I’d been hearing it far too frequently.

“He’s your father,” Mom said. “You need to give him a chance.”

I sunk farther in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. *Some father*. The man was a total stranger to me, and now I was being forced to travel to some town I’d never heard of so I could meet him. I still couldn’t understand why my mom was making me do this. She said it was because I was old enough now that I should know where I came from. But I was quite happy to leave that a mystery. The two of us had been perfectly fine without him in our lives so far. Why did she have to go and ruin things?

We stayed silent until Mom pulled up at the bus station. Despite my mad hurry to get ready, we’d arrived slightly early, and I still had a few minutes before my bus arrived.

“Isobel, before you go, there is something you should know about Matthew.”

“Something? I know *nothing* about him, Mom. And I’m happy to keep it that way. The guy knocked you up then abandoned you. That’s all I need to know.”

She rarely talked about my father until recently and had only ever given me the most obscure explanations for why he wasn’t in our life. As a kid, she’d told me he couldn’t be with us because he lived in a different world. For years, I’d wondered where he might be, imagining he was a prince stuck in some faraway land. It didn’t take long before I snapped out of the

fairy tales and back to reality though. The reason he wasn't around was simple: he didn't want to be. So, it didn't matter where he was, as long as it was far away from us.

Mom had often said we were better off without him, and I'd accepted that a long time ago. I wasn't sure why she'd suddenly changed her mind or why she was so desperate for me to meet a man she'd kept from me my whole life. It didn't make any sense, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get it over with.

"You know it's not as simple as that," she said. "There were circumstances—"

"Circumstances? Mom, stop acting like he's not the bad guy."

She blew out a long breath. "Things with Matthew are just complicated. If anything, I'm the one you should be angry with."

"I don't know why you're suddenly defending him." I honestly didn't understand how my mom could possibly think she was the one in the wrong.

"Well…" My mom started to speak but then paused and let out another long breath. "Like I said, it's complicated. I'm sorry, there's just so much you don't know about him…"

"Which is apparently why we have to meet. Do we need to talk about this now? I've got to catch my bus."

"I just don't want you to be surprised when you get there."

"Has the guy got a second head?"

"No—"

"Is his skin a shade of *Avatar* blue?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'm sure I won't be surprised."

"But—"

"Mom, like I've told you a million times this week, I'm just meeting this guy to make you happy and then I'm going to come home and go back to pretending I was an immaculate conception."

"Isobel…" Her voice trailed off as my bus pulled up at the stop.

"I've got to go." I opened the car door and climbed out, but when I turned to shut the door behind me, I was met with my mom's sad eyes. I might have been angry about meeting my father, but it wasn't fair to take it out on her. She'd only ever wanted what was best for me. I didn't want to leave things this way.

“It’s going to be fine, Mom.” My voice had turned soft. “My expectations of the guy are about as low as you can get, but I’ll give him a chance. For you.”

She slowly nodded, but the sadness in her eyes didn’t dissipate. She looked like she wanted to cry, which only made me feel worse. I rarely got angry with my mom, and I hated myself for being short with her. I climbed back into the car and reached across the center console to give her a hug.

“I’m sorry to put all this pressure on you, Isobel,” she said as she wrapped her arms around me. “I know it’s already been a tough year. But I promise everything is going to be okay.”

“I know,” I replied. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too.” She squeezed me tightly before pulling away and then flashed me a smile, but it didn’t quite seem to reach her eyes. “Call me when you get there, okay?”

“I will.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed and then nodded toward the bus. “You better get going.”

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before hurrying from the car. The bus was making a steady rumbling chuff as it idled by the curb, and my stomach tied itself up in knots as I slowly made my way aboard. I rarely left Rapid Bay and had never embarked on a trip this big on my own. I kept trying to convince myself it was just the journey that had me on edge, but I knew that was only partially true.

I found a window seat toward the back, and as I peered outside, I saw my mom was still waiting in her car watching me. The concern in her eyes was clear even at a distance, and I wondered whether she was finding it hard because I was leaving or because of the man she knew was waiting for me at the other end of the journey.

I pressed my hand against the window, and she gave me a sad wave in return. I’d be back in a couple of days, so she really didn’t have to worry.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, I leaned back in my seat and stared out the window, watching Rapid Bay quickly disappear into the distance.

I’d told my mom I didn’t want to know my father—that I wasn’t interested in anything other than getting this meeting over and done with. But the longer I sat with my thoughts, the more anxious I became. I knew practically nothing about this man. We shared some DNA, but that was it.

Matthew LaFleur was a total mystery to me. Who was he? And why was it so important I meet him after all these years? I was about to find out whether I wanted to or not.

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CHAPTER THREE

The bus ride was long and monotonous. I'd always thought there was something kind of romantic about traveling across the country by road, but clearly, I'd never covered any great distance by bus before. After sleeping curled up on a seat all night, my notions of romance were certainly gone. My clothes were crinkled, my mouth tasted like cotton wool, and there was a sore kink in my neck I couldn't stretch out.

I also had a distinctively pungent coffee stain down the middle of my shirt. Coffee had seemed like a great idea when we'd stopped to change buses this morning, but I'd made the mistake of not securing the lid to my cup properly. When I went to take a sip, the drink had spilled everywhere, ruining both my top and my backpack, which was placed at my feet. The drink had even soaked into the spare clothing I had packed. I should have counted myself lucky the coffee wasn't scalding hot, but it was hard to feel grateful when I was looking so disheveled and smelled like something that had fallen out of a garbage can. The universe was having a good laugh at my expense, I was sure of it.

By the time I finally reached the small town Matthew lived in, I was in a foul mood and even less emotionally prepared to meet my long-lost father than I had been when I left Rapid Bay. I didn't want to like anything about the place he called home, but it was hard not to appreciate just how pretty it was. Tall, leafy trees lined the main street through the town, which was made up of gorgeous old redbrick buildings. The place was quaint and picturesque, like something out of a postcard. It was nothing like the

beachside town I'd come from, but this place had a different kind of charm to it.

When the bus finally pulled to a stop, I rose from my seat and stretched my arms over my head. Every part of me felt tight from the journey, and I was in desperate need of some fresh air. I hurried along the aisle, down the steps, and off the bus as fast as my tired body could move. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, I came face-to-face with an elaborately decorated sign surrounded by stunningly bright and painstakingly manicured flowers of all colors.

"Welcome to Weybridge." I read it aloud before scanning the rest of my surroundings. Behind the welcome sign was a large garden square full of greenery bordered by an ornate black fence. I must have been in the center of town because there were stores and cafés lining the streets on either side of the park.

The buildings were old and elegant, and the clothes stores looked high-end. Even the nearest café, which was a few doors down, looked expensive and classy. All the cars parked along the street were sleek and sporty, and the bright morning sun was blinding as it bounced off their pristinely waxed surfaces. I felt like I'd stepped off the bus and onto a movie set, where there wasn't a blade of grass, brick, or building out of place. I was a long way from Rapid Bay, that was for sure.

As I headed over to the nearby taxi stand, I fished around in my backpack for the piece of paper my mom had given me with Matthew's address written on it. There was a slight coffee mark on the corner of the paper, which reminded me how messy I looked. I pulled at the edge of my top in a useless attempt to straighten it out. Not that it would have made any difference given the stain running down the center of it. I couldn't have looked more out of place in this town if I'd tried.

"Where to?" the taxi driver asked as I hopped in the back seat of the lone cab waiting at the stand. The woman was a little older than my mom, and she gave me a kind smile when she spotted the stain on my top. "Get into a fight with your latte this morning?"

"Yeah." I laughed. "I guess I lost."

"Happens to me all the time. I'm about as clumsy as they come," she replied, but I got the impression she was just being nice.

"So, where can I take you?"

“Uh…” I glanced down at the paper in my hand and rattled off the address.

The woman’s eyes lit with recognition. “Ah, that’s the mayor’s house. Well, it’s not anymore, I suppose. He sold it just last week.” She took off from the curb, but her attention was more on me in the rearview mirror than on the road. “Do you know who bought it?”

“No, I’m just meeting someone there,” I said. It would have been a lie to tell her I knew Matthew when I’d never even spoken a word to the man. Also, it seemed unlikely he would have just bought the house. Maybe someone else lived there.

“Well, everyone in town has been dying to find out who’s moving in. I heard the mayor got an offer for the place that he couldn’t refuse and sold within days. Apparently, the buyer offered him a bundle more to get him out of there immediately and to leave it exactly as it came—all the furniture and everything. It’s all anyone around here’s been talking about.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I got the feeling this woman liked to talk, and it seemed she didn’t need any encouragement to continue.

“Jeffery, that’s the mayor, has been fending off buyers for that house for years,” she said. “I’m surprised he was finally convinced to sell. He’s always been very passionate about preserving the history of this town, and that house has been passed down in his family for generations. I thought he’d rather die than see such an important part of Weybridge’s heritage end up in someone else’s hands.”

It seemed like she’d forgotten I was in the car as she talked. The words streamed out of her mouth as though she was speaking to herself rather than a passenger.

“My guess is that it was bought by one of the families of the kids that go to school here. They’ve all got more money than sense…” Her voice trailed off for a second, and her eyes nervously flicked toward me. “Not that I’ve got anything against the kids at the academy,” she quickly added. “Do you go there?”

“Oh, uh, no.” I had no idea what she was talking about.

She blew out a breath, and her shoulders relaxed. “No, didn’t think you did. You don’t really look like the type.” My gaze fell to my coffee-stained shirt, and I could only assume she was referring to my mess of an outfit. If I’d felt out of place in the town center, I imagined that meant I’d stick out like a sore thumb if I went to the town’s school.

The car started to slow, and my stomach dipped in response. I'd been so caught up in the woman's chatter I'd forgotten I was about to meet my father.

"Well, here we are."

My mouth dropped open as I looked out the window at the tall sliding gate that marked the entrance to the property. Through the gaps between the black iron bars, I could see glimpses of what looked like a sprawling mansion beyond. I'd only ever seen houses like this on TV or in movies. I didn't actually think people lived in such places—let alone my father. Perhaps he worked here. It seemed impossible that he might be the person the driver was gossiping about.

I paid the fare and gave the woman my thanks as I jumped from the car. I was a ball of nerves as I made my way to the front gate. All week, I'd been trying my best not to think about meeting my father, but I couldn't ignore it now. This moment had arrived too fast, and I didn't feel at all ready for it.

I'd always assumed my father was some sort of lowlife, unable to support my mom and me and incapable of being a dad. This beautiful home didn't match up with that image of the man at all though. As I stared at the gate before me, I wondered if perhaps it was us who hadn't lived up to his standards. This house was clearly worth an eye-watering sum of money. And if the taxi driver was to be believed, the recent buyer of the place sounded extremely wealthy.

It didn't make sense to think that my father might be so rich. Not when my mom had struggled financially for so many years. It was all I'd ever known. I'd assumed my father would be a disappointment, and my expectations of the man had been set seriously low. But now it seemed far more likely that I would be the disappointment. He was probably going to reject me the moment he laid eyes on my coffee-stained shirt.

I didn't want to care—I shouldn't care. But how would I feel if the man turned me out before we'd even exchanged a word? I wasn't sure, and the thought left a sour feeling in my stomach. I'd been so certain that I didn't want to know my father, but now I was worried I wouldn't be given a chance. How stupid was that?

The longer I stood there, the more I began to doubt myself. I needed to get this over with quickly, or I'd be heading back to Rapid Bay without meeting the man at all. And I had promised my mom. There was an

intercom by the front gate, so I walked over and pressed the buzzer before I could chicken out.

“La Fleur residence.” A pompous voice came through the speaker.

My heart was in my throat as I replied. “Uh, hi. I’m Isobel Grace. I’m here to meet Matthew LaFleur.”

“Yes, come in, Miss Isobel.” The gate buzzed in response and slowly started to ease open.

“Thanks,” I told the intercom before starting up the drive. I probably should have had the cab driver take me all the way to the house, as it was a surprisingly long way, but I was somewhat glad to have the walk ahead of me and hoped it might take some of the edge off my growing nerves.

It took me a couple of minutes to reach the house, and I marveled at the beauty of the property as I made my way toward the impressive building looming up ahead. The sun came out from behind a cloud as I walked, casting dappled light across the driveway and highlighting the deep green of the hedged gardens that lined the way. A soft breeze ruffled my hair, bringing with it the lightest scent of roses and freshly cut lawn. This place was like a hidden oasis; strikingly different from the salty heat I’d left behind at home.

The mansion only grew more striking as I drew closer. It was a gorgeous old redbrick building with lush green vines crawling over the face of the first two of the building’s three levels. A large fountain stood proudly in the center of the circular driveway, and behind that was a wide set of stairs that led up to a majestic entrance accentuated by tall pillars.

A man waited for me by the imposing front doors. He was dressed in a black suit, his back was ramrod straight, and his chest was puffed out. His expression remained bland as I climbed the stairs toward him. My palms were sweating as I approached. He looked far too old to be my father, but my father’s age was yet another fact about him I didn’t know.

“Miss Isobel,” the man said in greeting. His thick British accent matched the voice I’d heard over the intercom, and given the way he’d addressed me, I guessed he must be some kind of butler or doorman. My mom had a thing for *Downton Abbey,* and I’d watched it enough times to notice an uncanny resemblance between this guy and the butler on the show. But I was almost certain he wasn’t the person I’d come to meet.

“Welcome to Weybridge House,” the man continued. “I trust your journey was pleasant.”

“Uh, sure.”

He opened the front doors and gestured for me to come inside. “May I take your bag for you?”

I immediately felt smaller as I entered the grand home. The foyer seemed to go on forever, and the ceiling was so high I had to wonder how anyone was ever able to clear the cobwebs away. There was marble everywhere; the floor, the walls, and even the wide staircase directly in front of me shared the glossy white sheen. The sparkling chandelier hanging overhead was so big it would have taken up half the apartment I lived in with my mom. I must have been gawking like an idiot because the man cleared his throat, and I remembered he’d asked me a question.

“Oh no, it’s fine. I’ve got it.” I clutched my backpack strap a little tighter. It felt somewhat like a security blanket. A small piece of home in this all too foreign landscape.

He gave me a brief nod before starting into the house. I followed after him, trying not to gasp too obviously at how ridiculous the place was.

“Mr. LaFleur is in his office,” the man continued. “He’s expecting you.”

“He…lives here?” I asked the butler in disbelief.

The man let out a slow sigh, like it pained him to utter a response. “He plans to reside here on weekends. Now, like I said, Mr. LaFleur is expecting you.”

I nodded, unsure what else to say. I was still in shock that my father appeared to have serious wealth, and I wondered if my mom had any idea. Surely, if she had known he was rich, she would have asked him for help raising me. For years, we had struggled to get by. Her business barely made it through each winter before the summertime rush just about buoyed us back to life. Mom suffered through constant financial pressure, and I imagined she really could have used the support.

Maybe she had asked, and he’d refused. Although, the more I thought about it, the more I found it difficult to believe my mom would have ever made the request. She was far too proud and independent to accept a handout. No, if she knew about my father’s money, it wouldn’t have mattered to her. Still, it made me even more curious about what had prompted her to introduce us now.

We passed several other people in suits that matched the butler’s as we wandered through the large corridors of the mansion, but none of them so much as glanced my way as they went about their business. The place was

like a museum with long, wide corridors and large pictures hanging from the walls. There were even some stone sculptures dotted throughout the building, and I half expected to turn a corner and find a man holding a flag in the air, followed by a bunch of tourists listening eagerly as he described each piece we passed.

When the butler finally slowed by one of the doors, my heart dipped and my stomach clenched with an unexpected bout of nerves. I tried to remind myself I didn't want my father in my life and I didn't care what he thought of me. But as I stood outside the door, on the precipice of meeting him for the first time, all I could think was that he was sure to find me lacking. That given the opulence and extravagance he was surrounded by, there was no way I would ever be enough.

The door opened before I had time to mentally prepare myself, and the butler cleared his throat. "Miss Isobel to see you, sir." The butler then stood back and gestured for me to enter the room.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I had never felt more alone than I did at that moment. Even when I'd faced Nina and Levi at the café, I'd known backup was merely a shout away. But here, in this town so far from home, there was nowhere to hide and no one to help me.

I took a breath and reminded myself I was doing this for my mom. She wanted me to know where I came from, so here I was filling in the blank space on my family tree. If it didn't go well, I never had to see the man again. The thought relaxed me somewhat, and I managed to clamp down my nerves and pull my shoulders back. I pushed away the fleeting doubts that had been fluttering in my stomach and entered the room.

Like the rest of the mansion, Matthew's office was obscenely large and extravagant. The walls on either side of me were lined with heaving bookcases that stretched up to the high ceiling above. They drew the eye toward large bay windows on the opposite wall that overlooked the perfect gardens beyond. The room smelled of leather and books, and the only sound was the soft scrape of my Converse as I walked toward the mahogany desk that stood proudly in front of the vast window. A man was standing in front of it waiting for me, but it was only when I stopped a few meters from him that I finally allowed myself to lift my gaze.

As our eyes met for the first time, my father's widened slightly with apparent surprise. He stared at me for a moment, seemingly frozen in place, but with the next blink of his eyes, the shock vanished, and his expression turned stony as he proceeded to look me over. I felt a little like a horse up for auction as he took in every detail of me. His lips twitched with the

barest hint of disapproval as he eyed my beaten-up sneakers, and he frowned when he saw the coffee stain on my shirt. I got the distinct impression he was thoroughly unimpressed by me, but Matthew LaFleur was hardly the man I'd expected to meet either, and I was scrutinizing him just as much as he was me.

Matthew was definitely handsome for a guy his age. He had striking blue eyes and angular cheekbones with stubble across his jaw that was perfectly trimmed. His most striking feature was probably his thick head of salt-and-pepper hair, which didn't have a strand out of place. There also wasn't a single crinkle in his expensive suit. He was far too polished for my liking. From the shine on his shoes to the controlled expression on his face, it was clear he'd spent years buffing out all of his flaws and held himself with the rigid arrogance of a man who always got what he wanted.

He reminded me of the statues I'd passed out in the corridor. Carefully crafted and proudly displayed with a permanent, planned expression etched on to a cold, stone surface.

My hands twisted as I clasped them behind my back, and I tipped my chin up as I met his stare. I felt like nothing more than a speck of dirt to this man. A grimy smear across his polished marble floors that he wanted swept away. I refused to cower before him though. I hadn't needed a father in seventeen years, and I didn't need one now—no matter what my mother might think. Staring at this stranger, I only wished she hadn't suddenly changed her mind about us meeting.

What was she thinking, sending me here?

"Hello, Isobel," Matthew finally said in greeting. They were the first words I'd heard from the man, and they held a complete lack of emotion. He had a British accent that was every bit as haughty as his expression. Mom's *Downton Abbey* obsession was suddenly making a whole lot of sense.

I hesitated for a moment as I wondered how to respond. What did I call this man? *Dad? Father? Matthew? Matty?* In my mind, I'd always thought of him as *that jerk who abandoned my mom*, but that was a bit of a mouthful to say aloud, and I doubted it would be well received.

"Mr. LaFleur." I finally found my voice and settled on something formal. He seemed like the type who would balk if I tried to call him daddy.

"You look like her," he said as he continued to study me. "Candice, that is."

He hadn’t said that I looked like my mother in the endearing way most people gushed over our similarity. It was more a statement of fact. He could have been speaking about something as bland as the weather. I didn’t miss how his eyes flickered to my untamed hair as he spoke my mother’s name. My unruly curls were exactly like Mom’s, and I was sure he was currently wondering if I even owned a hairbrush.

His gaze continued to assess me, and while his face didn’t give much away, I could tell he disliked every part of the girl standing in front of him. From my ratty sneakers to the collection of bangles jingling around my wrist, I was everything he didn’t want in a child. When his scrutiny returned to my face, I was almost worried about what he’d say next.

“But you have my eyes.”

I wasn’t expecting that. He was right though. My eyes were a similar hue of blue to his. I wished he hadn’t brought it to my attention. I might have only just met my father, but I already knew I wanted nothing from this man, especially not something as permanent as the eyes I saw in the mirror each day. My father’s eyes were an icy shade of blue as cold and hostile as the rest of his demeanor. Why couldn’t I have been born with green eyes like my mom?

He looked me over one last time before he turned and walked behind his desk. He lowered himself into his chair and crossed one leg over the other with a gracefulness I most certainly hadn’t inherited. I remained where I was standing, unsure what he expected from me. He’d arranged this meeting, and yet he was acting as though it were just another item on his daily agenda.

It’s not like I wanted to be here, and the only reason I’d agreed to come was because my mom insisted. I would have given anything to have her here with me now. I couldn’t begrudge her for her absence though. Not when she had the café to run.

“Please, take a seat,” he said, gesturing to one of the free chairs across from him. “I trust your journey here was smooth.”

Matthew clearly couldn’t feel the kink in my neck or smell the coffee stain on my shirt. My legs were still cramping from being tucked under me as I’d slept on the bus last night. I was hardly going to alert him to those facts though.

“It was fine,” I replied. “Long, but fine.”

He nodded. “I did offer to fly both your mother and you up here, but your mother insisted against it.”

This was news to me, but it sounded just like Mom. Her pride would never have allowed it, and now I’d met Matthew, I could understand why she’d be hesitant to accept anything from him—I didn’t want to owe this man anything either.

“I’m glad that Candice finally came around and allowed us to meet,” he continued. “Clearly, I’ve missed a lot of your upbringing.”

“Clearly,” I muttered. I didn’t miss how Matthew made it sound like Mom was the reason he’d been absent all these years. He was probably used to spinning the truth in his favor like that. You didn’t get as rich as him without throwing a few people under a few buses.

“I’d like to remedy that.”

It took me a moment to realize what he’d said, and I struggled to contain my surprise. He looked like a man who didn’t want anything to do with me, let alone a father who wanted to become involved in my life.

“Why?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“You are my only child, my legacy in this world. Why wouldn’t I wish to know you?”

I could think of plenty of reasons, the main one being that he’d had years to get to know me but had chosen not to. Not to mention that the man hardly appeared paternal and clearly disapproved of me. But, I didn’t say any of those things out loud.

“I certainly hope we are able to make up for lost time,” he continued. “There’s a lot we have to learn about each other.”

“Okay.”

I didn’t know what else to say, but Matthew nodded as though my vague acknowledgement of his comments meant I was completely on board. I felt nothing of the sort though. I still wasn’t any more interested in making up for lost time with Matthew than I was when I’d gotten on the bus back in Rapid Bay.

“As your father, and under current circumstances, I am also able to provide you with certain opportunities your mother cannot.”

My eyes narrowed. Was this man seriously judging my mom’s ability to provide for me? She’d been caring for me for seventeen years—*unlike some people*.

“However, if you are to take advantage of those opportunities, it will require…a little refinement.” His gaze had again fallen to the coffee-stained outfit I was wearing. “There are many opportunities that will come with being a LaFleur but also expectations.”

A snort accidently escaped me. As suspected, this rich stranger didn’t think I was good enough to be associated with him. “Look, I’m not sure what you *expect* of me, but I’ve got no expectations for you. I don’t need you to provide anything for me. I have everything I’ve ever wanted back home with my mom. And just because you knocked her up seventeen years ago doesn’t mean I’m a LaFleur.”

If my crass response bothered him, he didn’t show it. “You have my blood running through your veins,” he replied, calm as anything. “You are a LaFleur, whether you like it or not. And though our surnames may be different, you have inherited all that comes with being a part of this family.”

This conversation was definitely not going how I imagined. I thought perhaps we’d exchange awkward pleasantries and maybe he’d ask me about the summer break or going back to school. I never imagined he’d want to be involved in my life or would sit there throwing around words like legacy or expectations. Who even spoke like that?

“You never wanted to be a part of my life before now. Why do you suddenly care if your blood is running through my veins?” I asked.

My question seemed to take him by surprise, and for the first time, I saw a flicker of emotion in his gaze. “You think I don’t care?”

“Well, you haven’t exactly been banging down our door trying to get to know me, so I think that shows how you really feel.”

His eyes still revealed hints of confusion, and he slowly shook his head. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Yeah, I doubt that. But, look, if you want to be part of my life, that’s up to you. Just know that I’m not changing for you or for anyone.”

I had only met him to make mom happy. I definitely hadn’t come here looking for a father, and I was perfectly content to leave without one. I’d done just fine without him so far. We didn’t have much money back in Rapid Bay, but my mom and I were happy. I was beginning to see why she hadn’t told me much about my father growing up. He really was from another world, and we were much better off without him.

“I’m not asking you to change who you are,” he said. “But there are certain things you must do in order to better represent the family name.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“For starters, you’ll get the best education money can buy. I have enrolled you at Weybridge Academy, and you will be attending school there from Monday.”

My mouth dropped open, and I stuttered. *The nerve of this guy.* My hands clenched into fists at my side as I attempted to control my outrage. I didn’t want his stupid name, and I certainly wouldn’t be attending some pretentious school to try to impress him. I happened to think my education back home was just fine.

“Well, as generous as your offer is, I’m afraid I have to decline,” I said. “I’ve already got a school, and I happen to like my name as it is. It’s been just swell meeting you, but I’d best be off. I would hate to take up any more of your time.”

I started for the door. The stench of wealth and arrogance in this room had grown suffocating, and I never wanted to inhale the pungent scent again. I was supposed to stay the night here, and my bus didn’t leave until tomorrow, but even just a few minutes after meeting Matthew, I knew I would rather sleep at the bus station than spend another moment with the man.

“If you attend this school without complaint, I’ll also pay for your college education…”

I froze, my feet suddenly glued to the floor. I couldn’t deny Matthew’s offer was tempting, and my chest twisted with a desperate sense of longing. He was dangling in front of me the one thing I had always wanted more than anything, and yet I knew I couldn’t accept it. I couldn’t leave my mom like that. I’d already made up my mind about college. I needed to stay in Rapid Bay and help at the café.

“I don’t even want to go to college.” The lie tasted like acid on my tongue. It was one thing to write off my dream to Norma or even my mom, but denying it to Matthew was harder than I cared to admit. I’d been telling them, and convincing myself, I just couldn’t afford to go to college, but now this man was going to give it to me on a silver platter.

Matthew let out a sigh. “That’s not what your mother said.”

“Well, she lied.” I forced my feet to start moving forward once more, and when I got to the door, I wrapped my hands around the handle and jerked it open. I needed to get away from Matthew as quickly as possible. Who knew what else he was going to offer to try to convince me to stay.

As the door swung wide, I found the butler standing there, barring my way. The man must have been in his sixties, but he was a surprisingly imposing figure and seemed to take up most of the doorway. He didn't move an inch as I tried to edge past him, and it was clear he had no intention of letting me leave.

I spun to face my father. "So, what? Since bribery won't work, you're just going to hold me captive?"

"You are not a captive here, but you will be attending Weybridge Academy."

"Like hell I will."

Matthew lifted a hand as if to silence me. "It has already been decided. You are to attend Weybridge Academy for the final year of your schooling. You'll have accommodation on the campus, but I've purchased this property so I can visit when my schedule allows, and we can get to know each other. Your mother has already agreed that this is in your best interest."

"My mom would never agree to this without talking to me."

"That is between you and your mother, but she did agree. Now, I have work to attend to. A room has been prepared for you to stay in tonight, and a car will collect you and take you to school in the morning."

It wasn't often I was lost for words, but I was really struggling to find them right now. I must have looked like a gaping fish opening and closing my mouth as I tried to figure out what to say.

"But, she…"

The butler appeared at my side and started to guide me from the room. I must have been in shock because I didn't complain as I mechanically turned to follow him from my father's office. Had my mom really sent me away without even discussing it with me first? It didn't seem possible.

"Oh, and one last thing," Matthew said as I went to leave. I only half turned to him because I was still trying to process the last few blows he'd dealt me. *Seriously*, what more could this man throw my way?

He straightened a little in his chair as I met his eyes. "The children of many influential families attend this school. I'm sure you will make connections with all of the right ones. However, there is one boy I must warn you to stay clear of."

I was still in a state of shock after everything Matthew had already told me, so I didn't know how to react. Who was this boy? And why did Matthew care about him? The poor guy probably just came from the wrong

family or his bank account didn’t live up to Mr. LaFleur’s lofty expectations.

“His name is Noah Hastings.”

I was about to ask Matthew why he was bothering to warn me, but I realized there was no point. He hadn’t been listening to a word I’d said so far. I’d already told him I wouldn’t be attending his stupid ritzy school, and I felt certain once I spoke with my mom this would all be sorted out. I’d be on the bus back to Rapid Bay by morning, and Matthew’s advice about where I should go to school, how I should act and who I should associate with would be a distant memory.

“Whatever you say.” I shrugged.

Matthew seemed pleased enough by my response. Clearly, he didn’t realize I had no intention of ever meeting this boy, let alone avoiding him. Matthew nodded to the butler, and the man went to guide me from the room once more.

“This way, Miss Isobel,” he said.

I didn’t complain as I let him lead me from my father’s office. The sooner I got away from Matthew, the sooner I could call my mom and sort this whole mess out.

I followed the butler back through the house and up the wide set of marble stairs in the entranceway. He showed me to a bedroom far more lavish than any I’d seen before. There were plush cream carpets spread across the floors and an enormous bed with a lush white comforter and hints of gold sparkling on the headboard. Two sets of double doors covered one wall and appeared to open onto a private balcony. On the opposite wall, a wide archway led through to an open living area.

“This is your room,” the butler said as I stepped inside. “There are clothes in the closet for you. Everything you require for school is already packed.”

He gestured toward a door I hadn’t noticed yet, and curious, I wandered over to check it out. I pulled the door open, and my mouth dropped as a miniature chandelier lit up above my head, revealing a closet larger than my entire bedroom back home. The racks were filled with clothing, and a whole wall was dedicated to displaying bags and shoes. I couldn’t bring myself to step into the closet. Even from here, I could tell the clothes were made from luxurious materials that probably had eye-watering price tags attached.

“He got me clothes?”

“Yes, Mr. LaFleur had them delivered in time for your arrival. Everything was selected by one of New York City’s top stylists, and I’ve been assured the collection reflects what young people are wearing these days.”

The way he said *young people* with such distaste might have been funny if I wasn’t under house arrest. I got the feeling this man wasn’t a big fan of teenagers, and looking after one definitely hadn’t been in his job description when he’d agreed to work for my dad.

“Dinner will be served in an hour,” he continued. “And—”

“Oh, I’m not hungry.” The last thing I wanted was to sit through a meal with my father, and I wasn’t sure I could eat right now anyway. “So, don’t worry about preparing anything for me.”

He nodded. “Well, if you need anything or you change your mind about dinner, you can call for me using the buzzer.”

I noticed the intercom on the wall and nodded. The butler went to leave, but I interrupted him before he could fully close the door. “What was your name?”

“You may call me Caldwell,” he replied before nodding and clicking the door shut.

“Caldwell,” I muttered. He was a total stick-in-the-mud, just like my father.

Once I was sure he was gone, I pulled my backpack from my shoulders and unzipped it to pull out my phone. Seeing the contents of my bag made my stomach swirl with irritation. They expected me to go off to some strange school tomorrow, and all I’d brought with me was one change of clothes. My mother had some serious explaining to do.

I found my phone at the bottom of the bag and dialed home. Mom answered on the first ring. “How was it? Did you meet him?”

“Oh, yeah, and my father’s a real peach. I can’t *imagine* why it took you seventeen years to introduce us.”

She let out a low exhale. “It didn’t go well then.”

“No, it didn’t. The man thinks I’m trash and seems to want to change everything about me. But, that’s not even the worst bit. Did you really agree to send me away to school?”

The other end of the line went quiet for a moment.

“Mom?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I agreed.” Her voice was low and filled with shame. Her guilt only flared my annoyance.

“And you didn’t think to ask me?”

“Well, I knew you’d be hesitant,” she rushed to explain.

“So, you just sent me here knowing I wouldn’t be coming home. Not giving me a chance to say goodbye. Fully aware I’d be gone for months.”

“Yes.”

“I only have one change of underwear!”

“Isobel…”

“Mom…”

“We figured it would be easier this way. He said he has everything you could ever need.”

Everything I could ever need? That was impossible when the thing I needed most in life was my mom. She was my best friend. We did everything together. I was too angry to tell her that though. “How could you do this to me?”

“How could I say no? To letting you attend one of the most prestigious schools in the country?”

“Uh, easy. You just say *no*.”

Mom wouldn’t be derailed though. “Isobel, you’re so smart. You deserve every opportunity in life, and going to Weybridge Academy will give you a real shot at getting into a great college next year. A college Matthew has offered to pay for…”

My mom sounded like such a sellout, and I struggled to reign in my anger. “Surely, if you wanted this guy to bankroll my education, you would have asked for his help getting me into this snotty school years ago. Why now? Why not last year or the year before that? What changed?”

Mom took a deep breath.

“Mom?”

“You changed,” she answered quietly. “You stopped dreaming, and I won’t let you waste your life.”

“I didn’t stop dreaming. I just decided I’m not going to college.”

“Why? Because you so desperately want to spend the rest of your life in Rapid Bay? I know that’s not the life you want, and I won’t let you stay here and be held back because of me.”

“People change their minds, Mom. I told you I don’t want to go to college anymore.”

“I’m not stupid, Isobel. I know I’m the reason you haven’t looked at colleges for next year. But I can manage the café just fine without your help.”

“I like helping out at the café.”

“I know you do. But Rapid Bay is the life *I* wanted. And if you go to this school, the possibilities for you will be endless.” She paused for a moment, and her voice calmed as she continued. “You don’t honestly want to go back to school here after everything that happened there last year, do you?”

I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. “I’m not *that* fragile. Yes, I was upset by everything that happened, but that doesn’t mean I want to run away.”

“It’s not running away. You’ve been like a zombie all summer, and you haven’t seen a single one of your friends during the break. You deserve a fresh start, and you deserve the future you dreamed of. Matthew can help give you that.”

I scrunched up my nose at the sound of my father’s name on her lips. I hated to hear her say it. I still couldn’t understand how she ever could have been attracted to someone like him in the first place. My mom was so full of life, but I wasn’t sure if Matthew even knew how to crack a smile.

“What did you ever see in him? Was it the money?”

“Of course, it wasn’t the money,” she replied. “He’s not so bad, Isobel. Give him a chance, and you’ll see he’s got a big heart.”

It seemed far more likely the man had an empty cavity in his chest, so I found it hard to believe her. “Mom, I don’t want him in my life, and I don’t want to go to a school that’s so far away from you. Can’t I just come home?”

She didn’t even pause before she responded. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do that. I’d never forgive myself if you wasted this opportunity. No. You’re staying right where you are. You may be angry with me right now, but one day, you’ll thank me.”

I was struck speechless by the finality in her voice. Mom never made decisions this way. She’d never forced my hand like this before. We’d always discussed these things together.

“Well, I guess that’s that then.” My tone was devoid of emotion, and I couldn’t help but feel hurt by how this had all played out. My mom had

always told me there were things more important in life than money, but it seemed that was a lie. How could she abandon me this way?

"I guess I'll see you when I see you then," I said. "Maybe Thanksgiving or Christmas…"

"Isobel…"

"No, Mom, you don't get to *Isobel* me. You've really hurt me. I can barely even talk to you."

"Okay…" she murmured. "Well, call me when you get to school. I can't wait to hear all about it."

"Sure, Mom. I'll talk to you then."

I ended the call and walked over to the balcony doors. I pressed my forehead against the glass and stared out at the rolling expanse of green lawns beyond. The sun was starting to set, lighting up the sky with a pinky golden hue as it breached the horizon. I normally loved a beautiful sunset, but I couldn't appreciate this one. Not when my whole life was about to turn upside down. My dad was even worse than I'd expected, my mom had betrayed me, and tomorrow I was leaving behind everything I knew.

As I stepped back from the doors, I caught my reflection in the glass. My blonde hair was a mess, my eyes were wide, and my ripped jeans and stained top looked completely out of place in the lavish bedroom that surrounded me.

I didn't belong here, and going to Weybridge Academy was only going to prove it. I'd felt like a fish out of water from the moment I'd arrived in this town. And it seemed that tomorrow I was going to have to figure out how to breathe air.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Someone had stolen my clothes while I was sleeping. I'd left them folded on the chair beside the bed, but they weren't there when I woke up. I hated the idea that someone had crept into my room while I was sleeping, and the image of Caldwell or Matthew sneaking through the dark was enough to give me nightmares.

I probably wouldn't miss the clothes. The jeans were slightly too small, and the top was pretty much ruined after being covered in coffee yesterday, but finding them gone still upset me. It felt like a small piece of me had been taken with the outfit.

My only option was to wear something out of the closet. Clothing selected for me by some stylist I'd never met. It was such a small thing, but I felt like Matthew was trying to mold me into the person he wanted me to be rather than the person I was.

I didn't have much choice though, unless I wanted to arrive at my new school naked. So, I begrudgingly ventured into the closet and selected a pair of black jeans, a cropped white top, and a leather jacket. The outfit wasn't all that different from one I might have chosen for myself, if I ignored the fact the clothes hadn't come from a thrift store and the labels all bore the name of some Italian designer I couldn't pronounce.

A knock sounded at the door just as I finished sliding the jacket over my shoulders. I turned as it opened, and Caldwell stepped into the room.

"Good morning, Miss Isobel. I trust you slept well."

"Well enough." *For a captive.* "And you can just call me Isobel."

“As you wish.” He nodded in agreement, but I imagined Caldwell would rather eat his waistcoat than call me by my first name alone. “Breakfast is being served in the dining room, and then a car will take you to school.”

“Is my father having breakfast with me?”

“Mr. LaFleur left for New York last night.”

“Right.” After a ten-minute conversation yesterday, it seemed my bio dad was already done with me. Luckily, I was done with him too. It was actually a relief to hear I wouldn’t have to endure the chill of his icy demeanor this morning, and I could hardly bear the thought of eating breakfast with his judgmental eyes watching my every mouthful.

“Well, lead the way,” I said, gesturing toward the door.

Caldwell gave another brief nod before returning to the hallway.

Breakfast was a lonely affair. I ate at a huge dining table that could have sat twenty people with two waitstaff watching from the doorway. They both refused to engage in conversation with me unless it was related to serving breakfast. It was painfully quiet and uncomfortable, and it made me desperately miss my normal morning routine. Mom and I would always eat at our tiny kitchen counter, propped up on stools, drinking our bodyweight in coffee. Our peaceful mornings usually descended into a battle over who got the last refill when only dregs remained in the pot. Mom always let me win, and the thought made my chest pang with sadness. I felt betrayed by the way she’d sent me here, and yet I couldn’t stop myself from missing her.

When I was finally done with my food, Caldwell led me to the front entrance. He opened the door, and as I glanced outside, I saw a large black car waiting in the driveway. A man in a suit almost as smart as Caldwell’s was already loading several large suitcases into the trunk. I didn’t recognize the luggage, but I knew it was all for me.

“I guess that’s my ride,” I said.

“Indeed.” I had no idea how Caldwell’s voice could both suck the life out of his words and also pack them full of judgment. It was a skill. He held out a backpack to me, and I frowned as I took it. It was most definitely not the bag I’d come with. The leather smelled expensive, and despite the fact I’d spent my life steering clear of designer clothes, even I recognized the Gucci logo across the front of it.

“The personal items you brought with you are all inside,” he said. I had a bad feeling my backpack had gone to clothing heaven along with my jeans and top. “We’ve packed everything you might need for your time at the academy. But this is in case you require anything else.” He lifted his hand to reveal a credit card with my name on it. It was black and shiny, and I wondered how high its limit was. My father was clearly rich, but I had no idea just how rich.

I took the card and tucked it into the back pocket of my jeans. I had no intention of using it though. “Well, thanks for everything. It’s been…” My voice trailed off because I wasn’t quite sure how to describe the last twenty-four hours of my life.

Caldwell sensed I was at a loss for words, and he gestured toward the car. “We’ll see you soon, Miss Isobel.”

I really hoped not, but I nodded and gave him a tight smile.

As I stepped from the house, I felt a weight lifting off my shoulders. The air was crisp and fresh, and a gust of wind seemed to clear the dark cloud that had been billowing around me since the moment I’d arrived at my father’s mansion. I was being forced to attend some school I’d never laid eyes on before, but at least I didn’t have to stay in the large hollow void that was Matthew’s home another night.

The driver opened the car door for me, and I thanked him as I made myself comfortable in the back seat. My phone buzzed as the car set off, and I glanced down to see my mom’s name lighting up the screen. I wasn’t quite ready to talk with her yet, so I ignored the call and stowed my phone back in my pocket.

I kept thinking about how she’d acted when she’d said goodbye to me. Her hug had been a little too tight and her smile a little too forced. For days, she’d been looking slightly ill. I’d thought she’d been sleeping badly because of the heat or because she was worried about how I would react to seeing my father for the first time. But now I knew the truth. She was readying herself to send me away.

I stared out the window as the car slowly drove back through town, and my heart gave a sad tug as we passed the bus stop. That was where I should have been headed this morning, and if my mom hadn’t been so resolute on the phone yesterday, I might have considered jumping from the car and onto the next bus home. I had a feeling she’d just ship me straight back here though.

A part of me didn’t want to go home right now anyway. Not when I was still so angry with my mother. I wasn’t thrilled to be going to this fancy school Matthew had arranged, but at least I didn’t have to see either him or my mom when I was there. There was also the added bonus of not having to deal with Nina or Levi as well.

I had never thought of myself as a girl who ran away from her problems. The more I thought about it, the more I came to terms with the fact that going to a new school might not be the worst thing in the world. I would never in a million years admit that to either of my parents. But, my mom was right; I’d been dreading my return to Rapid Bay High all summer, and a small part of me was relieved I wouldn’t have to face it on Monday.

The car headed out of town, but it didn’t follow the highway the bus had taken yesterday. Instead, it traveled down a winding road that led through a gorgeous leafy forest. Specks of sunlight danced across my window as it broke through the trees, and every so often, I’d catch sight of a river that wove its way alongside the road.

We drove for about ten minutes before the car started to slow, and the driver glanced over his shoulder to me. “We’re here.”

Any brief feelings of optimism I’d had quickly vanished. I swallowed down a lump of nerves as the car pulled to a stop.

A set of huge wrought iron gates towered over us. They were elaborately designed with swirling metal thorns and roses, and a large golden emblem featuring two roaring lions took pride of place in the center. The gates had sharp spikes protruding from the top as though they were protecting the entrance to a palace—or a prison. Although the gates were huge, they were set back from the road enough that the forest surrounding us effectively concealed them. You could easily drive straight past and not even notice them if you weren’t looking at the right time.

“I have Miss Isobel LaFleur,” the driver said into an intercom box.

“Grace,” I corrected him.

His eyes flicked to look at me in the rearview mirror. “Sorry?”

“My name is Isobel Grace.”

“Oh, my apologies, Miss Grace,” the man replied.

It was a simple mistake, but one that made the hairs on my neck bristle. I was not, and never would be, Isobel LaFleur.

Whoever was on the other end of the intercom didn’t seem troubled by the driver’s confusion, and a moment later, a buzz sounded as the gates

began to squeak open. I took a deep breath and held it as I watched them scrape wide. Any irritation I felt quickly dissipated and was replaced by a flutter of nerves.

This all felt so sudden. Despite having a night to sleep on it, I'd barely had time to process the idea of a new school and being separated from the only life I'd ever known. My whole world had been upheaved in a day, and my chest tightened as the car started forward.

Perhaps if my mom had talked to me about it first, I wouldn't have felt so anxious. It was only now as I entered the school that everything seemed to hit me. I wasn't headed back to Rapid Bay anytime soon. This place was my new home.

I glanced out the back window and watched as the gates closed behind us with a *clang*. The sound felt so final, so permanent. There was no turning back now, whether I wanted to or not.

The car crept slowly up the driveway, a long gravel road bordered by ancient leafy trees. Beyond the trees, wide-open fields stretched into the distance, and the lush greenness was accentuated by white and yellow flowers scattered among the grass. For a prison, this place sure was beautiful. It was hard to believe there was a school hidden somewhere amid the pristine scene—let alone a school I would be attending.

When the line of trees broke up ahead and I finally caught sight of my destination, my eyes widened with disbelief. Just this morning, I'd thought Matthew's house was the most impressive building I'd ever seen, but the school was so large and spectacular it made his place look like a shanty. The building sprawled wide in both directions, and its front featured gorgeous sandstone columns and tall windows reaching up several stories high. There were probably castles in Europe less impressive than Weybridge Academy.

The car stopped at the base of a grand entrance staircase that led to the school's front doors. A woman was waiting at the foot of the stairs, and she started making her way to the car as we came to a stop. Given her pantsuit and slick bun, I guessed she was my welcoming committee. I jumped from the car before the driver had a chance to grab my door, and I tried to brush my hair with my fingers as the woman approached. I really should have spent more than five minutes on my appearance this morning.

"Isobel," the woman said. She held out a hand toward me, and as I took it, she gave a firm shake. "I'm Vice Principal Langley. Welcome to Weybridge Academy."

“Oh, um, thank you.”

“We are so looking forward to having you here with us this year.”

I nodded, unsure what to say. Did she greet every student this way? Surely, this was below her pay grade.

She waved her hand, beckoning to someone, and a girl came to join us. She must have been standing with the vice principal when I’d pulled up, but I hadn’t even noticed her. She was dressed casually like me and looked to be about my age. She had gorgeous long hair that was a deep shade of reddish-brown, like fresh autumn leaves, while her sweet face and big doe eyes gave her a look of innocence.

“This is Cressida Farley, your roommate,” the vice principal said.

“Hi, you can call me Cress or Cressie. I’ll only answer to Cressida if you’re my mother or a teacher.” She shot Vice Principal Langley a cheeky smile as the words practically bubbled from her mouth. She seemed like the kind of person who was always brimming with enthusiasm.

Before I could answer, Cress closed the distance between us and gathered me in a warm hug. I was taken by surprise, but the hug was exactly what I needed after the last twenty-four hours. It was over before I could really react though.

“It’s so great to meet you,” Cress said, taking a step back.

The vice principal gave her a soft smile. I wouldn’t have been surprised if Cress had most of the teachers here wrapped around her little finger. It was hard not to immediately like her.

“Cressida will take you to your room and help show you around the school,” Langley said. “If there’s anything else you need, my door is always open.”

She searched my gaze until I nodded, and satisfied, she turned and made her way back up the steps to the building behind her.

“Phew, thank Beyoncé that’s over.” Cress rolled her eyes. “Come on, let’s get you to our room.” She grabbed hold of my hand and started pulling me up the stairs, following after Langley.

“I just need to grab my bags…”

She waved a hand at me though. “Oh, don’t worry about that. Someone will take them for you.”

I glanced over at the car and saw she was right. A man was collecting my bags and placing them on a trolley. Under normal circumstances, I might have worried about losing sight of them, but given that none of my

actual belongings were packed inside those bags, I realized I didn't particularly care.

Cress barreled up the stairs, dragging me with her. Her enthusiastic personality seemed to extend to everything, including the way she walked. "Just a warning, I can be a little full on," she warned. "But you can always let me know when I'm being too much, and I'll try my best to tone it down."

I smiled at her assessment of herself. "I can handle full on." I kind of liked her buoyant personality. It was refreshing to be around after spending the summer being ignored by the girls I used to think were my friends. I tended to buzz at a much lower frequency than Cress, but perhaps I needed someone like this in my life.

"Good." She grinned back at me. "Because I think I drove my last roomie a little crazy."

"Well, that's always something to look forward to."

She laughed. "Yeah, I think we'll get along just fine."

I smiled at her, but as soon as she looked away, my face fell. I wasn't sure if I was ready to let someone else into my life. Was I ready to risk another friendship after being so badly burned by everyone back home? Cress didn't seem like someone who was going to give me too much choice in the matter though. I'd known her all of two minutes, and already her infectious personality was burrowing into my heart.

We entered the building through a pair of solid wooden doors. They were thick and heavy and groaned loudly as Cress used both hands to push them open. I almost offered to give her a hand because it seemed like a two-woman job, but I was surprised by the slight girl's strength. She quickly got them open and set off into the entrance foyer.

I stopped just inside the door though and gaped up at the wide-open space within. The school looked ancient from the outside, and I'd expected the inside to resemble a dingy old castle, but internally, everything was modern and elegant.

The entrance was light and bright, and everything was white with gorgeous black accents. My eyes were naturally drawn to the sweeping staircase, which was the central focus of the foyer. It curved up in a large spiral all the way to the highest level of the building, and as my eyes lifted upward, I could see huge skylights covered the ceiling allowing the morning sunlight to stream in from overhead. The school was beautiful, but

its extravagance only reminded me just how out of place I was. I would never fit in among such opulence.

It took me a moment to realize Cress had continued walking, and I hurried to keep up. There were a few other students crossing the foyer who I had to dodge around to catch up with her, and I could feel their curious gazes on me as I passed. It's like they could immediately tell I was an outsider. My outfit wasn't too different from Cress's, but perhaps, despite my expensive clothes, they could still smell the poor on me.

Cress was already speaking when I fell into step with her. It seemed she'd gone straight into tour guide mode.

"So, this is Esher Hall," she said, fanning a hand at her surrounds. "It's the school's main building where all our classes and meals are held. There's a resident ghost haunting the place, so if a door ever closes for absolutely no reason, that'd be Not-So-Moaning-Myrtle."

I struggled not to smile. "Not-So-Moaning-Myrtle?"

"Well, no one's ever heard her. She's a stealth ghost, you see?"

"Okay, beware the stealth ghost, noted."

She winked at me and laughed before she continued on with her not-so-conventional school tour. She showed me the bathroom with the best lighting for makeup, a janitor's closet with a minibar containing all the best snacks, and her favorite window from which to watch the boys practicing rugby shirtless after school. These were just the highlights from the first floor as we passed through the building.

"The girls' and boys' dormitories are in the two buildings behind Esher," Cress said as we made our way outside. "You should be grateful you're a girl. They renovated Lauder Hall over the summer, and our new rooms are to die for. The boys' dorms aren't bad, but they're all going to be so jealous when they see what ours look like this year."

We'd arrived at a large square that separated Esher from two identical buildings on the opposite side. High hedges bordered the area, and a footpath meandered through manicured gardens. A tiered fountain sat in the center of the square with three stone cherubs taking flight at the top of it. The sun's light shimmered through the water that cascaded from the cherub's horns, and the soothing sound of the trickling fountain mixed with the laughter of a group of students sitting around the edge of it.

It was surprisingly peaceful out here, and for the first time since I'd entered through Weybridge's imposing gates, the tense feeling that had been

gripping my chest eased a little.

“Home sweet home,” Cress said, gesturing at the building to the left of us. It was like a miniature version of the castle she’d just taken me through, and I found it impossible to believe I’d be living there. It all felt ridiculous for a girl who normally lived in an apartment above a café.

“So, where are you from?” she asked as we started across the courtyard to our dorm.

“A town called Rapid Bay.” I managed to pull my attention from the gorgeous building and turned to Cress. “It’s a tourist town by the sea, but it’s pretty tiny, so you’ve probably never heard of it.”

“You’re right, I haven’t,” she said with a shrug. “I’m from New York, but my parents are based in Paris at the moment.”

“Oh, that must be hard.” I couldn’t help but think of how much I already missed my mom. It had only been a day, and she was still in the same country. I couldn’t imagine her being on another continent—even if I was currently angry with her.

“Not really, they’re always traveling.” Cress shrugged again. “Plus, I had our townhouse all to myself this summer. It was great.”

I matched her smile, but I didn’t envy her one bit. I might have spent most of the summer working at the café, but I couldn’t imagine being left home alone for the whole break. Especially if I’d already spent the entire school year away at boarding school like Cress had. If anything, I felt a little sorry for her.

Just as we reached the front door to Lauder, it opened and a boy stepped through the entrance. He was frowning with his head tilted down and his eyes focused on the ground. He must have sensed us standing there waiting for him to pass because he lifted his head, and our gazes collided.

As our eyes met, I felt a flare of recognition, but I knew I’d never seen him before in my life. The strangest mix of emotions ran through me. I felt both a sense of comfort and like I was helplessly exposed all at once.

His bright green eyes pulled me in so intensely that I struggled to look away. I was stunned by the way he had affected me. Who was this guy?

“Hey, Noah,” Cress said. Her words felt distant, like I was hearing an echo of them from underwater.

The boy slowly turned to Cress, and when his eyes moved to my roommate, the connection between us snapped. I could finally breathe

again, and I immediately felt like an idiot. I must have been staring at him like a total fool.

“Cress,” Noah replied. “I was just inside looking for you.” His voice was deep and pleasant, and now that I wasn’t so distracted by his gorgeous eyes, I realized they weren’t the only attractive thing about him. He was so stunning he didn’t quite seem real. His deep-brown hair was unkempt and fell down across his forehead. His lips were full and soft compared to the sharp line of his jaw. He was tall—far taller than I was— and his tight shirt did little to cover the strong muscles corded beneath.

This boy was the kind of guy who gave fathers nightmares and made grown women swoon. He was overwhelming in every sense of the word, and I got the feeling he could destroy a girl’s heart with just one look. He was trouble in both the best and worst sense of the word.

“Well, here I am,” she replied. “This is my new roommate, Isobel. She’s just started at Weybridge, and I’m showing her around.”

My mouth went dry as his all-encompassing green eyes returned to mine. The intensity with which he’d stared at me just seconds before had completely disappeared though. He now seemed so bored as he took me in that I wondered if I’d imagined it. He looked me over just once before returning his attention to Cress. It wasn’t at all surprising that a guy like him would have no interest in me.

“Are you coming to Luther’s tonight?” he asked Cress.

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” she replied, her smile widening.

“We can catch up then. I’ll leave you to your babysitting duties.” The corner of his lip twitched, but he continued walking past us before I could see his expression properly. With each step he took from us, I felt myself breathing easier.

Cress started giggling, jolting me back to reality. I quickly looked away from him and found her smiling at me. “I see you’ve already experienced the Noah Hastings effect.”

“The what?” As the words left my lips, the name finally seemed to register in my mind. Noah Hastings. *This* was the guy my father had been warning me about? I glanced over my shoulder and watched him walk away from us. Matthew had called Noah a boy, but I really didn’t think that was an accurate description of a guy with that many muscles.

“Noah has a way of making girls lose their words,” Cress explained.

“You didn’t seem to lose your words,” I said, dragging my eyes away from Noah.

“Because Noah happens to be my cousin. And *yuck*!” She emphasized her point with an exaggerated shudder. “Anyway, half the girls at school imagine themselves in love with him.”

“Why only imagine?”

“Because you can’t love someone you don’t really know,” she said. “He’s left a trail of broken hearts a mile long.”

Perhaps that was the reason for Matthew’s warning, though my father really didn’t need to worry. There was nothing I hated more than guys who didn’t treat girls well and bulldozed through their emotions. I’d been that girl. I kind of still was that girl. And if there was one positive thing to come out of Levi cheating on me, it was the determination I felt never to let something like that happen to me again. If Noah was half as bad as Cress suggested, I’d be steering well clear of him this year even without Matthew’s advice.

“But, enough about my dreary cousin,” Cress continued. “Let’s get inside and show you our room already.”

She pulled the door open and entered the building. I glanced over my shoulder one last time, catching sight of Noah as he was flocked by a group of girls. One girl in particular seemed to stake her claim over him as she linked her arm with his. She was gorgeous with long red hair and legs that went for days. But, despite her obvious possessiveness of Noah, the other girls in the group weren’t discouraged, and they continued giving him flirtatious smiles and fluttering their lashes at him.

I couldn’t help but be reminded of Levi, who’d always been fending off advances from other girls—even when I’d been standing at his side. I scrunched up my lips with distaste. It appeared every school had their king, and I’d just met Weybridge Academy’s.

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CHAPTER SIX

I struggled not to gasp when Cress opened the door to our dorm room. Every part of Weybridge Academy I'd seen so far was opulent and beautiful, and where we were expected to sleep was no different.

A large luxurious rug covered most of the floor, and the walls were papered with a subtle leaf design in the softest shade of blue. There were gossamer canopies over the two queen-sized beds, and the wispy material draped effortlessly over the crisp white bedspreads like something out of a dream.

We each had a desk and a dresser, and through the adjoining doors I could see our room had its own bathroom and walk-in closet. This wasn't the kind of room I'd been expecting to sleep in. It would have been more suited to a boutique hotel than a student dorm.

I'd been doing a good job of keeping my reactions in check ever since I'd arrived at the school, but it was impossible not to gape when I caught sight of the view from the window. The room overlooked a massive lake at the rear of the building, and beyond the water, a thick forest extended into the distance. Every bit of the view was so perfect it hardly looked real.

"So, what do you think?" Cress asked.

"That I shouldn't have complained about coming here." I was unable to tear my gaze from the beauty of the lake. I would have expected such a large body of water to have a deep, dark color, but it was more a light shade of aqua, and the surface was so still it reflected the clouds passing overhead.

Cress let out a shocked laugh. "Really? You didn't want to come?"

“Not really.” I would never have gotten on the bus here if I’d known what really waited for me in Weybridge. But now that I was here, I could see how strange it might seem to Cress that I’d had reservations about attending the academy. I could never have imagined a school like this existed, and I was yet to even have my first class.

“You weren’t at that school in Switzerland everyone raves about, were you? Because I probably wouldn’t want to come here either if I got to take the mornings off to go skiing in the winter.”

“Uh, no.” I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. “I went to school back home,” I explained. “The decision to come here wasn’t really mine, and it all happened very last minute. I guess I’m still getting used to the idea.”

This school. My father. It was all a messy blur. And I was still angry with my mom for all of it. We’d never fought like this before. Then again, she’d never made plans for my life without consulting me either. It was slowly starting to make sense to me though. Mom wanted me to have a better future, and this school would no doubt hand it to me. I didn’t agree with her decision, but seeing this place helped me understand it a little better.

“Ah,” Cress said with a nod. “My parents do the same—make decisions without really checking with me. It drives me crazy.”

“My mom’s normally pretty good about discussing them with me,” I said, feeling like I needed to defend her. “But my father…” I shook my head. I did *not* want to talk about Matthew. He might be paying for my schooling, but that was going to be the extent of our relationship, as far as I was concerned.

Thankfully, I was saved from having to explain about Matthew because a knock sounded at the door and Cress danced across the room to open it. A tall girl with flawless dark skin and bright green eyes stood in the entrance. She was the kind of beautiful that stopped people in their tracks. Even her chocolate-colored hair had a shine that I didn’t realize was possible outside shampoo commercials.

Cress grabbed her hand to drag her inside. “Anna, finally, come meet my new roomie. This is Isobel.”

“Uh, hi,” I said, waving a hand in greeting.

Anna started to smile as she watched my awkward wave. “Well, it’s about time you showed up.” She strode toward me and planted a kiss on

each cheek. As if being a total knock-out wasn't enough, Anna also had a gorgeous English accent.

When she stepped back to get a better look at me, her smile widened. "The boys are going to be tripping over themselves when they get a look at you."

My cheeks heated. Was she making fun of me? She had to be joking because Anna and Cress were both stunning, and I was practically a swamp rat in comparison—especially with how wild my hair was today. I could never manage to tame it.

"I'm sure they won't," I murmured.

Anna smirked as she leant back against the wall to assess me. "Oh, they definitely will," she said. "You're hot. Plus, you're fresh meat. I'm surprised there's not already a line of guys waiting outside the door to meet you."

"There will be," Cress said.

I found it hard to believe them. They both sounded genuine though, so at least I didn't think they were making fun of me.

"Even Noah struggled to keep his eyes off her," Cress added.

My stomach flipped at the mention of her cousin. Noah hadn't seemed the least bit interested in me. Surely, Cress had read him wrong.

I shook my head. "You guys are crazy."

"Oh, we're totally crazy," Cress agreed. "But not about this. The boys at Weybridge have complete one-track minds."

"It can be a lot of fun." Anna grinned.

Cress thumped her arm. "Yeah, because you're a shameless flirt."

Anna gave an accepting shrug before turning her attention back to me. "So, do you have a boyfriend back home?"

I swallowed, trying not to give the pain I felt about Levi a chance to surface. I quickly shook my head. "No, no boyfriend. How about you guys?"

Their reactions were strikingly different. Cress seemed to slouch her shoulders, and her eyes dropped to the floor, but Anna screwed up her nose.

"God, no," Anna said. "The boys here aren't exactly boyfriend material."

"That's true," Cress agreed. "The good ones are all taken, and the ones with potential come with a host of other issues. I was dating someone last year, but he doesn't go to school here, and it ended over the summer."

“Oh, I’m sorry, Cress.” I said.

“Thanks, but I’m okay.”

“You’re definitely ready for a rebound.” Anna nudged her playfully with her shoulder.

“Yeah, maybe.” Cress didn’t seem all that enthusiastic about the idea though. The sparkle that had shone in her eyes since the moment I met her seemed to have dimmed a little, and it felt like I was looking in a mirror. She was clearly still struggling with her breakup, and if her feelings toward boys were anything like mine right now, she probably wasn’t ready to move on from her ex.

“I vote that we find you someone hot at Luther’s party tonight,” Anna declared before turning to me to explain. “One of the boys throws a back-to-school party every year at his family’s property just outside town. His parents are never there, and the place is amazing. It can get pretty crazy.”

“And the school lets you do that?”

The two girls laughed.

“I’d like to see them try and stop Luther,” Anna replied.

“Plus, it’s not on school grounds, so even if they did find out about it, there’s not a whole lot they can do,” Cress added. “They sometimes dole out detentions for breaking curfew, but since school doesn’t technically start until tomorrow, it’s a kind of gray area.”

There was a knock at the door, and Cress went to answer it. “Isobel, it’s your bags,” she called over her shoulder. She ushered the man carrying them inside and directed him to the closet. “Just in there would be great.”

He silently moved through the room, placing the bags down in the cavernous closet before disappearing out the door once more. He moved so swiftly I barely had a chance to thank him.

“Do you need help unpacking?” Cress asked. She was already in the closet opening up one of the suitcases.

“Oh, ah, sure, that would be great.”

I’d barely responded when she gasped and pulled out the first item she laid her hands on. “Oh my gosh, you have the Alexander McQueen silk bustier I’ve been eyeing. Oh, and the Balmain ruffle dress.” She looked up at me with wide eyes. “Just so you know, I wanted to be your friend before I saw your closet. Not after.”

I laughed but didn’t say anything. I hadn’t selected a single item in that bag, but it felt like a strange thing to admit.

“You must have spent days shopping for your back-to-school outfits,” she continued. “Where did you find all of this?”

I felt my skin flush as Cress glanced up at me in expectation. I didn’t feel comfortable telling her I’d never seen these clothes before, but I didn’t want to lie to her either.

“It’s all from New York,” I said. That’s where Caldwell told me the stylist bought everything. It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it felt like one, and I shifted awkwardly on my feet as I glanced away from Cress.

“You’ll have to show me where you shop sometime. It’s all amazing.” She continued to pull clothes from my suitcase, gasping louder each time she saw something else she liked.

“You’re welcome to borrow any of it,” I said. I didn’t have any siblings, so I’d never needed to share my clothes before. I liked the idea of sharing with Cress though. Plus, all those beautiful clothes didn’t really feel like mine.

Cress smiled. “Keep talking like that, and Anna’s going to lose her place as my best friend…”

“Hey!” Anna called out from the other room.

“I’m only joking,” Cress shouted back to her but then grinned at me. “I’m not,” she mouthed.

The girls spent the afternoon helping me unpack. I didn’t want to like them. I really didn’t. Just like my father, Cress and Anna lived in a world of mansions, butlers, and designer clothing. A world filled with things I could never afford, and a lifestyle I’d never grow accustomed to. I was a fish out of water, and I felt so self-conscious of my obvious ugly scales.

Back home, I hadn’t been nearly so out of place, and yet my so-called friends had happily thrown me aside. I wondered whether Cress and Anna would be so callous when they found out I wasn’t one of them. I realized I felt just as wary of new friendships as I did of romantic relationships.

Cress and Anna were hard to keep at arm’s length and almost impossible to dislike. Being around them was like getting caught up in a whirlwind; once you were sucked in, there was no fighting back. You had no choice but to get pulled along for the ride. They included me in all of their jokes and talked with me like we’d been friends for years.

I’d been dreading my return to school all summer and preparing myself for a hard senior year with nothing but my studies for company. I wouldn’t be alone here though. And I wouldn’t have to face the trauma of seeing

Nina and Levi every day. Perhaps Weybridge could be a fresh start like Mom suggested. As the afternoon wore on, I was beginning to feel less anger toward her. Instead of feeling hurt, I found I mostly missed her.

Mom tried calling again just before dinner, and I walked into the corridor where it was quieter to answer the phone. “Hey, Mom.”

“Isobel, thank goodness you answered.” She let out a breath of relief. “I was worried you wouldn’t…”

My chest swelled with guilt. My mom and I rarely fought, and even when we did get angry at each other, we always talked it out. I shouldn’t have dodged her calls this morning no matter how annoyed I was with her.

“No, I’m here. Sorry I missed you earlier. It’s been a long day.”

“I can imagine.”

“And I’m sorry for being so angry with you about all of this. I know you only want what’s best for me.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Iz. I understand why you were upset.” The line went quiet for a moment before she continued. “I should have discussed the new school with you, and it wasn’t fair of me to send you away without a proper goodbye. I was just so scared that you wouldn’t agree to go, and I couldn’t bear it if you passed up this opportunity.”

“It should have been my choice, Mom.”

“I know,” she said. “But you can be just as stubborn as me sometimes, and I knew you would never agree to give Weybridge a go if you weren’t pushed a little.”

“A little?”

“Fine, a lot. But I wasn’t going to let you waste your life here because of me.”

“I wasn’t going to waste—”

“You were. You always talked about going to college, and that all stopped at the start of summer. Suddenly, all your plans for the future revolved around staying in Rapid Bay and helping me at the café. I had no choice but to accept your father’s offer.”

“Yeah, well, I would have kept up the college talk if it would have helped me avoid meeting him.”

“Don’t talk like that,” she said. “It’s time you two finally knew each other.”

I couldn’t bring myself to agree.

“He called me last night, you know?”

I struggled to contain my shock. “He did?”

“He did. He wanted me to know you had arrived safe.”

“I’m surprised he could spare the time,” I muttered.

“Isobel,” Mom pleaded. “He really does want to get to know you.”

I highly doubted that. He hadn’t even bothered to stay in town for one night with me. It was like he couldn’t get away from me fast enough.

The door cracked open behind me, and I turned to find Cress peeking her head through the gap. “You nearly ready for dinner?”

I placed a hand over the mouthpiece of my phone. “I’ll just be one sec.”

She gave me a nod before disappearing into the room again.

“I have to go, Mom. My roommate wants to go get dinner.”

“Oh, but you haven’t had a chance to tell me about the school…”

“Hmm, I think it’ll take a while. There’s a lot to tell. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Okay, we’ll talk tomorrow. Go, have fun.”

“I will.”

“And, Iz?”

“Yeah?”

“Please promise me you’ll give the school a chance? I think you can be happy there, and that’s all I want for you.”

I let out a sigh and nodded. “Yeah, Mom, I’ll give the school a chance.”

“Thanks, sweetie. You won’t regret it.”

I hoped she was right.

I walked with Cress and Anna back to the main building we’d entered through when I’d first arrived at Weybridge. The sun had fallen now, and the deeper hues of night had descended as we stepped outside. The courtyard that separated our dorm from the other buildings looked even more beautiful than it did in the daylight. Lights twinkled from the hedges that bordered the area, and the fountain in the center was lit up in a soft golden glow that made the sprays of water glitter against the dark backdrop.

The buildings also looked elegant under the night’s sky with shards of light shooting up their sandstone exteriors. The place was like something out of a fairy tale. All I needed to fit in was a glass shoe, a fairy godmother, and a prince. Unfortunately, even if I could conjure up the fairy godmother, I was clumsy enough that a glass slipper was a safety hazard, and I had lost all my trust in charming princes.

“Your mom must care about you a lot if she’s already checking in on you,” Cress said as we made our way inside Esher Hall.

“We’re really close.” I nodded. “I’ve lived at home my whole life, so this is a big change for the both of us.”

“Wow, really?” Anna asked. “I can’t imagine actually having to live with my parents during the school year.”

“I loved it,” I said. “My mom’s my best friend.”

“That’s so nice.” Cress gave me a gentle smile as she looped her arm through mine. “Boarding school is definitely different. But you’re going to have such an amazing time here. I’ll make sure of that.”

I was really starting to like both of these girls, and I’d gotten so lucky to be paired with Cress as my roommate. I so easily could have been stuck living with some total witch. Someone like Nina who would backstab me when being my friend didn’t suit her anymore.

The two girls had accepted me so quickly, but as I looked at them, I again found myself wondering if they’d still be so welcoming if they knew the truth about how I ended up at Weybridge Academy. Would they still want to be friends with me if they knew I lived in a small apartment above my mom’s café? If they saw the clothes I normally wore and realized I had absolutely no money to my name?

They were both so nice I didn’t think they would care, but our friendship felt too new and fragile to test it with such a bombshell. I’d never hung out with anyone as wealthy as them before, and I didn’t feel confident they’d so easily accept me if they knew I wasn’t like them.

I hated being dishonest, but perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad if I simply omitted a few things here and there. It hadn’t been the worst thing in the world to act like I’d been the one to select my clothes, and I was sure I could easily skirt around the truth in a similar fashion when asked about my past.

It wasn’t a perfect solution, but for now, it would have to do. I already felt like an impostor in this place. The last thing I needed was for everyone else at school to see me as one too. It sucked, but a few white lies seemed the best way forward. I just hoped I wouldn’t regret it.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The dining room was nothing like the cafeteria at my school back home. The lighting in the room was soft with large orb pendants dangling over the tables, and the wooden floors were a nice departure from the crappy bright linoleum I was used to. Plants were scattered throughout the area, bringing some life and vibrancy to the room, and large floor-to-ceiling windows lined one of the walls overlooking the courtyard at the back of the building.

The place was packed with students, and as we made our way across the room, people started to turn in their seats to watch us pass. Cress and Anna didn't seem to notice, but I couldn't help but shrink a little under the curious gazes coming my way. I knew I was the new kid here, but the way people watched me made me feel like an alien who had just landed on Earth.

I followed the girls over to a series of buffet stations positioned on the far side of the room. They continued to chat happily as they gathered food onto their trays, and when I saw the selection laid out before us, I was briefly distracted from all the people scrutinizing me.

I couldn't believe how much food there was, and I'd never imagined it could be presented so beautifully. Each plate looked like a mini work of art, a far cry from the slop they used to serve at my old school. I wanted to try everything, but I didn't think my stomach would let me. It had been tied in knots since the moment I'd entered the hall, and I wasn't sure those knots would loosen until we left again. Not when it appeared I was the latest

exhibit at the Weybridge Zoo. I ended up getting a salad and a Coke before I followed the girls to find a seat.

It was a relief when they placed their trays down at an unoccupied table in the corner of the room. As I sat, people gradually stopped staring at me and turned their focus back to their meals. I could still feel a few eyes on me, but it wasn't nearly as overwhelming as before. I'd never received attention like this in my life, not even when I was on Levi's arm at a victory party. It couldn't just be because I was new here, could it?

"Do I have something on my face?" I asked Anna.

She frowned at me, but her eyes lit with understanding once she realized why I was concerned. "Like I told you earlier, you're fresh meat. I'm sure everyone will get over it before the week is through."

The thought of putting up with the staring for a whole week was terrifying. "Surely there are other new students?"

Anna shook her head. "Not for seniors. The school has a set number of places for each year group. The only way a new student gets in is if another student leaves, and students rarely leave Weybridge."

"So, someone had to leave for me to be here?"

"Yeah, Elizabeth Watts. Apparently, her dad got in trouble with the IRS. She got pulled out over the summer holidays."

"That's horrible."

Anna shrugged. "Her loss is our gain. She wasn't the nicest person here."

"No," Cress agreed. "She was best friends with Veronica, who's the self-appointed queen of the school. And when those two girls got together, they were more toxic than the Chernobyl nuclear power plant."

They both seemed pretty pleased the girl had left. I had no time for toxic people either, especially after how things had ended with Nina last year, but I still felt bad this girl's family was in trouble and she had to be pulled out of school right before senior year.

"Speak of the devil," Anna said, nudging Cress and nodding toward the other side of the room.

A group of girls had entered through the large double doors. They were all dressed in outfits that wouldn't have looked out of place in a nightclub, and each girl's hair and makeup was as flawless as the next. Despite how gorgeous they all were, it was easy to pick out the queen of the group. She

walked slightly ahead of the others and was a head taller with long red hair and skin the color of porcelain.

It wasn't her beauty that made her stand out from the crowd though. Every girl in the group was stunning, but her expression held her above the others. There was an arrogant look in her eyes that could only belong to someone who always got what they wanted. I was all too familiar with that look because Nina had often worn the same one.

As I stared at the girl, I realized I'd seen her earlier today. She was the one who'd been hanging off Noah's arm in the courtyard. That made sense. Of course, the king and queen of Weybridge Academy were together.

Cress gasped as her gaze landed on Veronica. "I think she got her lips done over the summer!"

"Either that or a swarm of bees attacked her mouth." Anna snorted. "Can you imagine?"

"I'd really rather not," Cress replied. "No, she probably did it to impress Noah."

"Probably," Anna agreed with a roll of her eyes. It was clear neither of the girls liked Veronica.

"Why would she do something so drastic to impress her boyfriend?" I knew girls sometimes did crazy things for guys, but this seemed slightly ridiculous.

"Oh, he's not her boyfriend." Cress seemed very eager to correct me.

"But they are kind of endgame," Anna added. "At least, everyone seems certain they'll end up together."

I hadn't seen Noah in the dining room, but then again, I hadn't exactly been searching for him. With so many people watching me, I'd been avoiding looking anywhere but at Cress and Anna since I sat down. I scanned the room for him now, but I couldn't see him at any of the tables. He wasn't the kind of guy who was easy to miss, so I assumed he wasn't here.

I found my gaze drawn to Veronica again. She was closer to us now, and I could see she did have rather large lips. I never would have guessed they weren't natural though. Then again, the closest kind of cosmetic treatment I'd encountered at my old school was braces. I'd sported a hideous set on my teeth for two years, and I'd never been more grateful than I was on the day they were removed.

“Isn’t she a bit young to be getting surgery?” I asked, turning to the girls.

They both laughed.

“Lip fillers aren’t exactly surgery, and I think you’ll find a lot of the kids here are keen to enhance their natural beauty,” Anna explained. “Sometimes, having enough money to do whatever you want is a bit of a curse.”

“Yeah, and Veronica’s lips seem to have gotten on the bad end of an engorgement charm,” Cress added with a laugh.

I perked up a little at her words. I didn’t know much about lip fillers, but I certainly knew a Harry Potter reference when I heard one. It was the second one I’d heard from Cress today too. “You like *Harry Potter*?”

“Uh, *yeah*, I’m a Hufflepuff,” Cress said proudly.

“And I’m a Slytherin,” Anna added. “But, don’t hate me. I’m just ambitious AF and far too resourceful to end up in any of the other houses. Plus, I look great in green, and I think Malfoy is hot. I have a recurring dream where we’re snuggling up together by the common room fire.”

“Yeah, *snuggling*,” Cress replied, her voice dripping with innuendo.

Anna shoved Cress’s arm as she laughed.

“So, what house are you, Isobel?” Anna asked, her cheeks still slightly pink.

“I always thought I’d be in Ravenclaw.”

She looked surprised. “So, are you super smart?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m *super* smart, but I do okay in school.”

“Only someone super smart would say that.” She grinned.

“Maybe you can rub some of that studiousness off on me this year,” Cress said. “I’m useless at doing my homework.”

“Ha!” Anna laughed. “There’s an impossible challenge if I ever heard one.”

“I’m not *that* bad,” Cress grumbled.

“Every time you’re meant to study, you ditch your books after about five minutes and start practicing dances instead.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“No, I say that like it proves my point.”

I focused on my food, realizing I’d yet to take a bite. It was just a salad, but I let out a moan of appreciation as I had my first mouthful. I’d never tasted anything so good before. It was filled with light and creamy burrata

cheese, and the tomatoes were so sweet and flavorful they almost tasted like strawberries.

“How is this so good?” I asked the moment I swallowed.

“You think dinner is good, wait until you get to dessert,” Cress replied.

“Good, huh?”

“Insanely good.”

I ate my salad a little quicker so I could try the desserts as Cress suggested. She hadn’t been kidding when she said they were insane. The chocolate cake was as decadent as the school itself, and I barely came up for breath as I made my way through a massive slice. It was rich and moist, and the sponge felt light as air. It even rivaled my mom’s pecan pie, and that was my favorite food in the world.

“I’m going to get so fat this year,” I said with a groan as we made our way across the courtyard back to our dorm. My stomach felt like it was going to burst out of my pants. Maybe I’d gone a little too hard on the cake.

The girls nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, it takes serious self-control not to leave school with some extra happy pounds at the end of each term,” Anna said. “The food here is amazing.”

“Especially the waffles,” Cress added. “Just wait until breakfast.”

I loved waffles so I was definitely screwed.

As we entered the dorm, Anna started off in a different direction than us. “I’m going to go find something to wear for tonight,” she said. “I’ll meet you guys back in your room.” She gave us a wave before disappearing down the corridor.

“We better start getting ready too,” Cress said. “Or Anna will be banging down our door in ten minutes demanding we hurry up.”

“She gets ready in ten minutes?”

“Yup. But, then again, she’s practically a model. She looks good in everything and barely needs any makeup. It’s really not fair.”

I could see what Cress meant. Anna was so tall and her skin so flawless that I could easily picture her walking down fashion runways. I had a fair bit of height too, but my long legs didn’t work all that well with my curves, and I often struggled to make outfits work.

When we got back to our room, Cress started rifling through her side of the closet. “Is it too early for me to be stealing your clothes?” she asked, a hopeful look in her eyes.

“No, of course not. Go for it.”

She squealed and clapped her hands together. “Yes! Thank you, thank you!”

She started rummaging through my clothes, but instead of finding things for herself, she began offering me items to try.

“You have to wear these,” she said, pulling out a pair of black jeans. “Oh, and this top will look so cute with them.” She then added a belt, a blazer, and a pair of wedge boots to the outfit.

“You’re going to look amazing,” she said as she dumped the pile of clothes in my outstretched arms.

“Uh, thanks.” I felt a little overwhelmed. Whenever Nina and I had gotten ready to go out, she’d always been too worried about herself to care what I was wearing. Cress’s enthusiasm might have taken me by surprise, but it was nice how she genuinely seemed to want to help me.

“Shit. I’m being too much, aren’t I?” she said, her happy expression dimming a little as she caught the look on my face.

“No, you’re definitely not too much. I’ve just never had a friend like you before. It’s nice.”

“Aww!” Cress rushed over and pulled me into a hug. “You’re going to make me cry.”

I choked out a laugh as she wrapped her arms around me. “And you’re going to make me pass out. You may be small, but your hugs are strong enough to squeeze all the air out of a girl’s lungs.”

“Sorry.” Cress laughed and skipped back. “So, what do you think about the outfit?” She nodded to the clothes in my hands.

“I think it’s perfect. I’ll go put it on. Help yourself to whatever you want in my closet.”

She clapped her hands together with excitement once again and spun to face the closet with a huge grin on her face.

I quickly changed in the bathroom and put a bit of makeup on. I never usually wore much as I hated the feel of foundation on my face. I put some bronzer on my cheeks and a dash of mascara over my lashes. My natural curls meant there wasn’t much I could do with my hair other than run a bit of product through it.

“Damn, you look hot,” Cress said as I walked back out into the room.

I didn’t dress up like this often, and the last time I’d bothered with any makeup was when I went to a wedding last year. My mom had gushed over

how pretty I'd looked at the time, but it was a different feeling hearing it from a friend. I smiled warmly at her in response.

Cress had changed too. She was wearing an outfit similar to mine. Her jeans were denim though, and the bustier she was wearing was slightly more revealing.

"If anyone looks hot tonight, it's you," I said.

She smiled brightly and gave a little spin. "Yeah, I just had to borrow this top. I hope that's okay?"

"It's more than okay. It would be a crime for anyone but you to wear it."

Her smile widened. "Ugh, we never had any choice but to be friends, did we?"

"No choice at all," I agreed with a laugh.

We were interrupted by a loud knock at the door. "You girls better be ready in there," Anna called.

Cress and I shared a look before we burst out laughing.

"I told you she'd come a-knocking."

"You totally did," I agreed.

"Yeah, we're coming!" Cress called back through the door.

I grabbed my phone off my bed and tucked it into my back pocket as Cress opened the door.

"Damn, Cress, that top is amazing."

"Thanks, it's Isobel's."

"I might have to raid your closet sometime too." Anna spoke to me, but her eyes hadn't left Cress's outfit.

"You can take whatever you want," I replied.

"Perfect." She grinned, turning to face me this time. "So, are you ready for your first Weybridge party?"

"Uh, yeah?" The way Anna had asked the question made me feel suddenly unsure of the answer. The party suddenly sounded more serious than I'd initially imagined, like something you needed to prepare for in advance.

"Good," she replied. "Because tonight is going to be wild."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the array of expensive vehicles sitting in the school parking lot. The kids at Weybridge drove cars that probably cost more than my mom made in a year, and Anna's car fit right in among the others. It was sporty and luxurious with a dashboard that looked like something out of a spaceship. She drove like a bit of a maniac, but I could understand why. She owned a car that accelerated like it was on a racetrack, so I wasn't surprised she enjoyed putting her foot down as we made our way to a property on the other side of town.

The party was at Luther's house. Cress had explained his parents bought the place so they had somewhere to stay when they visited him at school. Apparently though, they never came, so the home sat empty for most of the year. My father seemed to have done the same thing, and I suspected his ridiculous mansion would remain just as empty. It was such a waste and made me a little angry when I thought of how hard my mom worked to keep a roof over our heads. Rich people didn't seem to care about that kind of excess though.

Like the school, Luther's house was hidden away in the woods out of town. It didn't feel all that remote though when his driveway was lined with flashy cars. Everyone from school seemed to be arriving at the same time, and Anna had to park a short walk from the house.

We got out of her car and started up the driveway, trailing a steady stream of students who were headed to the party. Luther's house was a gorgeous old villa that looked like it belonged in Italy or Spain. No one seemed to be going inside the house though. Instead, everyone was

following a path around the side of the building, which led into the woods bordering the property.

A narrow trail cut its way through the trees, lit up by the warm glow of lanterns that lined the edges of the path. It was enough light to guide us but not enough to stop me from stumbling every so often over the divots in the ground. I felt glad I was wearing wedges when I saw a girl in stilettos walking in the group ahead of us. She was constantly lurching forward and clutched desperately on to the arm of a friend for support. I was scared she wasn't going to make it.

I knew we were getting close to the party when the soft sound of music started to drift through the trees. Before long, it had filled the air and seemed to shake the leaves with its deep thrumming base. We soon approached a large clearing that butted up against a sharp cliff face. Fairy lights were draped through the trees that bordered the clearing, and colored lights flashed from a DJ booth at the foot of the cliff.

There were several bonfires crackling at the edges of the party, and given the slight chill in the air, I had a feeling I was going to spend most of my time huddling close to one of them.

The party was well and truly underway as we joined the crowd of students. Some were hanging out by the fires while others were loitering by tables covered with food and alcohol. Most people seemed to have gathered in front of the large DJ booth to dance. The music sounded like it was coming from everywhere, and I found myself scanning the trees around me to see if someone had somehow hooked up speakers to the branches high above.

Cress smiled when she caught my amazed expression. "Luther sure knows how to throw a party, huh?"

"Yeah, this sure is something."

"How does it compare to parties at your old school?"

"Uh…" I fumbled as I tried to come up with an answer. I didn't think it was even slightly comparable to the parties back home, and I breathed a silent sigh of relief as Anna saved me from answering. She'd been concentrating on the party and must not have heard Cress questioning me.

"Let's get drinks," she said, practically bouncing up and down like she couldn't wait to throw herself into the action.

"Yes!" Cress agreed. "Lead the way."

Anna flashed us both a wide grin before she thrust herself into the crowd.

“So, does Luther throw parties like this often?” I asked Cress as we followed after Anna.

“Not too often. Normally, everyone parties at the school’s old boathouse on the weekends.”

Anna glanced over her shoulder and shook her head at Cress. “By *everyone*, she means those who are cool enough to warrant an invite from Noah, Luther, or Kaden. Those three boys pretty much rule our school, and when it comes to their more exclusive parties, most kids don’t make the cut.”

I swallowed and glanced between the two girls. “Do *you guys* make the cut?”

“Let’s just say we’re lucky Cress is Noah’s cousin, or I doubt we’d even know the old boathouse existed.”

Cress rolled her eyes. “It’s not like that.”

“It definitely is,” Anna muttered.

The three of us came to a stop as we reached the drinks table. Bottles of spirits were lined up on the tabletop, and large buckets containing other bottles on ice were on the ground beside it.

“Oh, I see Luther’s got someone making cocktails tonight,” Cress said, nodding to a girl who was vigorously shaking a cocktail shaker at the other end of the table. “You guys want one?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Anna said.

“Me too,” I quickly agreed. I wasn’t really sure what went into cocktails. I hadn’t drunk much before, and I didn’t think tonight was the best time to experiment.

“Okay.” Cress shrugged. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Mmm, Cristal, this will do me,” Anna said, plucking a bottle from one of the buckets. She popped the cork and giggled as the champagne fizzed over the lip of the bottle.

“Aren’t you driving?” I frowned as I watched Anna eagerly waiting for her champagne to stop spilling out of the bottle.

“You should see your face.” Anna laughed. “I might be reckless, but I’m not stupid. We’ll get an Uber back to school, and I’ll have someone pick up my car in the morning.” She lifted the champagne bottle to her lips and took a quick swig before offering it to me. “Want some?”

“Uh…” I quickly scanned the other available options and grabbed a beer instead. “I’m more of a beer girl.” At least, I had been at the one party I’d drunk at last year.

“A girl after my own heart.”

I turned toward the deep voice and found a guy standing behind me sporting a playful grin. He was handsome with white-blond hair and bright blue eyes. He looked a little like a bulked-up version of Draco Malfoy, and given Anna’s weakness for the Slytherin villain, I imagined he was exactly the kind of guy she’d go for. He was far too preppy to be my type though.

“It’s my job to welcome all the prettiest girls to the party,” he said. “And you two definitely fit the criteria. Who’s your friend, Anna?” This guy was just a little full of himself, and there was a cheeky glint in his eyes I didn’t trust.

Anna pulled the champagne bottle from her lips and shook her head at him. “Someone far too smart to be lured in by your charm.” She turned to me. “It’s best to avoid this one. I’d introduce you, but I don’t want to give the cretin an opening.”

“Maybe she happens to like cretins,” the guy said, giving me a smile. “I’m Luther.”

So, this was the host of the party.

“Isobel,” I said, introducing myself. “And if Anna thinks I should avoid you, I’ll have to trust her on that one.”

He should have been annoyed by my rebuff, but instead, Luther only looked more intrigued.

“Yeah, buzz off, Luther,” Anna said. “We don’t need a welcoming committee.”

His eyes grew big as he turned to Anna. “You’re breaking my heart here.”

“We both know you don’t have a heart.”

“Then what’s this thing I feel shattering into a million pieces in my chest?”

Anna rolled her eyes while Luther turned back to focus on me once more. “Try not to let her turn you against me,” he said. “Despite what she says, I’m all heart and a hell of a lot of fun.”

I lifted an eyebrow. Judging by the party he’d thrown, it was hard to argue with him. He probably was a lot of fun, but I was certainly wary about getting too caught up in it.

“Luther, why don’t you run along and get into mischief somewhere else,” Anna said.

Luther placed a hand against his chest in mock surprise. “Mischief? Me?”

“You know you’re trouble. It’s practically your middle name,” Anna fired back.

“Perhaps,” he replied. “But who said trouble was a bad thing. Don’t you want to get into trouble with me, London?”

“I’m good, thanks.” She scoffed. “And you know that’s not my name. I’m not even from London. There *are* other places in England.”

Luther was definitely flirting with her, and despite Anna’s protests, I got the impression she didn’t totally hate it.

He reached out and pulled the bottle of champagne from her hands, taking a swig before passing it back. “Well, I’ll be around all night if you change your mind.” He winked before he turned and disappeared into the crowd as Anna scowled after him.

“God, he’s annoying,” she said. “I can’t believe I nearly kissed him last year.”

“I’m kind of surprised you haven’t,” I said. “He looks a lot like a certain Slytherin you dream about.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced in Luther’s direction. “Oh my God, he really does. I’d never noticed before.” She took a long drink of her champagne. “Damn, that’s terrifying.”

She genuinely looked disturbed by the idea, and I laughed. “How did you guys *nearly* kiss?”

“Well, there was a Christmas party, too much champagne, and some mistletoe,” she said before shaking her head. “Luckily, I remembered it was *Luther,* and I slapped his face instead.”

“It was brilliant,” Cress said, joining us once more. She was holding a martini glass filled with a bright pink liquid. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Luther look so shocked. Not many girls turn him down.”

“Yeah, they somehow find his annoying ways attractive,” Anna said. “Clearly they’re all deluded.”

She was protesting a little too much, which only made me wonder again if she liked the guy more than she let on.

“Anyway, we should go dance,” Anna said.

“Yes!” Cress cheered. She gulped down the rest of her drink before grabbing my hand and dragging me toward the makeshift dance floor. I stumbled after her, caught off guard, and Anna followed behind as the three of us made our way into the middle of the dancing crowd.

I didn’t dance much, other than on the rare occasion when I had the apartment to myself back home. I usually sung along to the radio while I cooked dinner, probably looking like a complete idiot as I spun my spatula around the room. The kids here seemed to have none of my reservations though, and they were all bumping and grinding like they were auditioning for a rap video. I, however, felt like a total klutz as I shifted from side to side.

Anna and Cress threw themselves into the music, and I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy at how easy they made it look. Anna’s style was more seductive while Cress danced with the kind of energy and enthusiasm that couldn’t be faked. I already felt out of place at Weybridge Academy, but the feeling was nothing compared to how odd I felt on the dance floor.

I stayed with them for two songs before I quickly made an excuse to leave. “I’m going to grab a drink of water.”

“Aw, but we only just started dancing,” Cress replied.

I shook my head. “I’ll be quick. You keep dancing, and I’ll come back to find you.”

Cress nodded and smiled. “Don’t be too long!”

With a relieved breath, I made my way off the dance floor. I didn’t head for the drinks table. Instead, I walked over to one of the bonfires and sat down for a breather on a nearby log. A girl was sitting just a few feet from me, but her head was buried in her phone, and I felt pretty much alone.

It was strange sitting here, watching the party. It was far more extravagant than any party I’d ever been to back home, but really it wasn’t all that different. There were still couples making out and kids who’d already gotten too drunk being tended to by their friends. There were people like Cress and Anna who were intent on dancing the night away and those like me who’d rather hang on the periphery.

As my gaze drifted across the party, I noticed one area where the crowd thinned out. The ground was higher there, and a small group of kids sat on a large rock that protruded from the base of the cliff face. It reminded me a little of pride rock from *The Lion King* as it jutted out, overlooking the

clearing. When I caught sight of who was sitting on it, I had to smother a snort.

Of course, Noah was up there, surveying the party like a ruler on his throne. There were others with him, sure, but none had mastered Noah's kingly expression. He was watching the party with the aloof expression of someone who truly believed he was better than everyone around him. In that moment, he reminded me so much of Levi, and I couldn't for the life of me understand how I'd ever found my ex-boyfriend appealing. How did I date someone so self-obsessed for nearly a year?

I watched as Veronica, the redhead the girls had pointed out to me earlier, sauntered over to Noah. She lowered herself onto his lap, gazing up at him with adoring eyes. He barely glanced at her and didn't react as she ran her hand across his chest. It was probably all part of his self-inflated belief that he was too good to be here.

I almost felt sorry for her as she continued to try to get his attention. It was hard to believe everyone thought they were destined to be together, as Anna and Cress had explained. Noah clearly hadn't gotten that memo. I wondered what it must be like for Veronica to be with a guy who so clearly wasn't interested in her. Levi wasn't the best boyfriend, but at least he used to talk to me and knew how to crack a smile.

Eventually, Veronica seemed to give up, and she reluctantly left Noah's lap to go talk with her friends. I couldn't seem to pull my eyes away from him though. What was it about this guy that made my father so wary? And why was everyone so enamored by him? He seemed thoroughly bored by the whole party, and I didn't understand how he could just sit there, surrounded by so many people but still appear so untouchable. So detached. I was trying to work it out; did he really think he was better than everyone here?

"Hey, you're the new girl, right?" The girl who was sitting near me was no longer concentrating on her phone. Instead, she was looking up at me and smiling. She had short curly hair and big hazel eyes that were emphasized by her dark-rimmed glasses. The oversized knit cardigan she was wearing made her look ready for a night curled up by the fireplace rather than a party in the woods. She had the kind of sweet expression that just couldn't be faked though, and I warmed to her immediately.

"Isobel," I said, returning her somewhat nervous smile.

“I’m Lillian,” she replied. “But everyone calls me Lily. Well, everyone but my mom that is. It’s nice to finally meet the girl everyone’s been talking about.”

Her words tumbled out in rapid succession, and it took me a moment to process them. When I did, the smile slipped from my lips. “Everyone’s talking about me?”

“Oh, crap, I didn’t mean it like that.” Lily’s big brown eyes widened with concern when she saw my reaction. “Sorry, I have a habit of putting my foot in my mouth,” she continued. “I just meant that we’ve all heard there’s a new girl joining us. No one’s gossiping or anything. I also tend to ramble a bit, so feel free to shut me up at any time.”

“It’s fine.” I laughed. “I hear you guys aren’t used to getting new recruits.”

“No, we aren’t.” She let out a long breath and relaxed. “So, are you enjoying your first Weybridge party?”

I shrugged and glanced back at the crowd. “Parties aren’t really my thing.” As I thought about it, I wondered if maybe they could become my thing, I’d just never really enjoyed them back home. Levi had always ended up getting too drunk, and I usually spent most of the night watching girls throw themselves at him. It didn’t help that the music was always too loud, and there was far too much dancing for my liking. Perhaps a smaller party would be more my style.

“Me neither,” she agreed. “I’ve been reading a book on my phone all night. The only reason I’m here is because my roommate was already drunk before she left our room, and I wanted to watch out for her.”

“You must be a good roommate.”

She blushed and averted her eyes. “Anyone else would do the same. Who are you rooming with this year?”

“Cress. Do you know her?”

“I think you’ll find everyone knows everyone here.” Lily laughed. “And Cress is great. She gets along with everyone. Not that anyone would ever dare dislike her given who her cousin is…”

“Noah,” I murmured.

“Yeah, Noah Hastings pretty much only has one soft spot, and that’s Cress. No one would ever do anything to hurt her because it would mean dealing with him.” She gave a nervous glance in his direction.

“You’re not a fan of Noah?” I guessed.

“He’s okay.”

I got the impression Lily had much stronger feelings about him that she was keeping to herself. “You *really* don’t like him, do you?”

She laughed and shook her head. “No, he’s fine. I just don’t know him, and I’m not obsessed with him like so many other people here. I get that he’s good-looking and his grandfather’s a billionaire, but I’m really not into the whole dark and brooding thing. He never says much, and I don’t understand how girls can fall at a guy’s feet when he’s never said more than two words to them.”

I didn’t get it either. It didn’t stop me from being curious about him though. “My father warned me to stay away from him this year.”

“Oh, really?” Lily looked like she was about to question me, but then she paused. “Actually, I’m not really surprised,” she continued. “Noah has a terrible reputation with girls. Most of the parents here run in similar circles, and they love to gossip. I’m not surprised your dad is worried.”

I slowly nodded with understanding. That probably explained Matthew’s warning, but I was surprised he cared enough to bother. Maybe he was concerned this boy might distract his new daughter from doing well in school and upholding his precious reputation. I didn’t feel any responsibility to follow Matthew’s advice. I was more likely to jump off a cliff just because he told me not to. But as I looked back at Noah, sitting on his makeshift stone throne, perched above us all, I got the feeling Matthew might have been right to warn me.

“So, do you have a boyfriend?” Lily asked.

“Not anymore. We broke up at the—”

“Oh no.” Lily shot to her feet. Her eyes were on the dance floor, and it wasn’t hard to see who she was looking at. A girl had stumbled into a drinks table and sent glasses and bottles flying. There was already a crowd of people forming to clean up the broken glass. “That’s Amber, my roommate.” Lily gasped. “I better go help her.”

“Do you need a hand?”

Lily was already making her way from the bonfire. “It’s okay. I think I’ll manage.” She waved a hand over her shoulder before jogging across the clearing to where her roommate was climbing to her feet. I didn’t envy her one bit. At least my roommate was more interested in dancing than drinking.

I watched as Lily reached Amber. A couple of boys were helping to steady her, as she was barely able to stay standing. I imagined she would be in a world of pain tomorrow. Being hungover on the first day of school couldn't be a fun way to start the year.

The party was back in full swing moments later. A shocked silence had descended over the dance floor when the glasses smashed on the ground, but that seemed to be forgotten very quickly.

I considered returning to Cress and Anna but was reluctant to go. It was far more peaceful sitting by the fire, watching the party from the periphery.

Without Lily distracting me, my gaze seemed to naturally drift back to Noah. His expression had barely changed since I last looked at him, and not even the two girls who were now fawning over him in Veronica's absence seemed to capture his attention. He still seemed to be observing the party like he was above it all, but I was continually fascinated by him.

Levi had become the king of our school through his sporting prowess and his ability to charm anyone, but how did someone like Noah, who clearly didn't care for the affection of the masses, command their respect? Surely, there was more to his influence than the fact he filled out a shirt nicely and had a gorgeous face. Lily had mentioned his grandfather was a billionaire, but was that all there was to it? Were the people here really so blinded by money? This was one of the most prestigious schools in the country. Surely Noah wasn't the only kid here who came from that kind of wealth.

Noah pushed a hand through his tousled hair and then suddenly looked in my direction, as if he sensed me watching him. I expected to find the same disinterest in his eyes that I'd observed all night, but there was something about his gaze that made me feel like he was lost.

He was a king at this school, but perhaps he found the weight of his crown a little too much to bear? Either way, it shouldn't matter to me. I'd been stupid enough to get lured in by the appeal of our school's resident royal back home. It didn't matter how intriguing Noah Hastings was. I wouldn't be falling into that trap again.

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CHAPTER NINE

"Whatcha doin over here, newbie?"

My cheeks flushed as I jerked my gaze away from Noah to look at Luther who was standing over me, a wide grin stretching his mouth. I really hoped he hadn't been standing there long enough to catch me watching his friend like a crazed stalker.

"Just taking a breather," I said.

"Do you want company?"

I lifted my eyebrows, surprised by his offer. "I don't think Anna would approve. She seems to think you're trouble."

He watched me for a moment, almost weighing my response. It seemed he liked what he heard though because his grin grew and he took a seat beside me anyway. "Ah, but I'm the best kind of trouble."

"And what kind is that?"

"The kind that everyone needs—fun with a dash of mischief, all rolled into one delicious package."

"I have no idea what that means."

Luther replied with a laugh before he leaned forward and lifted his hands to warm them by the fire. He looked the picture of ease sitting beside me despite the fact we barely knew each other. He wasn't watching me though; he was looking in the direction I'd been staring before he interrupted me. "So, were you really taking a breather, or were you just enjoying the view? You seemed awfully focused on my boy Noah when I arrived."

“I wasn’t focused on anyone,” I quickly replied. “I must have zoned out for a second there.” I tried to sound unbothered, but I could feel my cheeks warming, likely betraying my lie.

“So, you weren’t checking out Noah?”

“I hadn’t even noticed him.”

“Because you don’t have to be embarrassed if you were. Lots of the girls enjoy drooling over him.”

I could definitely see why this guy annoyed Anna so much. “I wasn’t drooling. I’m not interested in any boys here—not you and certainly not Noah.”

He laughed again. “Okay, if you say so.”

“I do.” I folded my arms over my chest, hoping the matter was settled.

“But just so you know, he’s been watching you tonight too…”

My eyes narrowed on Luther. He was clearly messing with me. “You really are full of trouble, aren’t you?”

His lips turned up in a mischievous smirk. “The best kind, like I said.”

I shook my head and relaxed a little. Even though I’d only just met Luther, and he was totally obnoxious, I felt surprisingly comfortable around him. He had a terrible way of getting under your skin, but I kind of enjoyed his ridiculousness. Perhaps we could be friends.

“So, what classes are you taking this year?” he asked.

“It’s a party and you’re asking me about classes?”

“Well, since I’m here on an undercover mission to discover all your secrets, I figured I should start with your weekly schedule…”

“An undercover mission, huh?”

He nodded gleefully. “But, *shhh*, don’t tell anyone.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed.

“So, newbie, your classes are…” Despite his jokes, Luther did seem serious about his task.

“Sorry, Luther, but your undercover mission is already failing. I actually have no idea what classes I’m taking yet. My dad organized everything for me.”

“Ah, one of those fathers. Mine’s like that too.”

“I don’t really know the guy that well,” I said, not wanting to talk about Matthew any more than I had to.

“It’s like looking in a mirror,” Luther said. “My dad’s a total mystery to me too. Kaden and I started a sucky dad club back in freshman year. You’re

welcome to join if you want?”

“Sounds exclusive,” I said.

“Oh, it’s the most exclusive. Only the coolest kids get to join.”

“Well, it’s an honor to be invited then.”

He gave me a warm smile. It was the first genuine expression he’d shown, and he suddenly seemed so much more innocent.

“Is Noah a part of your club?” I had no idea why I’d asked that. I’d just told Luther I hadn’t been completely drooling over his friend, and here I was asking questions about Noah the first chance I got.

“No,” Luther replied. “He’s got a shitty grandfather instead, so he doesn’t qualify.” Luther sounded like he was still joking around, but his expression had become more reserved. Although he was happy to talk about his own father and Kaden’s, it seemed like Noah’s grandfather was a more closely guarded subject.

I didn’t want to push it, so I quickly changed the subject. “So, I haven’t met Kaden. I’m guessing he’s one of your friends?”

Luther’s tense shoulders relaxed at my question, and he nodded, pointing to a guy sitting with Noah. He had dark hair and an easy smile, which was a striking contrast to the bored look on Noah’s face.

“He’s the brains of our little trio,” Luther said.

“And what are you?”

“The balls.” He didn’t even take a second to consider it.

I snorted. “The balls?”

“Oh, yeah. If it weren’t for me, shit would never get done.”

“And what’s Noah?”

“The heart.” I was taken aback by the answer. He sounded sincere, which was surprising. Luther seemed like the type of guy who rarely took anything seriously. I found it hard to believe it was true though. From what I’d seen and heard about Noah, it sounded like his heart was hard and neglected. How else could he so happily destroy the feelings of so many girls?

I shook my head, wondering why Luther was even sitting here having this conversation with me. I was the new girl. A nobody. Someone who hadn’t even known Weybridge existed a day ago and certainly didn’t belong at the school. From the way the girls had been talking about them, these boys were too popular to be interested in me.

“Why are you talking to me?” I asked.

Luther shrugged, seemingly much less surprised by the directness of my question than I'd expected. "I've got a good feeling about you, newbie."

"You do?" I frowned.

"Yep, and I always trust my gut." He stood and brushed a hand down his top to straighten it. "I know you said you're not much of a dancer, but no one ever looks bad dancing with me…"

"Is that your way of asking me to dance?"

"Yep."

I smiled and shook my head. "Actually, I think I'm going to call it a night. It's been a pretty long day for me, and I'd like to feel awake for my first day of classes tomorrow."

"Suit yourself," he said. "But just remember what you're missing out on." He jumped backward and spun around in a smooth circle, dramatically spreading his arms wide as he swirled. He actually made the move look good, but it wouldn't have been out of place in a cheesy boy band routine. Once again, I couldn't tell if Luther was being serious or not. Even his cheeky grin couldn't confirm either way.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure I'll survive."

He chuckled under his breath. "Yeah, newbie, I think we're going to get along just fine."

I watched him walk away, a small smile still on my lips. Luther was a bit of a playboy, but I'd kind of enjoyed our talk.

I slowly stood and went to search for Cress and Anna. I found them getting drinks out of one of the large coolers and was grateful I didn't have to face the dance floor again. They both had small beads of sweat dotting their brows, and I was guessing they'd only just taken a break from dancing.

"Isobel!" Cress squealed happily, throwing her arms around me.

I laughed as I caught her. She was pretty buzzed, but at least she wasn't as drunk as Lily's roommate.

"We missed you," she said. "We thought you were coming back to the dance floor."

"Sorry, I'm really not much of a dancer."

"That's okay. You're here now." Cress linked her arm through mine. "And you haven't got a drink. We better fix that." She turned to the drinks table, but I planted my feet to stop her.

“I would love to, but I think I want to head back to the dorm and get some sleep before tomorrow.”

“But it’s not even late yet.” Cress pouted at me.

“I know, but I’m absolutely useless if I don’t get a good night’s sleep.”

Cress let out a disappointed sigh. “Okay, we can go.”

“Don’t be silly. You guys stay. I’ll grab a ride home with someone else.”

“Are you sure?” Anna asked. “We’re happy to come with you.”

“Totally sure. I don’t want you guys to leave because of me. I’ll see you back at school.”

Anna hesitated. “Okay, but only if you’re certain.”

“I am.”

Cress gave me a big squeeze. “We love you.”

I smiled and nodded as she wrapped her arms around me. I was pretty sure it was just the alcohol speaking, but it was nice to hear all the same. “Have fun. I’ll catch you guys later.”

I turned and headed for the path that led back to Luther’s house. I was a little uncertain about finding a lift with a stranger, but it was better than forcing the girls to leave when they were having so much fun.

As I walked down the path and the music behind me began to fade, I heard voices up ahead. A girl was speaking, and since she was talking so loudly, it was easy to make out what she was saying.

“… and I can’t believe you just let all of those girls practically crawl all over you tonight…”

“Is that why you dragged me out here?” a guy responded. “Because I really don’t need this shit.”

“But, *Noah*,” she whined. “Isn’t it time you forgot about all these other girls? I’ve been patient, and you said things would be different with us this year. That we could finally be together.”

I came to a stop as I caught sight of Noah and Veronica. She had him pressed against a tree on the edge of the path, and while they hadn’t seen me yet, there was no way I could make my way past without them noticing. The last thing I wanted was to interrupt them having such a private conversation, and I hesitated as I considered what to do.

“I never said that…”

“Oh, so I just imagined it?”

“Well, I didn’t say it, so you must have imagined it,” Noah snapped back.

“But we’re *supposed* to be together,” she continued. “I want it. Both our families want it. I know deep down you want it too.”

“I’ve made it perfectly clear, Veronica. I’m not interested in a relationship right now.”

Veronica stepped away from him slightly, and I could see the hurt in her eyes. I knew Cress and Anna weren’t fans of the girl, but I didn’t like seeing her so upset. Did Noah really have to be so blunt with her?

“Isobel, is that you?” I glanced over my shoulder as Lily came up behind me with her drunken roommate slumped heavily across her shoulders. My eyes darted back to Noah and Veronica. I hoped they hadn’t noticed Lily calling out my name, but Noah had turned in my direction, and his eyes seared into mine.

I hated that I’d been caught eavesdropping, but it’s not like I had much choice. Veronica and Noah were arguing right in the middle of the only route back to the house. If they wanted their conversation kept private, they should have chosen somewhere more secluded. Noah only kept eye contact with me for a moment before he stormed away from Veronica and continued up the path toward the house.

Veronica turned in our direction as well, but she barely seemed to notice me. Instead, her eyes narrowed on Lily, who was now at my side. “What are you looking at, *Charity*?” She practically hissed the words before running after Noah. It was only after she was out of sight that any of us seemed to breathe again.

“She shouldn’t-a called you that,” Lily’s roommate slurred as she teetered dangerously on her heels. She kept swaying like she was going to fall over, and if Lily hadn’t been propping her up, she definitely wouldn’t have been standing.

“It’s fine, Amber.” Lily’s expression betrayed her true feelings, and I could tell she was hurt.

“Why *did* she call you that?” I asked.

“Because I’m a scholarship student.”

“So?”

“So she called me Charity, as in *charity case*.” Lily sighed. “I couldn’t afford to go to Weybridge if it wasn’t for the scholarship.” She didn’t look at me as she spoke, as though she was worried I’d be judging her. Little did she know, I was the last person who would look down on her for that.

“That’s ridiculous,” I protested.

“Yeah, it’s super ridiculous,” Amber mumbled from where she was nuzzled into Lily’s shoulder. “You’re a super-duper-smarty-pants.”

“Amber’s right. Veronica shouldn’t have called you that,” I said. “You’re here on merit. Not just because your parents happen to have more money than they know what to do with.”

“Yeah, well, money is what counts around here.” Lily shrugged. “And it’s not the first time I’ve been called that. I doubt it will be the last. I know I’m lucky to come to this school.”

Lily seemed completely resigned to her place in the school’s pecking order—the poor kid who had to be grateful for even being allowed in. It made me angry thinking of Veronica or anyone treating her that way, but I wasn’t exactly surprised. I too felt out of place at Weybridge, and I hadn’t even told anyone about my background. After finding out how Lily was treated, I was only more convinced I’d made the right choice by keeping it quiet so far.

“This school’s the one that’s lucky to have you,” Amber said. She might have had way too much to drink, but at least she was a sweet drunk.

Lily blushed and let out a gentle laugh at Amber’s garbled compliment. “We really need to get you back to school.”

“Here, I’ll give you a hand.” I went to Amber’s other side and took her arm, placing it over my shoulder.

“You have two heads,” Amber mumbled to me through bleary eyes. “And they’re so pretty. I wish I had two pretty heads.”

I lifted my eyebrows as I glanced at Lily, and she looked to be withholding a laugh. It was a compliment, sort of, but the fact Amber was seeing two heads on my shoulders made me doubtful she could make out my features clearly enough to determine I was pretty.

“Uh, thanks. I think,” I said as I focused on her again.

“Do I know you?”

“No. I’m Isobel.”

“Isobel.” She sounded out each syllable of my name, like she was tasting it but couldn’t decide if she liked the flavor or not. I wasn’t sure what she concluded because her head slumped forward a moment later, and Lily and I had to brace her to keep her upright.

“Are you okay, Amber?” Lily asked.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

She sounded far from it.

As we slowly started walking with Amber flopped over our shoulders, Lily shot me a smile. “Thanks for helping. I’m not sure I would have made it back to my car on my own.”

“I’m surprised you made it this far.” Amber was much heavier than she looked, but it was mostly because she was a total dead weight at this point.

“Me too.” Lily let out a laugh. “I probably should have enlisted some help to get her home, but I was just happy she’d finally agreed to leave the party with me.”

“Well, I’m happy I was in the right place at the right time.”

“Same.”

Step by step, we slowly made our way back toward Luther’s house. It took a while to traipse our way through the trees because Amber kept lurching and swaying as we walked. I had no idea why Luther thought a party in the middle of the woods was a good idea, especially when people were drinking.

It was a relief when we arrived back at Luther’s driveway and better still when Lily headed for a car right by the house. It was an old sedan, far nicer than the car my mom drove back home, but it still looked out of place surrounded by the luxury vehicles that lined the driveway. I would have killed to own a car like this, but Lily looked embarrassed as she pointed it out to me.

“This is me,” she said. “I think we should put Amber in the back seat.”

“But I want to go in the front,” Amber complained.

“Not tonight,” Lily replied. “I won’t risk you throwing up on the dashboard.”

“I’m not going to throw up,” Amber grumbled, but at least she didn’t complain as we helped her into the car. She perked up a little once she was inside, and she looked past me and started smiling as I was doing up her seat belt.

“Noah Hastings is so hot,” she slurred. There was a dreamy look in her eyes, and I shook my head as I finished strapping her in.

“Yeah, well, it’s a shame that sometimes beauty is only skin-deep,” I replied.

Amber started to giggle. “I think he heard you.”

“What?” My chest tightened, and I glanced over my shoulder. Noah was leaning against a car a little way down the drive. He was staring in our direction, his green eyes narrowed. I didn’t have a chance to analyze his

expression because he immediately turned away. He couldn’t have heard me, could he? I hadn’t been speaking very loudly, but he wasn’t standing that far from us either. Maybe he had overheard, or perhaps he was simply scowling at me because I’d listened to his conversation with Veronica earlier. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it now.

I gave Amber a half smile and a shrug before closing the door on her. I took a seat in the front and stared out the passenger window. I watched the lights of Luther’s house disappear as Lily drove off.

I hadn’t even been here a day, and already I’d made new friends, been to a crazy party, and somehow managed to piss off the supposed king of Weybridge Academy. I had to wonder what on earth this school had in store for me tomorrow.

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CHAPTER TEN

I woke up with the sun. We'd forgotten to close the curtain last night, and Cress groaned as the soft morning light filtered through our bedroom window. I'd slept surprisingly well considering it was my first night in a new place. But now that I was awake, I had no hope of returning to sleep.

Cress grumbled again and pulled a pillow over her face. She'd come in much later than me last night, and I quickly rose from my bed to close the curtain. We didn't need to be up for a couple more hours, and I was sure Cress would want to go back to sleep.

By the time I turned back to face the room, her breaths had become slow and deep once more. I was impressed by how easily she'd drifted off. There was no way I could go back to sleep once I was up, so I decided to get dressed. I threw on a pair of shorts, a tank, and my running sneakers. I was feeling kind of jittery about starting school, and I figured a little fresh air wouldn't hurt.

The corridor was silent as I made my way outside. Everyone was still sleeping after the party last night. I was glad I'd decided to bail early. I'd heard quite a few girls arriving back at the dorm in the middle of the night. They were crashing around and laughing as they kept trying to shush each other. I was guessing they'd had too much to drink and probably felt terrible this morning. Even Cress didn't make it back until nearly midnight. She didn't seem too drunk, but she was definitely tipsy. She liked to giggle when she'd been drinking and thought putting on her pajamas was hilarious.

The air was crisp as I left the dorm, and the golden morning light showered the school in a beautiful, almost unearthly glow. I never understood why some people hated early mornings. They were, without a doubt, the best part of the day. I loved seeing the sunrise, and I always felt a kind of boundless hope that anything was possible as I watched a new day begin.

I set off at a light jog, heading toward the lake and the forest beyond. Whenever I went for runs back home, I'd always jogged along the beach. I loved the gentle sound of the waves lapping against the shore and the warm salty breeze rushing through my hair. There was nothing more soothing than watching the morning light shimmer over the waves or seeing the water devour footprints in the sand. While Weybridge was no less beautiful, it was definitely different.

Everything felt so lush and green here, and the smell of tree sap and pine needles permeated the air. The lake was like a mirror this morning, perfectly reflecting the clouds floating above it, and birds chirped as they woke to greet the sun.

I still couldn't believe this place was to be my life for the next year. I didn't want to like it here, not when I'd been forced to come here, but it was hard to hate the school. Especially when I'd already started to make some friends.

I followed a path past the lake and into the trees. The forest was gorgeous under the early morning sun. Dark shadows still clung to the leafy foliage, but soft shafts of sunlight managed to creep through the canopy above. As I breathed in, I was hit by the earthy smell of loam and the sharp fragrance of pine. The ground crunched pleasantly beneath my feet as the cool air brushed against my skin. For a moment, I didn't have to worry about the crazy situation I'd been put in. It was just the forest, my loudly thudding heart, and me.

The path became uneven as I ventured farther into the woods, and the shadows creeping across the ground grew darker as the canopy overhead thickened. I kept my eyes on the forest floor, making sure I didn't trip. I was clumsy at the best of times, and with tree roots poking up through the dirt path all around me, there was a high chance I wouldn't make it out of the forest safely.

I was so fixated on the ground I didn't see someone approaching until it was too late. I heard the scrape of footsteps ahead of me and quickly lifted

my gaze. But I didn't have a chance to stop. All I saw was the brief flash of a guy's bare chest before I slammed right into him. I clenched my eyes shut as his strong arms wrapped around me, caging me to him as we fell. He grunted as we hit the ground, and the wind rushed from my lungs as I landed on top of him.

I let out a small groan. *Damn, that hurt.* It could have been a lot worse. If the guy had landed on top of me, I knew I'd be suffering a whole lot more.

"*Shit*, are you okay?" His voice was deep and rumbly and far too familiar. It only took a few seconds for me to realize who I'd landed on. I closed my eyes a little tighter, hoping that if I kept them shut then perhaps it wouldn't be true.

"Isobel, are you okay?"

Nope, his voice only confirmed it. I was sprawled across none other than Noah Hastings, and given how closely we were intertwined, I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me so I could disappear.

Slowly, I blinked my eyes open. Noah was staring up at me with a slight frown crinkling his brow and concern flashing in his green eyes. They were almost the color of the trees surrounding us; far too pretty to belong to someone so arrogant.

"I'm fine." I tried to push myself up, but it was a little hard to do so without touching Noah's chest. His firm skin was covered in a light sheen of sweat, which only added to his appeal. It wasn't hard to see why all the girls at school were so infatuated with him. Without his shirt on, he looked like a Calvin Klein model. It really wasn't fair. No one should look this good.

I realized I'd been staring at his chest a few seconds too long, and I scrambled to get off him. I was rushing, and as I started to move, I noticed an unpleasant ache in my ankle. I ignored it, tripping over myself as I hurried to get away from him. I must have looked like one of those baby fawns trying to take its first steps because just about every movement I made was a little frantic without being particularly successful.

Noah let out an irritated huff. "Here." He took hold of my arm to help me balance.

His touch made my skin prickle and set off a fluttering sensation in my stomach. The tingles caught me by surprise, and I jerked out of his grasp. "It's okay. I'm fine."

I avoided looking him in the eyes. I didn't want any tingles caused by Noah Hastings, and I could think of nothing worse than letting him know he'd affected me that way. I'd given into those kinds of feelings once before, and things with my ex hadn't ended well. I wasn't stupid enough to go and get a crush on the one guy at this school I'd been directly warned about. Definitely not one who was also already entangled with another girl and who appeared to be Levi's Weybridge equivalent. Nope, I wouldn't be doing any of that.

I went to put pressure on my aching foot, but the moment it bore any weight, my leg collapsed under me, and I staggered right back into Noah. He caught me easily and helped me stand tall once more.

"You know, most girls just flip their hair or bat their eyelashes," he said. "I have to admit, you're the first one to try running into me."

He was still lightly touching my arm to steady me, and I shook him off. "You think I did that on purpose? It was an accident."

"You wouldn't be the first girl to do something crazy to get my attention."

My mouth dropped open. *The nerve of this guy.* I'd been right to think Noah's beauty was only skin-deep, and I was starting to wish he'd heard me after the party last night when I'd said as much. "There's something wrong with you, you know."

A flicker of uncertainty seemed to flash in his eyes, but it was quickly replaced by the look of superiority he seemed so fond of. "I'm not the one falling all over a guy to impress him."

When I'd met Noah outside the dorms on my first day, he'd been grumpy and indifferent to almost everyone, especially the new girl. But clearly, that was him on a good day. I'd never met someone so conceited in my life. Sure, he was gorgeous, but who could actually stand spending more than two minutes with him? Perhaps that was why I hadn't seen him speaking much last night. No one could actually put up with him once he opened his mouth.

I stepped back from him, making sure to walk lightly on my sore foot. It took a concerted effort not to wince in pain from the small amount of pressure I placed on it. Something was definitely wrong with my ankle, but I didn't want Noah to know it.

"Well, I can see my planned collision has failed to get you to fall in love with me, so why don't you run along and we forget this ever happened." I

turned before he could respond and began to hobble away from him. I was moving painfully slow and could feel him watching me as I continued to struggle. Why wouldn't he just leave? Would this embarrassment never end?

He let out a heavy breath. "I can see you're in pain. Let me help you back to school." It must have nearly killed him to make the offer, but I had zero intention of accepting his help.

"I just need to walk it off." I said the words with hope rather than conviction.

"Walk? You look like you need someone to carry you…"

I ignored his comment. I couldn't begin to imagine what would happen if the whole school saw me emerging from the trees cradled in Noah's arms. Every girl here would put a target on my back. And Noah? Well, playing the hero would probably inflate his big head so much his neck would collapse under the pressure.

I'd barely taken two more awkward steps when Noah caught my elbow. His touch brought all those horrible tingles back to my skin, and I wrenched my arm away from him. "I'm not some damsel in distress."

The corner of his lip twitched, as though he was holding back a smirk. I wasn't sure the guy was capable of humor because his face remained markedly blank. He stared at me for several long seconds before he finally responded.

"I didn't say you were. But you've got a long walk back to school if you don't let me help you."

I knew he was right. Limping all the way back through the woods by myself was going to take forever, and knowing my luck, I'd only fall over again. I couldn't bring myself to accept his help though. Not when I already knew it was a bad idea for so many reasons. Besides, there simply wasn't enough room on the path home for him, his ego, and me.

"I'll manage." My ankle throbbed with pain in response, as if my body was protesting my decision.

Noah shrugged and stepped back, waving for me to proceed. I wasn't sure what his game was, but I wasn't going to wait around to find out. I nodded and began to gingerly walk back along the dirt path.

I expected Noah to jog off again, now that he'd begrudgingly offered to help and I'd refused. But instead, he followed after me. I could feel his eyes

on the back of my neck as I took each painful step. Was he really going to trail me all the way back to school?

"Are you sure your surname is Grace?" he asked as we walked.

I didn't answer because I was trying to ignore him, but his question had me curious. Why would I lie about my surname? I was surprised he even knew what it was. I hoped he wasn't asking because he somehow knew about Matthew. I had a feeling Noah would only judge me if he knew the whole messy truth behind how I'd come to be at Weybridge Academy, and surely, I'd endured enough pain and embarrassment for one morning.

Thankfully, Noah continued before I could begin to truly worry. "Because you're not exactly the most *grace*ful person I've met," he said. "I would have thought Klutz or Crash would be more appropriate…"

Despite my best attempts to pretend Noah wasn't there, I couldn't stop myself from turning on him. "What are you doing?"

"Walking back to school. Same as you."

"No, you're following me, and you keep talking." I was doing a terrible job of pretending he wasn't there.

"It's called conversation. And I'm not following you. We just happen to be going in the same direction."

"What? And you normally walk this slowly?"

"Do *you* normally walk this slowly?" he shot back. "You're clearly struggling on that ankle."

"I told you I'm fine. I'm just taking my time," I lied. "You're the one creepily stalking behind me."

He let out a frustrated sigh and moved closer to me. Too close. He didn't stop until he was just a hairsbreadth away.

"You know, most girls would just accept my help," he said as I looked up at him. The vibrant green of his eyes had dimmed slightly, and he was looking at me as though he was trying to figure me out. He probably thought I had a few screws loose.

"I'm not most girls."

"I can see that, Crash."

I scowled at him, thoroughly disliking the nickname. I'd only crashed into him one time. And, yes, I wasn't the most graceful person… Okay, I was clumsy and cumbersome at the best of times, but did he really have to call me Crash?

That small hint of a smile dared to pull at the corner of his lips again. It eluded me as his mouth remained a firm line. “Are you really so stubborn though?”

“I’m not stubborn.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “Said the girl who’s ignoring all logic just to prove a point.”

“I’m not ignoring all logic.” I spoke through gritted teeth. “I just don’t need help from someone like you.”

“*Someone like me*?” Surprise lit Noah’s eyes, but they quickly started to narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I think it’s pretty obvious.”

“Pretend it isn’t,” he growled. “Enlighten me.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “I don’t need help from a self-absorbed, egotistical man-child who thinks the whole world revolves around him just because a few girls think he’s attractive. I was told to stay away from you, and it didn’t take me long to realize why.”

I didn’t think his expression could darken any further. Apparently, I was wrong.

“Who told you to stay away from me?” he asked. He seemed far more interested in the answer than addressing all the other insults I’d thrown at him. It was like he hadn’t even heard them.

“Someone who clearly knew what they were talking about.”

Noah exhaled, and I got the impression I was seriously trying his patience. “Whatever. Look, you’re going to hurt yourself even more if you don’t let me help you. I think you’re going to have to defy whoever this person was that warned you against me if you want to get back to school in one piece. Have you no sense of self-preservation?”

I kind of thought that keeping my distance from Noah *was* an act of self-preservation because being close to a guy like him could only end in trouble. I could hardly admit that to him, especially not with his words crawling their way under my skin. I just wanted to get back to my room to ice my ankle, and arguing with him was clearly getting me nowhere. He seemed persistent enough that he’d probably follow me all the way back to the dorms if I didn’t accept his help, so I finally caved.

“Okay, fine, you win. My ankle is killing me, and I could use your help getting back to school.”

“Finally,” he grumbled, but his eyes flashed with delight. I might have been frustrating him, but I could see how much he enjoyed being right. Accepting his help was hard enough to stomach without the knowledge I was also feeding that ego of his.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” I quickly added. “You’re not carrying me, nobody can know this happened, and once we get back, we return to being strangers.”

“You really don’t want people to know I helped you?”

“Obviously. So, if we could make this quick, that would be great.”

He started to frown, and his expression grew puzzled. He was staring at me like he thought I was some kind of lab experiment gone wrong. Like he couldn’t quite decide what to make of me. My cheeks were warming under his scrutiny, and I quickly scrambled for something to say so he’d stop looking at me that way. “Well, are you helping, or am I going to keep on hobbling?”

It took him a second for the words to register, and he glanced down at my ankle and nodded. “Right, your ankle.” He moved closer to me, and my stomach dropped as he looked into my eyes. He seemed so much bigger when he was standing right beside me, and my breath felt suddenly shallow as I realized I was going to have to touch him again. Without his shirt, he had so much exposed skin, and nerves shot through me.

Noah hesitated for a moment, and I wondered if he felt as uncertain as I did, but then he cleared his throat and reached out to me. He took my arm and looped it around his shoulder before gently resting his hand on my back.

His skin was hot to the touch, and his muscles felt hard and strong as he supported me. He smelled far too good for a guy who’d just been working out, and I wished I could stop breathing so I wasn’t constantly hit by the musky scent of his deodorant. They did not make teenage boys like this back home, and I immediately regretted agreeing to let him help.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I muttered as we set off.

Thankfully, Noah remained silent as we walked, only speaking up when it looked as though I was about to trip again. It happened far more frequently than I would have liked. I really couldn’t help it. It was hard to pay attention to where we were walking. My mind kept drifting to the strong arm supporting me, and I couldn’t stop glancing at how chiseled

Noah’s abs were. They didn’t look real, and I kept wondering if perhaps it was impossible not to be conceited when you looked that way.

It was a welcome relief when we reached the edge of the woods and the school appeared before us. I’d been itching to get some distance from Noah since the moment he wrapped his arm around me, but something stopped me from shrugging out of his grasp the first chance I got. Instead, I waited until we were closer to my dorm before I eased my arm from over his shoulders. I quickly glanced around to make sure no one had noticed us together. Thankfully, it was still early enough that everyone was still in bed. The fewer people who saw Noah holding me, the better.

“You really aren’t like everyone else here,” Noah said as he stepped back from me.

I was already well aware of just how different I was from the kids at Weybridge, and I hardly needed reminding of that fact when I was constantly surrounded by such obvious wealth. There was no way Noah could know about my humble background, so I wasn’t really sure what he meant. It was hard to decipher from his expression whether he was complimenting me or not. I had to assume the latter.

“If you’re saying I’m different because I don’t think you’re God’s gift to the girls at Weybridge Academy, then you’d be correct,” I replied.

He slowly lifted his eyebrows. “Is that how you thank the guy who rescued you?”

“Rescued? I wouldn’t have needed your help in the first place if you hadn’t collided with me.”

“I guess we’ll agree to disagree on that one.” He slowly shook his head, but he didn’t seem all that annoyed by my comment. “You should probably get the school nurse to take a look at your ankle.”

“It’ll be okay once I rest it.”

A small smile curved the corner of his lips. “And you said you’re not stubborn.”

“I’m not—”

“Do you need help getting to your room?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Of course, you will.” He seemed amused by my answer more than anything.

“I guess I’ll see you around, Noah.” I turned and started toward the dorm.

“You can count on it, Isobel.” His words sounded like a promise and sent a thrill down the back of my spine.

I frowned as I opened the door and entered the dorm. Noah was still standing where I’d left him staring after me. There was concern in his eyes, but as I looked back, it quickly dissipated, making me wonder if it had been there at all.

He set off at a jog toward his own dorm. Watching him leave felt like waking from a dream. What had happened in the woods didn’t feel real and left me feeling off-kilter. Noah had been surprisingly persistent, and given everything I knew about him, I struggled to believe he’d actually bothered to help me. He didn’t seem like the type to stick around long enough to see I was bluffing about my ankle being fine, but I figured he probably enjoyed playing the hero.

It had been a strange morning, but I was going to do my best to forget the accident ever happened. I was going to forget how good Noah smelled and the way my skin tingled when we touched. And I was definitely going to pretend I’d never been pressed up against Noah’s naked chest or had his arm wrapped around my waist as he held me close.

I wasn’t quite sure how I was going to erase those things from my mind, but I was going to find a way. I didn’t need any annoying butterflies over a guy who probably wasn’t capable of loving anyone or anything more than himself. It would be best if I kept my distance from him like my father wanted. At least, that’s what I kept telling myself.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Why are you limping?" Cress squealed.

She was already dressed in her school uniform and looked far cuter than I thought possible for someone in plaid. I think it came down to the accessories. She wore a set of black heels and a long dark cardigan she'd belted at the waist. I looked at my uniform, which I'd laid out on the bed the night before. I imagined the drab, formless sweater we were supposed to wear wasn't going to look as nice on me.

"I twisted my ankle on my run."

She rushed over. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's really no big deal."

"Are you sure?" Her brow was pinched with concern, and it touched me to see how much she cared.

"I just have to walk it off." My words didn't seem to do anything to ease the worry on her face, and I quickly continued. "There's not much I can do about it now anyway, so I'm going to hop in the shower."

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the nurse?"

"Nope, I'm all good. I better get ready so I'm not late on my first day." I was already short on time, so I left the room before Cress could continue to worry over me. My ankle was starting to feel a lot better, so I was fairly certain it wasn't badly damaged. I could imagine nothing worse than spending my first weeks at my new school with my foot in a cast or crutches under my arms.

I had a quick shower before changing into my school clothes. I hadn't tried them on yet, but they fit me perfectly, almost as if they'd been custom-

made to fit my body. The white button-down shirt was tailored to follow my curves, and the tartan skirt sat comfortably around my waist, ending the perfect distance above my knees. The check pattern was mostly navy, but it had subtle hints of red threaded through it, and the tie was made to match. While the sweater wasn't particularly fashionable, the material was so soft I couldn't bring myself to take it off.

I wasn't sure how much time I had so I swiped some mascara across my lashes and quickly ran a brush through my hair. "That will have to do," I murmured as I looked at myself in the mirror. It was a struggle to tame my hair on the best of days, and today was no exception. It was as wild as ever and distracted from the smart, neat fit of my uniform. I might have looked the part of a Weybridge student, but I wasn't sure I'd ever feel it.

"Aww, you look adorbs," Cress said as I reentered the bedroom. "Not many people can pull off the school sweater. I'm impressed."

My cheeks warmed as I tried to figure out if she was making fun of me. "You don't have to lie to me, you know."

She smiled brightly. "I never lie when it comes to clothes."

"I'll keep that in mind." I laughed as I picked up my school shoes and went to sit on my bed so I could put them on. I was still struggling not to hobble as I walked and could only lightly press down on my foot. It was going to be a long day walking around school if my ankle kept complaining this way.

"You should really get that checked out," Cress said. She sounded just like her cousin.

"It'll be fine. It's already feeling much better." Was I in denial? Probably. But admitting I was in pain felt like giving into it, and I refused to let my ankle hold me back today. I quickly changed the subject. "How was the rest of the party last night?"

"It was fun, but I wish you had stayed. Did you find a ride home okay?"

"Yeah, I went back with Lily."

"Oh yeah, she's sweet."

"Do you know her well?"

"Not really," Cress said. "She mostly hangs out with the other scholarship students."

"Oh." Cress didn't sound like she was judging Lily for being here on a scholarship. Not like Veronica had. But her response made me wonder how

the rest of the school viewed Lily, and whether she was only friendly with other scholarship students because she wasn't welcomed by anyone else.

If that were the case, then it was completely unfair. Lily might not be ridiculously rich like the other kids here, but she still belonged. She had earned her place at Weybridge Academy by being smart. I definitely couldn't say the same. If anyone at this school was a charity case, it was me. Would I be treated differently if the people here knew I came from nothing?

I wasn't sure of the answer to my question, and it worried me. I'd lost too many friends recently, and I wasn't sure I could handle being ostracized again.

A knock came at the door. "I'll get it." Cress hurried over to the door and pulled it open to reveal an older woman standing in the corridor.

"Good morning, Cressida," she said. "Is Isobel here? I hear she had a fall, and I've come to take a look at her ankle."

"Oh, sure. Come right in." Cress stood back as the woman entered the room.

"Hello, Isobel. I'm the school nurse, Miss Ludwell." She introduced herself as she came over to me. I was still sitting on the edge of my bed, and she lowered herself to kneel by my foot, setting her bag down at her side.

"Do you mind if I take a look at your ankle?" Miss Ludwell had a very direct tone, and although she was asking for my permission, I didn't think she was someone who would take no for an answer.

"Oh, uh, sure."

I leaned forward to watch as the woman lightly touched my ankle in different places, checking it for points of tenderness and assessing my range of motion. "It's not that bad," I said. "Cress really didn't need to call you."

"It wasn't me," Cress murmured.

"Actually, Mr. Hastings came to my office," Miss Ludwell explained.

"What?" I gasped.

"Noah came to see you?" Cress sounded understandably confused.

The woman nodded. "Yes. I don't normally visit the dorm rooms, but he was quite insistent."

"Interesting," Cress said with a glance in my direction.

My cheeks immediately started to flush. I hadn't told her Noah had been in the woods with me. I'd already started pretending none of it had

happened. Clearly, that wasn't an option anymore—at least, it wasn't as far as Cress was concerned.

Noah had surprised me again. He'd clearly gone out of his way to contact the school nurse, which really didn't fit with the image I had of him in my head. I didn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed. Who was he to decide whether I needed the nurse or not?

The nurse was nice, and by the time she'd finished with me, I was glad Noah had sent her. She iced my ankle and strapped it up, and she gave me some painkillers to dull the pain.

Just as Miss Ludwell was finishing up, Anna arrived at the door. She was already in uniform, and like Cress, she'd made an effort to add her own style to the outfit. She was wearing a gorgeous set of hoop earrings, and bracelets jangled around her wrist. She'd paired it all with a set of heels too. I didn't usually wear heels and had no idea how she expected to survive a whole day of school in them.

"You guys ready for breakfast?" Anna asked as she let herself into the room. "I'm starved…" Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Miss Ludwell packing up her bag.

"Are you sure you won't consider resting in your room today?" Miss Ludwell asked me. "That would be my advice."

"No, I'm okay," I said for what felt like the tenth time. There was no way I was missing my first day of classes.

"Very well. Remember to ice your foot every few hours and try to keep it elevated. If you come by my office this morning, I can give you a crutch so you won't be putting too much pressure on it."

"Okay, thanks." I wasn't going to admit it to her, but I had no intention of walking around school with a crutch.

The nurse gave me a warm smile before leaving the room. As she shut the door behind her, Anna came rushing over. "What happened to you?"

"I fell over on my run."

"Run?" Anna raised an eyebrow. "Why were you *running*?"

She looked so confused I couldn't help but laugh. "Because I enjoy it."

"Well, that's just crazy," she said. "I'm not sure if we can be friends anymore." A smile played at her lips though, so I knew she was only joking.

"The run's not even the most interesting part," Cress said. "Apparently, Noah was the one who went to the school nurse and sent her up to see Isobel."

“What?” Anna gasped. “Why?”

“That’s what I want to know.” Cress turned to me, an expectant look in her eyes. “What happened?”

I let out a sigh. “There’s really not that much to tell. I fell over in the woods, and Noah happened to be out running too. He saw I was hurt and helped me get back to the dorm. I think he must have known I wasn’t going to go and get my ankle checked out by the nurse so he sent her over.”

Anna started to laugh. “Wow, school hasn’t even started yet, and already, every girl here is going to want to kill you.”

“Yeah, I have a feeling there will be a few girls out in the woods tomorrow waiting for Noah to run past so they can fall over at his feet,” Cress added. “They’ll be kicking themselves for not thinking of that sooner.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” I protested.

“Oh, we know that,” Anna replied. “But there are genuinely girls here who would.”

I shook my head. That’s exactly what Noah had assumed. But who in their right mind would fake an injury as a way to get closer to a guy? It sounded like there were some really manipulative girls at this school.

“I still can’t believe he sent the school nurse over to check on you,” Cress said. “The infirmary is all the way on the other side of school. He must have been really worried if he went out of his way to fetch her.”

I thought it far more likely Noah did it because he knew it would annoy me, but I didn’t tell the girls that. I could hardly admit to Cress that I was wary of her cousin. “I think you guys are reading into this far too much. It’s not a big deal.”

“Maybe not to you,” Cress replied. “But then again, you don’t really know Noah. Any other girl at school would be freaking out.”

That was probably another reason why he went to fetch the nurse. I must not have adequately fed his ego this morning. Maybe he was hoping this extra good deed would make me chase after him in grateful thanks. I could guarantee that would not be happening.

“Perhaps we can just keep this between the three of us then?” I asked. “I really don’t want anyone else thinking there’s more to this than there is, and I’d hate for anyone to go out into the woods to try to fake an injury.”

“Of course,” Cress agreed.

Anna looked disappointed. “But this is *such* good gossip…”

Cress folded her arms over her chest. “*Anna*…”

“Okay. Okay. I won’t tell anyone.”

I let out a breath in relief. “Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it.”

They gave me warm smiles in return, and I knew they’d keep their word.

Once the girls had recovered from the shock of hearing what had happened with Noah and me in the woods, we headed to the dining hall for breakfast. It was lucky we left the dorm early because I was still struggling to walk properly, and it took us a while to make it over to the other building. I was glad Cress had suggested I bring my schoolbag with me because I would have struggled to get to the dorm and back before classes started.

Thankfully, I didn’t need to carry much, just the laptop and tablet I’d found in my suitcase when I unpacked. They were both so shiny and new I was nervous to carry them around with me. I’d never owned a tablet before, and my laptop at home was ancient. It was a hand-me-down from one of my mom’s old boyfriends. It was so old it took about ten minutes just to start up. It was a miracle it was still working, and I had to save my schoolwork every few minutes because it was known to shut down without warning.

The dining hall was far emptier this morning than it had been last night, and the echoing sounds of conversation were much quieter. I still got a few curious glances as I walked through the room, but people seemed far less interested than they had been at dinner.

“Half the school is probably hungover,” Cress said as she looked around the room.

“Yeah, I bet they’re all still in bed, waiting for the last possible second to get to class,” Anna agreed.

I wasn’t sure how anyone could choose sleep over a good breakfast. Especially when the food here looked so amazing. The buffet had whole sections dedicated to baked goods, fresh fruits, cereals, and yogurts. There were even chefs standing by to cook fresh eggs, pancakes, and waffles. It was insane.

I was tempted to try a bit of everything but eventually settled on some fruit, cereal, and yogurt. My stomach grumbled with hunger, but I was starting to get nervous about my first day of school, and I didn’t think I could handle much more than a light breakfast.

“You two seem fine this morning,” I said as we sat down at the same table as last night. It had looked as though Cress and Anna were only just getting started when I left the party, and given how late it was when Cress returned, I was surprised she didn’t seem more tired.

“We both tend to dance the booze off,” Cress said with a laugh.

“Or we’re too busy dancing to get more drinks,” Anna added with a smile.

“Or making out with hot boys…” Cress gave Anna a knowing nudge with her elbow.

“You kissed someone last night?” I gasped.

Anna’s cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink. “Maybe.”

“She means definitely,” Cress said with a laugh. “Angus Whitmore was all over her.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” Anna’s head fell into her hands.

“Is he that bad?” I asked, confused as to why she was so embarrassed.

“Yes,” Cress replied. “He might be hot, but he’s a pompous ass.”

Anna groaned in agreement before lifting her head out of her hands. “I always swear I’m not going to kiss him when I go to these things, but somehow, we always end up in a corner making out. It’s terrible.”

A laugh slipped out of me at the dismayed expression on her face. “Why do you do it then?”

“Because he’s a really, *really* good kisser.”

Cress glanced over her shoulder before pointing at a guy on the other side of the room. “That’s him over there.”

I followed the direction she was nodding in. “The guy drinking out of a tea cup?”

Cress snorted out a laugh. “That’s the one.”

I could see why they thought he was hot. His school shirt clung to his muscles, and he had a nice tan. His light hair was perfectly slicked back, probably the result of a painstaking morning routine. He was definitely a good-looking guy but far too put together for my liking. He even sat a little too straight, and I could see why he might be too uptight for Anna.

As I was watching Angus, my attention strayed, and I caught sight of Noah sitting at the table behind him. He’d changed out of his sports clothes, which was probably a good thing. The girls at breakfast would have caused a riot if he was sitting there with his chest and abs out.

Still, he looked far more appealing in his uniform than he probably should. His tie was slightly loose, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows showing off his strong forearms. I didn't know forearms could be an attractive feature on a guy, but Noah made them look hot. He was sitting with Luther and Kaden but none of the crowd he'd been surrounded by last night. His expression was reserved as he sat and talked quietly with his friends.

"He's hot, right?" Cress said.

"Very," I murmured before realizing she was still talking about Angus and obviously not her cousin. I blushed and glanced away. The last thing I needed was for the girls to catch me staring at Noah.

"So, how are you feeling about your first day?" Anna asked. She was desperate to get the conversation away from Angus, and I was happy to oblige. There was nothing worse than having to relive something you were embarrassed about.

"A bit nervous," I said. "I still have no idea how to work my tablet. I can't even find my class schedule on it."

"Oh, that's easy," Cress said. "Pass your tablet here, and I'll show you."

I fished the tablet out of my bag and handed it to her.

"This is the school app," she explained, pointing to one of the squares on the screen. "Once you log in with your student details, it gives you everything you need. The school gives you a generic password to begin with, and you can change it straightaway."

As I watched her fingers fly across the tablet screen, I felt grateful for her help. There was no way I would have figured it out on my own. I wasn't a complete tech Neanderthal, but I'd also never even had a smartphone of my own.

"So, I've changed your password to *Cressisthebest*, which shouldn't be too hard to forget," she said with a wink. "And I'll just bring up your class schedule…"

"Oh, what's she got?" Anna asked, scooting closer. "I wonder if we're in any classes together…" She peered at the screen over Cress's shoulder, and her face scrunched up like there was a bad smell under her nose.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You're taking such boring classes!" Anna said it like I'd done something to personally offend her.

"I am? Let me take a look."

Cress handed the tablet back to me, and I scanned the screen. She was right. My first day was filled with English, math, and a business management class. I let out a breath of relief when I saw biology and chemistry were on my schedule later in the week. I also appeared to be taking an economics class.

It was obvious Matthew had picked my schedule for me because I had absolutely no interest in any sort of business classes. I was also guessing he'd consulted my mom because biology and chemistry were by far my best subjects.

I'd always had a natural affinity for the sciences, and I often imagined I'd pursue them in some way at college. I'd completely given up on that dream over the summer, but seeing the subjects on my schedule now reignited a little of the excited spark I'd felt so many times before when imagining myself at college. If Mom could handle things back home without me this year, maybe she'd be okay if I was away for college too. Matthew had offered to pay for my studies, after all. That's if I could bring myself to stomach more of his help.

"We're not going to have any classes together all year," Anna complained.

Cress shuffled closer so she too could study my schedule. "Well, we have English and bio together," she said, smiling at me. "Oh, and all three of us share the same PE class."

"I guess that's something," Anna mumbled, struggling to hide her disappointment.

"Anna takes mostly arts subjects," Cress explained. "I wasn't in any of her classes last year either."

"Yeah, and it sucked. Looks like this year's going to be just as dull."

We were interrupted by the sound of chairs scraping across the floor, and I looked up to find two identical boys taking a seat at our table. They were both handsome with dark blond hair and warm brown eyes. They weren't overly muscular but tall with athletic builds. The fact they were wearing the same school uniform only added to the feeling I was seeing double.

"Anna, are you eating those hash browns?" one of them asked. "Because they just ran out, and you know they're my favorite."

The twins might have had all the same features, but their expressions couldn't have been more different. The guy who'd spoken had a cheeky

smile on his face while his brother was rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“Don’t even think about it, Sawyer,” Anna said, slapping his hand away as he reached for her plate.

He pouted in reply. “Think of it as a gift to welcome me back to school.”

“I wouldn’t share these with you even if it was your birthday,” she replied before taking a big mouthful of her hash brown patty and groaning with delight. “Damn, this is good.”

She was momentarily distracted by her food, and Sawyer’s hand darted out to grab the other hash brown patty off her plate. It was in his mouth before Anna could react, and he mimicked her moan of pleasure. “It *is* good,” he agreed, grinning as her eyes narrowed at him.

“We haven’t met,” the other boy said. Unlike his brother, his attention was on me rather than the food on Anna’s plate. He offered a hand. “I’m Wes.”

“Isobel.” I smiled and shook his hand in response. His grasp was warm and comforting, and he had kind eyes that smiled back at me.

“This is my brother, Sawyer,” he nodded at his twin, who was still chewing on the hash brown patty.

Sawyer swallowed his food before he gave me a beaming smile. I had a feeling he probably got a lot of girls simply by flashing his teeth. I took the hand he reached out to me, but instead of shaking my hand, he lowered his head to plant a kiss across the back of it. “I’m surprised they let you in the dining hall, gorgeous, because you’re just too damn sweet,” he purred.

I burst out laughing as I removed my hand from his grasp. “Was that really a pickup line?”

Wes thumped his brother over the back of his head while Cress and Anna both groaned at him.

“Seriously, Sawyer?” the girls asked.

“What? Can you blame a guy for trying? The new girl is hot.” Sawyer honestly looked perplexed.

“Ignore my brother,” Wes said to me. “We spent the summer surfing, and I think he got dumped by a few too many waves.”

“*Hey*,” Sawyer complained.

“Yeah, it’s not the ocean’s fault he’s a pig,” Anna agreed. “He was like this far before your summer in Tahiti.”

Sawyer scowled at her, but she flashed him an angelic smile. “What? You know it’s true.”

He looked like he was going to argue back, but Cress interrupted before he got the chance. “Where have you guys been?” she asked. “You weren’t at Luther’s back-to-school party.”

“We got in really late last night,” Wes said.

“Yeah, Dad needed the jet, so our flight home got delayed,” Sawyer added. “Besides, it’s not like we were in any rush to leave. The waves were killer, and the girls were hot—not that Wesley would know much about that. He was mooning over that girlfriend of his the whole time.” Sawyer rolled his eyes before he continued. “Anyway, Dad’s new hotel is sick. You guys should come next time we go there.”

“And watch you pick up girls all summer?” Cress said. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Your loss.” Sawyer shrugged.

I began to feel uncomfortable as I listened to their conversation. I’d barely ever left the town I grew up in, let alone the country. Sawyer spoke so flippantly about his dad’s new hotel that I got the impression their father didn’t own just the one. He talked so casually about having a jet and invited his friends to Tahiti like it was as simple as going to the mall. It all made me feel very much out of place.

“Well, you guys missed a good party,” Anna said.

“Oh yeah?” Sawyer replied. “Can’t have been that good. I heard you hooked up with Angus again…”

“Ugh,” Anna groaned. “How have you heard that already? I thought you guys only just got here.”

“Ha!” Sawyer let out a triumphant laugh. “I didn’t actually know. I just guessed. You’re getting too predictable.”

Anna groaned again and turned to Cress. “Remind me, why are we friends with the twins again?”

“Because we take you skiing every Christmas,” Sawyer responded.

“I didn’t ask you.” Anna kept her head turned away from him. “Seriously, Cress, *why*?”

“Because they take us skiing every Christmas,” she said with a laugh.

Anna shook her head. “I’m really beginning to feel like it’s not worth it.”

Sawyer wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close. “We’re also both very lovable. Even if I annoy you a little.”

“A little?”

“Okay, a lot.”

His grin was so adorable that Anna quickly gave in and started to laugh. “You guys are impossible to stay mad at.”

“It’s all a part of the Montfort charm,” Sawyer responded, grinning brightly.

As he let go of Anna, a few girls walked up to the table. They acted like they were there to speak with Anna and Cress, but they just wanted to ogle the twins. I didn’t really blame them because the guys were both really good-looking. While Sawyer was clearly the cheeky, flirtatious one of the pair, Wes was more mysterious and quiet.

The girls introduced themselves to me, but their names went straight in one ear and then right out the other. I was absolutely terrible at remembering names. They were all on the dance team with Cress and chatted excitedly about the dance number they were performing later in the week.

When the bell for class rang, the girls scurried off. At my last school, the signal for classes starting was a dull buzzing noise that sounded over the PA system. At Weybridge, it kind of sounded like a church bell ringing in the distance. Who knew a school bell could sound so classy.

“That’s the warning bell,” Cress said. “We’d better get to class.”

A flurry of nerves churned in my gut as I packed my tablet away. Every aspect of Weybridge Academy had felt foreign to me so far. I wasn’t like the kids I ate breakfast with. I didn’t vacation overseas or drive an expensive car. I was more at home in a shabby café with a broken air conditioner than I was in a ritzy dining hall that served seven types of pancakes. I’d always done well in school, but everything about this place was different from what I knew, and I hoped the lessons didn’t feel as alien to me as the rest of the place. There was only one way I was going to find out, so I sucked in a deep breath and headed for my first class.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

My first class of the day was on the very top floor of the building. It was lucky we left the dining hall as soon as the bell rang because I was still moving slowly on my ankle, and we barely made it to the room in time for the start of the period. There were only a few desks free when we arrived, but I was glad to see there were two beside each other so I could sit next to Cress.

As I sat down, the girl at the desk in front turned in her seat to face me. It was Veronica—the girl Cress had dubbed the queen bee of the school. “You’re the new girl,” she said. “I’m Veronica Cordeaux.”

I gave her a tight smile as I nodded in reply. I wondered if she recognized me as the girl who’d been eavesdropping on her conversation with Noah last night. She’d been so fixated on Lily that I doubted she’d even realized I was there. After the way she’d treated Lily, I wasn’t all that enthused to talk to her.

“I’m Isobel.”

“And your last name?”

“Uh, it’s Grace.”

Veronica frowned as though she was racking her brain for any sign of recognition. “Nope,” she responded. “Never heard of you. What do your parents do?”

I struggled to hide my shock at the question. Was that really the first thing she wanted to know about me? I’d been here one day, and all Veronica could think to ask me was who my parents were? I shouldn’t have been

surprised seeing how quick she was to call Lily a charity case. Clearly, a person's station in life was important to this girl.

"Well?" she prompted.

I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. I'd been nervous about the idea of anyone at Weybridge finding out about my background. I'd even been deliberately vague with Cress and Anna. I couldn't begin to imagine the kind of reaction Veronica would have if I answered her question truthfully. I'd never been embarrassed by my mom's work before, and I wasn't embarrassed now. She probably worked harder than most of these kids' parents. But something inside me felt like telling Veronica the truth was asking for trouble.

"Leave her alone, Veronica." Cress came to my rescue as I hesitated to answer.

Veronica gave Cress a saccharine smile. "I'm hardly bothering her." She turned her attention back on me. "Am I, Isobel?"

I returned her smile with one of my own. "Oh, you're no bother at all."

"So, your parents?" she prompted. "Everyone's been dying to know more about you. You're practically a mystery."

"No mystery here. My mom's in hospitality." I decided to be vague, hoping she wouldn't press me for more details. At least it wasn't an outright lie.

Veronica leaned forward. "And your father?"

"He's not around," I shrugged. There was no way I was uttering a single word about Matthew to this girl.

"Oh, what happened?"

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. "That's none of your business."

Her eyes sparkled with a hint of pleasure, as though she had achieved her goal of getting a reaction out of me. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was a touchy subject." Her apology was about as fake as her lips. "I'm just trying to get to know our newest student."

"Well, you might have to save your questions for another day." Cress chimed in once again. "Class is about to start."

Veronica's eyes narrowed at Cress as the teacher entered the room, but she soon returned her glare to me. It annoyed her that I wasn't being more forthcoming. I'd only just met the girl, and I already felt like she was the

last person in the world I wanted to discuss the messy details of my family life with. Some people just had bad vibes, and Veronica's were the worst.

The teacher cleared his throat and introduced himself to class as Mr. Wagner. Thankfully, Veronica finally released me from her judgmental gaze as she turned to face the front of the room. I let out a long breath and relaxed back into my seat now she wasn't studying me.

"Don't worry about her," Cress whispered. "She's probably extra bitchy this year because it hurts to talk with those lips."

I snorted, earning myself a warning look from Mr. Wagner. I immediately went quiet and focused on the teacher. I didn't want to get on the bad side of any teachers—especially not on the first day. I listened closely as he outlined the class's agenda for the year. I'd always had tunnel vision in school back home, and I was glad I could still employ the same level of concentration here.

I'd been worried about my subjects at Weybridge and wondered whether I would be drastically behind the other students. However, as the teacher went over the material we were going to be studying in English this semester, I relaxed. It all seemed pretty standard, and I wasn't nearly as anxious as I'd been when I entered the room.

When the class ended, Cress started sniggering. "You didn't hear a word I said that whole period, did you?"

"You were talking to me?"

"Yeah, I was talking to you." She chuckled. "At least, I was trying to. It was like you had earmuffs on or something."

"Sorry, I should have warned you." I grimaced. "I tend to get hyper focused in class."

"I'll remember that next time. Maybe I'll try drawing on your arm or pulling your hair to get your attention."

"Oh no, not the hair!"

She wiggled her eyebrows at my reaction. "Looks like I've found your secret weakness. I'll try to use the power I now hold wisely."

"Okay, thank you." I laughed.

Cress's expression turned more serious as we made our way from the classroom. "I'm sorry Veronica was so nosy. It wasn't exactly the nicest welcome to your first class at your new school. She can be such an Umbridge sometimes."

Even though the memory of Veronica grilling me made me uneasy, I smiled at Cress's *Harry Potter* reference. "It's fine. I just wasn't expecting the inquisition."

"That's Veronica for you. She's like a shark. The slightest scent of blood, and she goes in for the kill."

"She sounds like a delightful human being."

"Tell me about it." Cress shook her head. "So, you said your mom's in hospitality. What does that involve?"

"Uh…" I stuttered as I tried to think of a response. I didn't want to tell Cress that my mom worked day and night at a struggling café and could barely make ends meet. I was scared about how she'd react. As we walked out into the corridor, my eyes flicked from side to side, looking for some kind of inspiration or escape. My eyes landed on a poster board on the opposite wall, and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Lobsters."

"What?"

Lobsters? What was I thinking? Lobsters weren't a job. I glared at the poster on the wall. It showed various diagrams of sea creatures and seemed to be just outside the entrance to a biology classroom. My eyes must have landed on the picture of the lobster. Why did that have to be the source of my inspiration? But I couldn't blame the lobster. Clearly, I had just cracked under the pressure and was a terrible, terrible liar.

I took a deep breath and tried to recover. "Uh, she owns a chain of restaurants that specializes in lobster. Well, seafood." Was chain lobster restaurant owner a legitimate-sounding business for a rich person to have? I didn't really know, but it was a better answer to Cress's question than just lobsters.

"Oh, yum. I love all seafood, especially lobster," Cress replied. "You must get to eat so much good food. You'll have to take us to one of her restaurants sometime."

I smiled and nodded even though I knew that was never going to happen. Not when said lobster restaurant didn't exist.

"So, what class have you got next?" Cress asked.

I was relieved I didn't have to keep talking about my mom's fake lobster business, and I quickly pulled up the schedule on my tablet. "Math." Thankfully, the classroom was only a few doors down so I didn't have far to

walk. I was already wishing I'd gone to the nurse's office and got the crutch she suggested I use.

"Cool. I have French now, so I'll see you in the dining hall for lunch?"

I nodded and tried to ignore the way my stomach dipped at the thought of Cress leaving. She'd been by my side practically since the moment I'd arrived at this school. I wasn't looking forward to walking the corridors without her.

I knew I couldn't rely on her to hold my hand through the entire school year, so I gave her a smile. "Sure, I'll see you then."

Cress waved before taking off down the hall in the opposite direction. With a sigh, I started making my way to math class.

People were watching me as I hobbled down the corridor. There were far fewer students at Weybridge than my old school, so it was harder to disappear into the crowd between classes. It also made it more obvious when people looked my way—something I was noticing far more now that I no longer had Cress as a shield.

I hurried to math as quickly as my aching ankle would let me. Students were still slowly entering the room as I arrived, so thankfully, I wasn't late. I scanned the room for a familiar face and was met with a sneer from Veronica. Apparently, I shared this class with her too. But even though she was one of the few people I'd talked to in this school, I had no interest in taking the free seat at her side. Our brief conversation in English had already convinced me she wasn't interested in being my friend.

"Newbie!" I lifted my eyes to find Luther waving at me, his face lit with a bright grin. He was sitting at the back of the room with his friend Kaden at his side. He beckoned me over, but I hesitated. I was keen to keep a low profile, and I was already getting enough attention at school as the new kid. I wasn't sure sitting with Kaden and Luther would help take the focus off me.

Veronica's smug smile turned to a dark glare when she heard Luther call out to me. Something about the way she scowled at me pushed me toward the guys though. I wasn't about to let her obvious disapproval get to me. Plus, it wasn't like I had anyone else in the class to sit with.

Luther gestured at the seat next to him as I approached. "Sit with us, newbie."

I folded my arms over my chest. "I have a name, you know."

“And a very cute one at that,” Luther said with an approving nod. “So, are you going to sit down or not?”

“Uh, sure.” I still didn’t quite trust Luther. He had a constant air of mischief about him, but he was being friendly enough, so I lowered myself into the empty desk at his side. Veronica’s searing gaze had followed me to the back of the room, and I tried to ignore the scowl practically burning holes in my skin and focus on Kaden. “I’m Isobel,” I said, introducing myself before he could start calling me newbie too.

“I know.” He gave me a small smile. “I’m Kaden.”

“I know.”

His smile tugged upward into a grin. Kaden wasn’t nearly as big as Luther or Noah, but he was just as handsome, and his glasses made him look like a cute Clark Kent. It was easy to see why the girls at school were all enamored with these boys.

“How’s your ankle?” Kaden asked.

I frowned and glanced down at it. “You guys heard about that?”

“Oh yeah,” Luther replied. “Noah wouldn’t shut up about it at breakfast.”

My eyes darted up to meet his. “He wouldn’t?”

“Nope.” Luther let out a chuckle. “Sounds like you can be a little stubborn, newbie. I think he was surprised you didn’t want his help. Most girls would have been happy to be Noah’s damsel in distress.”

“I’m not stubborn,” I muttered.

Luther’s face lit up. Noah had clearly told his friends all about our encounter this morning. I wasn’t sure what to make of the fact he’d shared the details with them. I hadn’t planned on telling anyone about it, but I couldn’t keep it from Cress once the nurse revealed he was involved. Why would Noah feel the need to tell the story? Maybe he’d been annoyed by it all and was complaining to the guys. Or maybe he was making fun of me. Hopefully, Luther and Kaden were the only ones he’d spoken with. The last thing I needed was word getting around school that Noah had come to my rescue.

“So, is there a reason you invited me to sit with you?” I asked in an attempt to derail conversation about this morning.

Luther winked. “I told you, newbie, I’ve got a good feeling about you. Plus, I’m still on a top-secret mission to uncover all your deepest darkest secrets. Like, for instance, where are you from?”

I frowned. “That’s hardly a deep, dark secret.”

“Then tell us all about it.”

Why did everyone at this school ask so many questions? It was becoming harder and harder to keep my home life to myself. I took a deep breath before answering. “A place called Rapid Bay.”

“That’s down the coast, right?” Kaden asked

“Uh, yeah,” I replied. “You know it?”

Kaden nodded. “My aunt used to have a place in Rapid Bay. We went there all the time when I was a kid.”

I hadn’t expected either of the guys to be aware of my hometown. It might have been a popular place for wealthy people to vacation in, but it was small enough to be fairly unknown.

I gave Kaden a tight smile in response. Unlike him, I wasn’t part of the vacation crowd. My family didn’t own a property on the foreshore, and I didn’t spend my summers working on my tan. My hometown was a stark mixture of people who had it all and those who just got by in life, and my mom and I definitely fell into the latter category.

“You really get to live there year-round?” Kaden asked.

“Uh, yeah.” I was growing increasingly uncomfortable. It felt like Kaden was one question away from discovering that I spent most of my time serving food to people like him.

“How long have you lived there?” Luther added.

“My whole life.” They looked ready to fire yet another question at me, so I quickly continued. “Are we really going to play twenty questions in math?”

“What better time than during math?” Luther shrugged. “It has to be the most dull subject in the world, and Kaden’s always a total drag and actually listens to the teacher for most of it. I figure you will be more entertaining.”

I let out a soft laugh, pleased that Luther was so easily distracted from his interrogation. “Well, you’re in for some disappointment. You’ve now surrounded yourself with two drags.”

Luther’s expression fell. “Oh, no. You’re not a nerd too, are you?”

“I just try to do well in school.”

He leaned back in his chair and groaned up at the ceiling. “She *is* a nerd.”

Kaden gave me a bright smile though. “Luther’s always impossible to sit with in class. Maybe between the two of us we can get him to

concentrate.”

“Ha! You wish,” Luther replied. “Now, I’ve just got one more reason to be a total distraction.”

The teacher walked into the room, and I expected Luther to quiet down as the man signaled for the class’s attention. Luther kept on prattling away like the teacher wasn’t even there though.

“It’s not like it matters if we do well in these classes. Our parents just bribe the teachers to give us good grades anyway, so there’s really no point in actually trying.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not, so I shot him a scowl just in case he was serious. “There is a point if you want to *learn*,” I hissed back at him.

Luther didn’t respond, and I wondered if I’d actually gotten through to him. His silence lasted all of two minutes, and I stifled a groan as he started prodding my arm with the end of his pen.

“You don’t *really* want to learn though, do you?”

I didn’t look at him as I replied. “Yep.”

“But, why?”

There were plenty of ways I could answer his question—because I enjoyed school, or because I wanted to get good grades so I had options once this year was over. I didn’t say anything though, hoping the silent treatment might work with him.

It didn’t.

He kept prattling on in a one-sided conversation instead. “You know no one actually uses math in real life, right? I mean, I guess accountants and people with other boring jobs use it, but no one actually wants to do that. Unless… You don’t want to be an accountant, do you? Maybe that gut feeling I had about you was wrong. I didn’t think my gut could ever be wrong, but—”

“Luther?” I hissed, turning to him.

An innocent smile was plastered across his face. “Yes?”

“Shut up!”

Several sniggers sounded from the other students in the room, and I realized I’d almost shouted the words. I immediately lowered my head closer to the desk and wished I could disappear. Thankfully, the teacher didn’t reprimand me. He just carried on like I hadn’t said anything at all, and I had to wonder if it was because he’d already given up on trying to control Luther. Either that or Luther’s parents really did bribe the man.

I felt another poke on my arm, and I lifted my head to see Luther and Kaden both grinning at me.

“I think math is going to be fun this year,” Luther said.

I couldn’t have disagreed more.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I hear you yelled at Luther to shut up in math," Anna said, as I joined her in the dining hall and placed my plate down on the table. It was piled high with food. The nerves that prevented me from eating much earlier in the day were now being overridden by a serious need for comfort food. Math had been an ordeal to say the least. Luther was so distracting, I'd missed half of what the teacher said, and now I was going to have to spend extra time studying tonight to go over the lesson.

"How did you hear that?" I groaned.

Anna shrugged. "Everyone hears everything at Weybridge. They're all talking about how you were sitting with Luther and Kaden, and no one can believe you told Luther to shut up."

"Well, he's annoying."

Anna laughed. "You've got that right."

"He seems to think we're going to be friends, but after one class with him I'm pretty sure that's not going to happen. He literally didn't stop talking all class. It's so distracting."

"He's like that in most classes," Anna said, shaking her head. "It's really a crime that someone so hot is also so irritating."

I nodded my head firmly in agreement. "He's like the annoying brother I never asked for."

"Well, you're probably the only girl in this school who's ever compared him to a brother."

"Annoying cousin then?"

She laughed again. “I just meant that not many girls friend-zone Luther. I can’t stand him, and even I’ve nearly kissed the guy.”

I scrunched up my nose at the thought. “I definitely don’t want to kiss him.”

“Which is probably why he wants to be your friend,” Anna said with a smile.

“That and apparently he wants to uncover all my secrets.”

Anna tilted her head and looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“He kept saying he’s on an undercover mission to uncover all my secrets.”

“Did he now? Why would he be doing that?”

“Beats me.” I shrugged. “Probably just wants to know who the new kid is.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she agreed. “So, what did you think of Kaden?”

“He seems nice. He didn’t say much though. Luther was doing all the talking.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty quiet. Cress used to have the biggest crush on him.”

“Who did I have a crush on, Anna?” Cress asked as she arrived at the table.

“Kaden.”

“Oh, yeah.” Cress gave a dreamy sigh as she slumped into the nearest chair. “It was forever ago, but I was totally hopeless for him when we first started at Weybridge. I think it was the glasses. I find them so sexy.”

“It wasn’t *just* the glasses,” Anna said. “You really started swooning over him when he spoke French to you in class.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Cress sighed again before turning to me. “We got paired together for an assignment, and he’d spent the summer in France with his family, so he could do the accent perfectly. I turn to absolute putty when a guy has an accent.”

“Did you guys ever get together?” I asked.

“No.” Cress pouted. “I crushed on him for our entire freshman year, but I was too nervous to make a move. I started dating my ex that summer, and the rest is history.”

“But you’re single now…” Anna’s voice was thick with suggestion.

“I *am* single now,” Cress agreed. “But there’s no way Kaden would be interested in me. He’s always been too busy concentrating on school to have a girlfriend.”

“Who said anything about being his girlfriend? I just think you guys should be bone buddies.”

“Bone buddies?” I laughed.

“Yeah, buddies who bone…” Anna looked so serious that I laughed again. She said it like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Meanwhile, Cress’s cheeks had flushed bright pink. “I’m not becoming anyone’s bone buddy.”

“Your loss,” Anna replied with a shrug. “I think Kaden got extra hot over the summer.”

Cress carefully looked over her shoulder and scanned the room for Kaden. He was sitting at the same table he’d been at for breakfast with Luther and Noah. My focus wasn’t on Kaden. My gaze drifted of its own accord to Noah. His expression was muted, and even though he sat with his best friends, he seemed distant. Luther and Kaden were both joking around and laughing at his side, and yet he only seemed to show a mild interest. There was definitely no hint of a smile.

“You really think he’s hotter?” Cress asked. “He seems just as hot as always to me…”

Anna slammed her hand down on the table, jolting me with surprise. “And that is why you should be bone buddies. You’ve always thought he was hot even when all the other idiots at our school didn’t realize.”

“I told you that was a million years ago.” Cress had turned back to face our table. “I don’t see him that way anymore.”

“Uh-huh.” Anna clearly didn’t believe her, and I wasn’t convinced either. There had been a hint of longing in Cress’s eyes when she’d looked over at Kaden, and perhaps her crush wasn’t as ancient as she claimed.

“No one ever seems to go over to their table,” I said, glancing back at them once more. “Noah, Luther, and Kaden’s, that is.”

Cress shrugged. “It’s always just kind of been *their* table.”

“But why would that make people avoid it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really questioned it,” Cress said.

“That’s because you’re Noah’s cousin,” Anna said, rolling her eyes before she leaned in close to answer me. “When the three of them are together, people tend to tread carefully. Those boys are heirs to the biggest fortunes in this school, and they wield a crazy amount of power because of it. They make most of the kids at Weybridge look poor, which is kind of mind-blowing when you consider who’s at this school.”

“But why would that make people avoid them?”

“It’s not that people avoid them. It’s more that people don’t want to piss them off. There’s almost like some unwritten rule to leave them alone in here. Plus, everyone’s terrified after Vance tried to sit with them last year, and Luther told him to disappear or *he’d make him*.”

“He was obviously joking,” Cress said.

“Was he?” Anna replied. “Because if those boys wanted to make you disappear, they totally could…”

Cress scoffed. “They’re not *that* powerful.”

“I swear, Cress, sometimes it’s like you’ve got your blinders on when it comes to your cousin…”

“Well, *because* Noah is my cousin, I happen to know he doesn’t have a hit man on speed dial.”

Anna scoffed. “Yeah, because he’d totally *tell* you about it.”

“He would!”

Anna shook her head and focused back on me. “Okay, so maybe they’re not going to set a hit man on you. But everyone here wants to suck up to them,” she explained. “Success at this school is more about the connections you make than what you study, and you’d be crazy not to want close ties with one of those boys.”

“I guess that’s true,” Cress said. “That’s why they’re not close to anyone outside their little trio. Everyone here wants to get close to them for the wrong reasons.” She sighed as she spoke, and I almost felt sorry for the guys. I couldn’t imagine going through life questioning the motives of everyone around me. It sounded like that’s exactly what they had to do though.

“If they’re so guarded, why would Luther ask me to sit with him in class today?”

“I’m not sure,” Anna said. “It’s pretty unusual.”

“Yeah, he wouldn’t normally do that with a new student.” Cress nodded in agreement. “Maybe he’s just trying to figure you out. I bet the fact you didn’t leap at the chance to have Noah help you this morning is making his little head implode.”

“Because that’s not normal?” I guessed.

“Not in this place,” Anna replied. “I might not be totally enamored by Noah, like most girls here, but even I would have taken him up on his offer

to carry me back to school. I mean, who wouldn't want to be cradled against his naked chest? *Yum*."

I scrunched up my face at the thought. That didn't sound even slightly delicious. If Noah had carried me back to school today, I would have been too mortified to ever show my face again.

Anna burst out laughing when she saw my reaction. "Yeah, Luther definitely sat next to you because of that. You've obviously caught his attention, and I imagine he'll keep you around once he realizes you're not all that interested in the politics of this school. It's very refreshing."

Much to my relief, the attention on me shifted as Sawyer and Wes joined us at the table.

"Have you guys seen the new Spanish teacher?" Sawyer asked. "Because her ass is *muy bueno*—"

"Sawyer!" Anna and Cress both shouted.

"What? She's my future wife, I can talk about her ass."

"Good luck with that," Anna said. "There's no way she'd even consider dating you, let alone marrying you."

"Uh, hello, hotel heir sitting right here," Sawyer fanned his hands in front of his face. "Who wouldn't be interested?"

"Anyone who's ever talked to you," Anna fired back.

"Ha ha, very funny." Sawyer had only just sat down but he suddenly leaped to his feet. "Now I'm going to have to spend lunch proving you wrong." With that, he left the table and headed over to a group of girls. Within moments he had one cornered, and she was soon giggling as he flirted with her.

"Your brother's a bit of a player, isn't he?" I asked Wes.

"You could say that," he agreed, with a shake of his head. "Thankfully, we're not really alike in that respect."

"So you don't go round breaking girl's hearts?"

"It's not really my style." His expression was genuine and I felt like he was telling the truth. Wes was definitely the sweeter of the twins.

"How was your first morning of classes?" he asked.

"Good, although I think I've got my work cut out for me in math this year."

"I know the feeling," he agreed. "If you ever need someone to study with, let me know."

I'd always studied alone, but before I could tell him that, something about the sweet smile on his face caused me to nod in response. "Sure, that would be great." I felt a twinge of guilt in my stomach, as I doubted I would take him up on the offer.

"Should we take bets on whether Sawyer nails, fails, or bails with that junior?" Anna asked, still watching him flirt with the girl across the room.

"Bails," Cress immediately responded. "He's all talk. There's no way he's going to keep this up and actually go on a date just to prove a point."

"I think you underestimate him," Wes said. "He can be pretty determined when he wants to be. I say nails. He's definitely coming back with a date."

They turned to me and I shrugged. I'd only just met the guy so I echoed Wes' guess. I figured he would know his brother best.

"He's definitely going to fail," Anna said. "That girl might be laughing at his jokes, but this is Sawyer we're talking about. No self-respecting girl would actually go on a date with him."

When Sawyer returned to the table, it was with an inflated ego and a date for the weekend. Anna and Cress both groaned, disappointed they had guessed wrong. That only seemed to boost Sawyer's mood further though. Apparently, he loved nothing more than proving people wrong. He spent the rest of lunch pondering if his Spanish teacher would be jealous, and Anna spent the rest of lunch throwing fries at his face whenever he said something obnoxious. Her plate was empty within minutes.

I left lunch before the bell rang so I could slowly make my way to the next class. I hadn't iced my ankle in hours, and it was starting to throb again. I really should have spent my lunch break hunting down the nurse's office so I could get the crutch she'd offered me, but I'd been so distracted I'd forgotten to go.

I found my next classroom easily enough, which meant I was early for my business management lesson. No one else had arrived yet, and I grabbed a seat toward the back of the room. I'd barely gotten comfortable when I heard movement at the door. My gaze naturally drifted upward, and my stomach dipped as I saw who was entering the room—Noah.

He stopped just inside the doorway, and as our eyes met my heart seemed to flicker. I rubbed a hand across the spot on my chest, uncomfortable with the reaction. All the guy had done was help me back to my dorm this morning. I wasn't interested in him, and yet I was doing a

terrible job of forgetting just how good he smelled and how my body had tingled when he wrapped his arm around me.

I ripped my gaze away from him and pulled my laptop out of my bag. The hairs on my arms stood on end as I felt him approach. Why was I so aware of his every movement? I didn't think he'd acknowledge me, so I was surprised when he stopped next to my desk.

"You didn't tell everyone," he said.

I slowly lifted my eyes to his. A hint of confusion had created a pucker at his brow.

"Tell everyone what?"

"About your ankle this morning. I haven't heard any rumors flying about the school, so I can only assume you didn't tell everyone I was there."

"Should I have?"

He shrugged. "I'm just surprised. Not many people in this world surprise me."

"Okay…"

He searched my gaze, like I was some kind of puzzle he was yet to solve. I didn't want him putting all the pieces of me together though—not when I knew he wouldn't like the finished product.

"Thank you for sending the nurse this morning," I said, desperate to break the silence. I didn't like the way he studied me during the pauses in conversation, and I especially disliked how my body seemed more responsive to him when we were quiet. It was hard uttering my gratitude when I was still suspicious of his motives, but whatever his reasons for getting the nurse this morning it had still been helpful.

"I guess this self-absorbed, egotistical man-child knew you'd be too stubborn to seek her out yourself." So he *had* heard my insult this morning. I opened my mouth to object, but he kept talking before I got a chance. "How's your ankle feeling now?"

I blew out a breath and ignored the way my ankle throbbed in response to his question. "It's fine."

"The way you've been limping all day says otherwise."

"Well, it *will* be fine," I clarified.

"You say that word a lot, you know. *Fine*."

"Well, it does a *fine* job of describing things."

A small smile tempted the corner of his lips. "I guess it does." He'd gotten closer as we talked, and even though there was nothing unusual

about the distance that separated us, it felt so intimate when his eyes locked on to mine and danced with amusement like they did now.

Laughter from the door drew my attention away from him. It felt like someone had popped the bubble surrounding Noah and me as other students entered the classroom. He stepped away as people began moving down the aisle between us. He didn't go far though, choosing to sit right behind me.

The room was filled with empty seats, and I was surprised he'd picked one so close to me. My skin buzzed at his proximity, and I could practically feel his eyes on the back of my neck. When I glanced over my shoulder, Noah was concentrating on his laptop, so I must have imagined it.

As I turned away, a guy who had taken the seat beside Noah pulled him into a conversation. "Noah, my man, how was your summer break?"

"It was *fine*."

I struggled not to smile. I desperately wanted to look over my shoulder again to see if Noah was smiling too. There was an edge of humor to his voice that suggested he might be. I didn't look though. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I was listening in.

"It's a shame we couldn't catch up," the guy continued. "Would have been great to see you at our summer party in the Hampton's. Perhaps next year?"

"Perhaps," Noah replied. He sounded less interested in the conversation now, and I had to wonder if this was an example of what Cress and Anna had been talking about. Noah hated people cozying up to him and trying to use him. It sounded like this guy was sucking up big-time, and as he continued to talk, I felt the urge to stuff a sock in his mouth.

"Father bought me a new yacht for my birthday," the guy continued. "I'm taking it out next time we all have a free weekend. You must come."

"I'm afraid I'm busy," Noah replied.

"I didn't say what weekend…"

"You didn't have to."

That seemed to shut the guy up. Noah wasn't even slightly subtle when it came to shooting him down. And I didn't blame him. Yacht-boy sounded like he needed a little grounding.

"Hey, Isobel, did you drop this?"

I glanced up and found a familiar face looking down at me. I was so relieved to see Lily it took me a moment to realize she was holding a pen in her outstretched hand. It was nice to know she was in this class too.

“Thanks, it must have fallen out of my bag.” I took the pen from Lily before she went to sit at the desk next to me.

“How was the rest of your night?” I asked. I’d helped Lily get Amber to their dorm room after we got back from the party, but Amber perked up as I was leaving. I’d had a bad feeling it was going to be a while before she went to sleep.

“Ugh, it was terrible,” Lily said. “Amber decided she wanted to be a pirate and sang sea shanties for hours. I couldn’t go to sleep because she kept trying to escape our room so she could go search for mermaids in the lake.”

“Oh no,” I cringed. “How’s she feeling this morning?”

“Not so great. She was throwing up when I left for breakfast, and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Poor girl.”

“I definitely don’t envy her,” Lily agreed. “How’s your first day going?”

“Uh…” My voice trailed off as I remembered Noah was right behind me. I could have sworn I felt his attention prickling against my skin. “It’s feeling like the longest day of my life.”

If I was being honest, it was just my time in this class that had felt like an eternity. The minutes had a way of stretching in Noah’s presence, like everything was happening in slow motion, and I had to wonder if he had a secret super human ability to control time. It definitely seemed to come to a screeching halt whenever he looked me in the eyes.

Lily giggled. “Yeah, the first day back at school is always like that. It doesn’t help that I stayed up way too late with Amber.”

“I hope she appreciates that you looked after her.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will once she’s feeling a bit better.”

I glanced at the clock to check the time. The teacher was already running five minutes late for class. I wasn’t about to complain though. Matthew had chosen this subject for me and I wasn’t particularly excited about it.

“So, we didn’t get a chance to finish our conversation last night,” Lily said. “You were telling me about your ex-boyfriend…”

I scrunched up my face at the question. Levi was the last thing I wanted to talk about now, especially when I was almost certain Noah was listening in behind me. “There’s not much more to tell. We broke up at the end of last year because he cheated on me.”

“Oh, that sucks. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t great.” Lily didn’t even know all the gory details. “How about you? Are you dating anyone?”

“No. I’ve never really clicked with anyone here.”

“No?”

“I guess I’m just very different from the people here.” Her voice was soft, and her shoulders fell a little as she spoke. I understood what she meant. I’d only just arrived at this school, and I could already tell I wasn’t like the other students here. It wasn’t a good sign that Lily had been at the school for a while and was still feeling like an outsider.

“Yeah, I don’t think the guys here are really my type either,” I agreed. The urge to glance over my shoulder and see Noah’s reaction was almost overpowering.

“Really?” she asked. “What kind of guy do you usually go for?”

I paused as I considered my answer. I had thought Levi was my type, but clearly, he was the wrong choice for me. I now knew to steer clear of the popular guy, and to avoid any guy that basked in attention and adoration. I knew exactly what kind of guy I didn’t want to date, but I had no idea what I was looking for. It was especially hard to come up with an answer when I could feel Noah’s eyes still laser focused on the back of my neck.

“I guess a guy that’s normal would be a good start,” I finally answered. I’d hoped to come up with something witty—something that might get under Noah’s skin and teach him a lesson for listening in on our conversation like I knew he was. Instead, I’d settled for the boring truth. I was never going to like most of the guys in this school. From what I’d seen so far, they spent more time in front of the mirror in the morning perfecting their hair than I did.

Lily laughed and nodded in agreement. “A lot of the guys here are pretty extra.”

The teacher finally entered the classroom, and conversations hushed as he started the lesson. I let myself get drawn into the work. It was amazing how easy it was to concentrate when you weren’t being constantly prodded in the arm.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, I was surprised by how quickly the time had gone. I’d been worried a business class would be dull,

but so far, it sounded interesting. I was actually looking forward to what the teacher had in store for us this term.

Most of the students filed out of class quickly. It was like they'd packed up five minutes before the lesson had ended and were out the door before the teacher finished speaking. I waited until we were dismissed and was a little slower to gather my things.

Lily waited for me, but as I stood from my desk, her gaze flicked over my shoulder. A small frown creased her brow, but she quickly ironed it out and smiled at me. "I'll see you later, Isobel."

She darted away before I could reply.

I knew exactly what had prompted her to move so fast as I felt *his* presence behind me. I slowly turned and found Noah had stepped away from his desk and edged toward me. I wasn't sure why he felt the need to stand so close, and I took a small step away from him.

"I'm curious," he said. "What exactly does a guy have to do to be considered normal?"

So, he *had* been listening.

"I'm not sure you'd understand if I told you." I started to walk toward the door, but Noah hurried to catch up with me.

"You won't give me a clue?"

"Nope."

"Not even a little one?"

I let out a sigh and stopped as I approached the classroom door. "Why do you want to know?" I asked, turning to face him.

"Why don't you want to tell me?"

"Perhaps I don't want to tell you because I wasn't actually talking to you when I said that."

"I'm aware. That doesn't stop me being curious though…"

I let out another heavy breath. "I'm not sure why you're so curious. It's not like you'll ever be normal."

He slowly started to smile. "Are you saying I'm special?"

"No. I'm definitely not saying that." He already thought it enough for the both of us.

His eyes seemed to sparkle in response. "I think you might be, Crash."

"Ugh, don't call me that." This boy was giving me whiplash. One moment he was dark and brooding, and the next he was taunting me with

the barest hints of a smile. “Maybe you should stop worrying about my definition of normal, and start worrying about why you want to know.”

I turned and walked off down the corridor before he could respond. It wasn’t the most majestic exit because my ankle was still causing a slight hobble, and I wasn’t feeling all that triumphant after our interaction.

Why *was* Noah so curious?

And, more importantly, why did I care?

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered.

We were standing on the school basketball courts, and I was scowling in the direction of the PE teacher. I'd just gotten over the feeling of awe as I walked past the school's indoor swimming pool, which had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lake, and the fitness center, which had all the latest high-tech equipment a fitness junkie could dream of. I hadn't even had a chance to appreciate how shiny and new the school's basketball courts were before the teacher announced the worst news ever.

Today we were taking part in the high-school version of torture—the beep test. Couldn't they have waited more than two days into the new school year before subjecting us to this?

I wasn't the only one who was upset by the idea, and a series of groans echoed around me. Cress and Anna were probably two of the loudest. The boys in the class didn't look nearly so concerned. Although I heard Sawyer grumble to his brother that he shouldn't have eaten so much for lunch.

The upside to all of this was that at least I'd be too tired to keep stressing over the girls' PE uniform. We were expected to wear a T-shirt with a pair of booty shorts, and ever since I put them on, I'd been worried half my butt was showing. It wouldn't have been too bad if the top was oversized, but that too was on the smaller side. The outfit was something I'd be happy enough wearing on a run—when it was the early hours of the morning and there wasn't a soul in sight. But being surrounded by a class of teenage boys, I was feeling highly self-conscious.

“We’ll be comparing your test results from the start of the year to the end of the year to see how your fitness improves,” the teacher explained, but it was hard to hear him over the complaints of my classmates.

He started to tell us how the test was going to proceed, but no one was really listening. The concept was pretty straightforward, and I imagined most kids had done the test before. All we had to do was run back and forth between the cones laid out at either end of the court, staying ahead of the beeps. It was easy enough until the beeps started getting progressively quicker and you had to run faster. If you didn’t reach the next cone before the next beep, you were out.

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle, and I glanced over my shoulder as Noah and Luther entered the gym. It was like my body had some built-in sensor for whenever those boys were around—self-preservation, I thought.

I concentrated on the teacher, not wanting to be caught staring at the two of them. I was determined to keep my distance from those boys, Noah especially. They were trouble with a capital T, and I had no intention of getting swept up in it.

I couldn’t seem to help myself from noticing wherever Noah was in the room though. He’d stopped just off to one side of the teacher and was leaning against the gym wall looking like he was posing for some catalog photo shoot. I’d never seen a high-school student fill out a PE uniform quite like he did. The shirt perfectly molded to the muscles on his arms and chest.

If I was being honest, a few guys in the class gave Noah a run for his money. I wasn’t completely blind to how good the twins looked in their uniforms, and Luther was almost as muscular as his friend. I just wished I were a little blinder when it came to Noah.

The teacher blew his whistle, and several kids jolted with surprise. “Line up by the cones!” he shouted. Several more groans echoed through the room, but we all started heading to the side of the basketball court.

“This sucks,” Anna said. “Coach August must have had a really bad summer if this is how he’s starting the year.”

“It’s like he wants to punish us,” Cress agreed. “And we haven’t even done anything wrong yet.”

“Yet?” I asked.

Cress and Anna shared a knowing smile before Anna turned to me. “Last year, Cress and I got in a bit of trouble because we kept pretending to

have our periods to get out of swimming in PE. August probably wouldn't have said anything, but everyone was swimming for a month, and we sat out of every class. You should have seen how pink his cheeks went when he confronted us about it."

Cress giggled as she nodded. "He kept referring to our women's problems, and every time we corrected him to say periods, his cheeks went even brighter. That's probably what this beep test is about. The old guy still hasn't forgiven us."

"Probably," Anna agreed.

"This is going to be fun," Wes said, appearing at my side. "I hope I can beat my score from last year."

"You must be the only person who's excited about this," I told him. I enjoyed running myself, but not like this. The best part about running was finding a steady rhythm and enjoying the outdoors, not racing until your lungs burned and your legs seized up.

"Yeah, because he's a super human fitness freak," Anna agreed with a shake of her head. "Wes, you're crazy."

He laughed and shrugged. "I can't help that I enjoy this stuff."

I looked over to see if Coach August was close to starting the test. He was standing to the side of the court and seemed to be in close conversation with Noah. He was listening intently to whatever Noah was saying, so I guessed there would still be a few more moments before the running began. I'd woken up this morning and was pleased to find my ankle didn't hurt as much today, but I was still feeling a little nervous about exercising on it again so soon. I'd been walking okay so far, but it was still a little tender. I didn't want to make a big deal about it. I was sure it would be fine if I just started with a light jog and stopped when my ankle started to complain.

"So, what do you think, bro?" Sawyer walked over to stand next to Wes. "Fancy a little bet on which of us will come out on top?"

Wes rolled his eyes. "We already know I'm going to beat you. No point in betting on it."

"You sure? Because I was thinking of putting our dorm room on the line…"

"Oh, really?"

"Yep." Sawyer eagerly rubbed his hands together. "If you win, you get one full weekend of the room to yourself."

"And if you win?"

“Well, I get the room to *myself*.”

Wes actually seemed tempted by the idea. “And where would the loser sleep?”

“I’m sure you could find a couch to crash on. Or your car’s got a big trunk; you could probably sleep in there.”

“Neither of those options sound the least bit appealing. But since I’ll be winning anyways…”

A big grin lit Sawyer’s face. “Then we have a bet?”

“We have a bet.”

The two boys shook hands, identical looks of satisfaction displayed proudly on their faces. Each looked convinced he was going to win.

“Wes seems confident,” I murmured to Anna. “Do you think he’ll win?”

“To be honest, it could go either way,” she replied. “They’re both just as fit as each other.”

“At least Sawyer didn’t bet his Maserati this time,” Cress said. “He almost cried when Wes won their last bet and got to drive it for a month.”

“So, they make bets a lot?”

Anna nodded. “Oh yeah, they are always competing with each other.”

“Miss Grace?” I turned as Coach August walked over to me.

“Yes?” I somehow managed to smother a frown as he stopped in front of me. I wasn’t sure how he knew my name, but as I was the only new kid in the year group, it probably wasn’t hard to figure out. Still, I wasn’t sure why he’d decided to single me out.

“The nurse contacted me,” he said. “I hear you’ve hurt your ankle.”

I was thrown for a moment. The nurse hadn’t told me she was going to speak to Coach August about my injury.

“Oh, uh, yeah, I did,” I answered. “It’s feeling much better today though.”

My eyes drifted past Coach August to where he and Noah had been standing at the side of the court. Luther was now alongside Noah, chatting away to his friend. But Noah didn’t seem to be listening. He was looking right at me, watching my conversation with the teacher. When our eyes met, he instantly turned to his friend, as though he’d been talking to Luther the whole time.

“Miss Grace, did you hear me?”

“What?” I turned back to face Coach August, who was still looking down at me. I must have completely missed something he’d said.

“I was saying I think it would be best if you sit out the test,” he continued. “You can make it up once your ankle is fully recovered.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or annoyed. I didn’t particularly want to do the beep test on a sore ankle. But I also didn’t want to sit out by myself. I’d rather just get it over and done with.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” I said.

“I insist.” There was a sense of resolve in his voice, and I knew there was no way I’d convince him otherwise. He started gesturing to the bleachers. “You can sit over there and watch.”

I let out a sigh. “Okay.”

He nodded, satisfied I’d finally agreed, and returned to the sidelines.

“Have fun,” I murmured to Cress and Anna. They were practically glaring at me with envy.

“You are so lucky,” Anna said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be sitting with you soon,” Cress added.

I gave them a smile before I trudged over to the bleachers. I hated being the odd person out, and I felt like the rest of the class was judging me as I went to sit by myself. My limp wasn’t obvious anymore, so they probably all thought I was cheating to get out of the test somehow.

As I made myself comfortable on a bench a few rows back from the court, I noticed Noah watching me. I could have sworn there was a hint of concern in his eyes, but he pulled them away so quickly it was impossible to tell. Why was he so interested in me today? The image of Noah deep in conversation with Coach August flashed into my mind. I was still surprised the nurse hadn’t told me she wanted me to sit out of gym class. Could Noah have been the one to tell the coach about my ankle? Why would he do that?

The test started, and I relaxed back on my seat to watch. I’d done the beep test once at my old school, and kids had started dropping like flies within the first few minutes. They hadn’t exactly been a fit bunch though. Everyone here looked to be doing much better. Even Cress and Anna, who had grumbled and groaned about doing the test, seemed to be taking the first few minutes easily in their strides.

The test only became harder as the minutes dragged on. With each beep that sounded, the pace increased and the students had to reach the opposite side of the court quicker. All of a sudden, people started to give up. It was mostly girls at first, but then a few guys stopped too.

When Cress failed to reach her cone before the beep, she came to join me with a pained look in her eyes.

“That. Was. Horrible,” she said between breaths as she collapsed down onto the bench at my side.

“You did really well.”

All I got was a groan in response.

I continued watching and was impressed by how long Anna managed to keep going. She somehow made it look so graceful. Kids were red-faced and puffing on either side of her, but the only hint of her own struggles was the soft glow of sweat on her forehead.

When Anna finally stopped, she abruptly slowed in the middle of the court, like she’d suddenly decided she was bored with the whole experience.

“Anna, you did amazing,” I said as she came to sit on the bleachers.

She merely shrugged and dabbed her face with a fresh towel she’d taken from a basket at the sidelines. “I’ve always been quite good at running,” she said. “Doesn’t stop me from hating it though. It’s terribly boring.”

I smiled and shook my head. I didn’t understand why she thought running was boring. I’d always found it so freeing. I loved the constant feel of my feet hitting the ground and the way I could sense the blood pumping beneath my skin. I lived for those moments when I could take in the beauty of the world around me and allow my mind to just drift. Running between cones to the sound of high-pitched beeps wasn’t quite the same.

“Looks like we could be here a while,” Cress said, nodding at the line of students who were still running across the court.

Most people had dropped out, and there were just a few guys left. All of them looked as fresh as the moment the whole thing had started. Sawyer and Wes were still running and practically moving as one, their feet slapping against the ground in unison. They were so in sync it was almost mesmerizing to watch. There were a couple of other guys I didn’t recognize running next to them, and Noah was also still going.

“I’m not going to lie,” Anna said. “I’m actually starting to enjoy this beep test. Is it wrong that I find guys running super sexy?” She was watching the boys like she’d just been offered a box of chocolates and couldn’t decide which one to take.

“Definitely not wrong,” Cress replied.

I could see what they meant. There was something alluring about the way the boys' muscles flexed as they ran and how their sweaty shirts clung to their chests.

"It's a shame that Wes has a girlfriend and Sawyer is Sawyer," Anna continued. "Because right now, I would love to be the ham in that twin sandwich."

I burst out laughing, causing several people to look our way. I immediately went quiet. "I can't believe you just said that!"

"What?" Anna replied. "Just because we're friends with the guys doesn't mean I can't appreciate their beauty."

"I just thought you'd be too busy drooling over Luther," Cress said.

"Ugh, no." Anna protested but didn't look nearly as disgusted by the idea as her words suggested, and her eyes immediately sought Luther out. He was headed for the sidelines, having just tapped out of the test. When he looked up and saw Anna watching him, he winked.

"Definitely not," Anna added. "If anyone out there is worth drooling over, it's Noah. Pretty sure he's been crowned the king of hotness at our school."

I smothered another laugh. "The king of hotness?"

"Yeah, he rules in that department, and we should all bow down to him."

"Anna, that's my cousin," Cress groaned.

"Yeah, your extremely hot cousin," she said.

Cress's face scrunched up with disgust. "I'm going to grab a drink of water."

She stood and walked to the end of the bleachers. I was expecting to see her headed toward a water fountain, but there was a large refrigerator with bottles of water and Gatorades standing by the wall. We definitely didn't have one of those in the gym at my old school.

"It's a shame Veronica's had her claws sunk into him for such a long time," Anna said. Apparently, she was still talking about Noah. "I bet he'd be a good kisser."

"So, they *are* dating?" I felt like I couldn't keep up.

"No, but she's made it clear to everyone at school that he belongs to her," Anna replied. "And you'd need to have a death wish to risk her wrath. Though there are plenty of girls who are willing to put themselves in danger for a ride on the Noah train."

“You have such a beautiful way with words, Anna.”

She snorted a laugh. “I know.”

“So, that’s it then?” I asked. “Noah is off-limits to everyone because Veronica has decided he’s her property?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s a bit messed up.”

“To be honest, I don’t think it really stops him getting attention from other girls. If anything, it probably makes them want him more,” Anna said with a shake of her head. “Personally, it doesn’t seem worth it to me. Apart from this weird on-again-off-again thing he’s got going with Veronica, Noah wouldn’t date any of the girls at school. As far as I’m concerned, that train has left the station.”

I glanced back at the court to watch Noah running. “Why wouldn’t he date anyone at school? You mean because of Veronica?”

“Nah, I think it’s because his standards are too high.”

That didn’t surprise me in the least.

“Please tell me you’re not still talking about Noah.” Cress had returned with three bottles of water. She passed one to Anna and one to me before she sat back down, opened hers, and took a swig.

Anna shrugged. “I’m just explaining to Isobel that Noah thinks he’s too good to date any of us mere mortals.”

Cress sighed and shook her head. “He’s not like that. He’s just guarded. He doesn’t open up easily.”

“So, he doesn’t date anyone here because he’s worried about getting his heart broken?” I wondered out loud.

“No, I think he’s more concerned about getting used,” Cress explained. “The girls here all have ulterior motives. They only want to date him to boost their status. There’s nothing he hates more than dishonesty, so he never gives girls a chance to take advantage of him that way.”

It was one thing to avoid dating because you’d been cheated on, but to not trust anyone at all was downright depressing. His reaction to our collision in the woods was starting to make a little more sense. It didn’t excuse the fact he’d automatically assumed I’d fallen on him on purpose, but if what Cress said was true, perhaps his reaction wasn’t completely ridiculous.

A shout sounded from the court, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I won!” Sawyer was standing in the middle of the court, dancing on the spot while Wes shook his head at his brother. It looked like Sawyer had stopped running the moment Wes had finished, and given the way he was dancing, he still appeared to have more than enough energy to continue.

“Sawyer, Wes, off the court now!” Coach August shouted to them. “The test isn’t over.”

The boys both dashed to the edge of the court, leaving three boys still running the test. Noah was there, along with two guys I hadn’t met. They were all sprinting hard now, and I felt slightly breathless just watching them.

“I can’t wait to have the room to myself for the weekend,” Sawyer bragged as Wes came over to sit with us. I hadn’t opened my water bottle yet, and I happily offered it to Wes. He looked like he needed it more than me.

“Thanks.” He smiled and accepted the water before focusing on his brother. “You can’t win if you cheated. You tripped me!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Sawyer looked far too smug as he turned to us. “I guess we’ll just have to ask our umpires. Did any of you see evidence of foul play?”

Cress, Anna, and I shook our heads.

“Sorry, Wes, we were too busy talking. We didn’t see anything.” Cress looked genuinely disappointed that she couldn’t save Wes from his brother’s taunts.

“See!” Sawyer continued. “Now I just have to pick the perfect weekend.” He was still grinning brightly as he spun on his heels and walked off. He proudly made his way over to a group of girls sitting farther down the bleachers, no doubt planning to boast about his victory over his brother.

Wes shook his head as he watched his twin leave. “In all honesty, I can only blame myself for that. I should have known he’d cheat.”

“Maybe we can do something fun that weekend,” Anna said. “Go on a trip somewhere without Sawyer to teach him a lesson.”

Wes slowly started to smile. “Anna, you are totally devious, but I love the way you think.”

“Thank you.”

My eyes drifted to the court as Noah finally came to a stop. He was puffing heavily, and he lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face,

flashing his abs to everyone on the bleachers. I heard several girls giggling, and I had no doubt as to why.

Noah was the last student left running, and a smattering of applause floated down from the bleachers. The noise practically turned to cheers when Coach August announced that, since the test was over, class was ending early for the day, and everyone hurried back toward the locker rooms. Anna and Cress couldn't seem to wait to grab a quick shower and get out of their sweaty clothes, and I slowly trailed after them.

"Nice running out there, newbie."

I turned to find Luther grinning behind me. Noah was at his side, and I tried my best to ignore him. Instead, I shot Luther a scowl. "It's not my fault I couldn't do the test."

"Uh-huh."

"My ankle is injured. You *know* that."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

Luther gave a lopsided shrug. "So, did you like what you saw from the bleachers?"

"What do you mean?" I was doing my best not to look at Noah, but from the corner of my eye, I could swear he was glaring at his friend.

"I mean, the most athletic boys at Weybridge put on quite a show for you ladies. I was curious if you enjoyed it?"

"Uh…" How did I even respond to that?

"Or maybe you're more into book-smart guys. Or perhaps the arty type?"

I raised an eyebrow at him but kept quiet. He didn't need any encouraging to continue. "Or the funny guy or the bad boy. Come on, what kind of guys do you like to date?"

Finally, he'd gotten to his point. "Luther, all you need to know about my type is that you're not it." I kept my face deadly serious as I spoke, but I couldn't help a grin from forming as I turned away from Luther to follow the rest of the kids out of the gym.

Luther wasn't even slightly discouraged by my response and skipped quickly to my side, a broad smile still plastered on his face. "Message received." He laughed as he walked alongside me. "But that doesn't answer the question."

"Why are you so interested?"

“I told you I’m on an undercover mission to uncover your secrets. That’s the one I want to know today.”

“I really don’t like this game,” I grumbled. I was suspicious of all Luther’s talk about secrets, and I wasn’t sure why he kept insisting on trying to uncover mine. It was probably like Cress and Anna said, and he was trying to figure me out.

“So…” he continued. “What type of guy do you go for?”

I stopped and faced Luther once more, but my eyes flickered in Noah’s direction. He was following behind, keeping his distance. Thankfully, Noah didn’t seem to be waiting on my answer. Instead, he was glaring at his best friend. It seemed he was just as annoyed with Luther as I was.

“I don’t have a type,” I replied. Luther opened his mouth to object, but I quickly interrupted before he got a chance. “And I don’t have any secrets. Catch you later, Luther.”

This time, I managed to escape, and as I strode away, I heard a thump and then Noah hissed, “What is wrong with you?”

Luther laughed, but I was now too far away to catch his response. I just hoped he was finished trying to figure me out because, even though his questions seemed harmless, there were things about me I didn’t want anyone in this school to know.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I was trying to study when my phone started ringing. It wasn't the beaten-up old flip phone I'd been using for the last five years. No, it was the new iPhone that had arrived for me earlier in the day. There was only one person who could have sent it and only one person who had the number, so I knew it was Matthew on the other end of the line. I was suddenly cursing myself for taking the damn thing out of the box.

I scowled down at the device as I saw the screen light up with the words "Matthew LaFleur." Because, of course, my father had already added himself to the contacts list. I was going to have to change the name to something like "Do not answer" so I was reminded to not pick up.

I couldn't imagine why he would be calling, and I had no desire to speak to him, yet I still found myself answering the call. "Hello."

"Miss Isobel, I have your father on the line." I recognized Caldwell's voice but didn't have a chance to respond as I heard the click of the line changing. They had called me, and yet I had to wait several minutes before I was connected to my father.

"Hello, Isobel," he said. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

I highly doubted he was genuinely apologetic. I imagined he kept people waiting all the time.

"I wanted to touch base with you," he continued. "I trust you are settling in at school."

"Well enough." I didn't feel the need to go into more detail. I doubted he really wanted to hear how I was getting on anyway.

"And it seems you received your new phone without any issues."

“Yep.” This had to be the most painful conversation of my life. “Was there anything I can help you with?” I figured it was better to cut right to the chase, rather than sit here and listen to his woeful attempts at small talk.

“Actually, yes. I would like for us to have lunch on Saturday.”

“You would?” My voice betrayed my surprise. He’d bailed and gone to New York almost immediately after meeting me, so I was under the impression he had no plans to see me again anytime soon—if at all.

“I would. It will be around midday. I’ll have Caldwell contact you with the details.”

“But—”

“I’ll see you then.”

He hung up before I had a chance to reply, and as I lowered the phone from my ear, I frowned at it. Matthew actually wanted to see me? I struggled to believe it. Surely, he had some ulterior motive. Maybe there was someone else he wanted me to stay away from, or perhaps he needed to give me another lesson on the *expectations that come with the LaFleur name*. I shuddered at the thought. I didn’t particularly want to see him, but he hadn’t given me the opportunity to object. Perhaps that was why he’d hung up on me so fast. He probably knew I wouldn’t be thrilled by the idea.

“Why do you look like you just sucked on a lemon?” Cress asked as she entered the room. She was still dressed in her dance gear and looked as bubbly as ever despite the fact she’d been at practice for hours.

I tossed the phone down on my desk. “Oh, parent stuff. You know how it is.”

“I really do,” she replied before collapsing on her bed.

“How was practice?” I asked, hoping to steer the subject away from Matthew.

“It was great.” Her face lit with a wide smile as she stared up at the ceiling. “The choreography for our latest dance is amazing. I can’t wait to perform it at the game on Thursday. You’ll come watch me, won’t you?”

“Yeah, of course.” I had no idea what game she was talking about, but I was happy to go and support her.

She smiled brightly and rolled onto her side to face me. “Perfect.” She hopped off her bed again with a surprising amount of energy. “I’m going to grab a quick shower. Should we head to dinner after I’m done?”

My stomach grumbled in agreement, and she laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Cress flitted into the bathroom, and the smile on my face dropped as she closed the door behind her. My talk with Matthew was still at the forefront of my mind. Did I really have to see him again so soon? Mom had told me I needed to give him a chance, but I felt like he'd already had his opportunity and wasted it. He was making an effort to see me again, so perhaps I'd judged the guy too quickly. It was just one lunch. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

Just as she promised, Cress had a quick shower, and we were soon heading for the dining hall.

As we were crossing the courtyard that separated the main building from our dorm, my phone rang again. This time, it was the banged-up old one rather than the shiny new iPhone, which I'd left in my room. As I pulled it from my pocket, I noticed Cress giving the phone a strange look. I quickly realized why. The device was probably older than I was, and I imagined no one in this school used anything other than the latest devices.

Cress didn't question me about the phone, so I hoped she had simply ignored it. Still, I probably needed to switch to using Matthew's iPhone from now on.

I glanced at the screen and smiled when I saw it was my mom calling.

"I better take this," I said to Cress. "It's my mom, and we've been missing each other's calls for the last few days."

"Of course, I'll see you at dinner when you're done."

I waited until Cress had walked away before I answered the call.

"Hey, Mom."

"Oh, you finally answered." My mom let out a happy cheer. "I was worried that school was working you too hard and we might never speak again."

I let out a laugh. "Sorry, I keep accidentally leaving my phone in my room."

"You really make a terrible teenager," she said. "That thing should be glued to your hand."

"Well, someone must have raised me wrong then."

Mom's delighted laugh lit up the other end of the phone, and I realized how much I missed the sound.

"How's school?"

"It's fine." I wandered over to one of the decorative benches that lined the edges of the courtyard and sat down. It was growing dark, and there

weren’t many students about, but thankfully, it wasn’t too cold. “I like my classes, and I’ve started to make a few friends.”

“That’s great, sweetie.”

Her voice was filled with happiness but also a hint of relief, so I suspected she’d been worrying about how I was going to fit in at such a fancy school. The way my friendships back home all ended so disastrously last year had also probably given her a scare.

Coming to Weybridge was a little like being splashed in the face with cold water and being forced to take a fresh look at my life. It was only now, when I looked back on the last few months, that I realized just how miserable I had been. Just a few days ago, I’d been so angry with my mom for sending me here, but it was hard to stay mad at someone who only ever wanted the very best for you.

“How’s the café?” I asked.

“It’s good.” She replied quickly, like her answer was already prepared. “We’ve been quite busy even though the summer rush is over. The air conditioner has finally been replaced. And Norma is still insisting she’s a psychic. Yesterday, she used her abilities on Frank and told him that he’d already met the love of his life and that she was right before his eyes and he didn’t realize it.”

I laughed as I easily pictured the scene. Frank had been a regular for years and came to the café every morning for bacon and eggs. It had always been clear to Mom and I that Norma was in love with him.

“She was talking about herself, wasn’t she?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about it. Unfortunately, Frank thought long and hard about it but said he had no idea who it could be. You should have seen the way Norma stormed off.”

“Oh, poor Norma. I hope Frank finally gets a clue. They’d be so cute together.”

“The cutest,” Mom agreed. “She told me to say hi and check to make sure you’re not breaking too many boys’ hearts at your fancy new school.”

“Well, you can tell her I say hi back. And that her psychic powers must be wonky because I’m definitely not breaking hearts.”

“I’ll make sure to let her know.”

I couldn’t stop smiling as I relaxed back into my seat. Everything felt so much better when I was talking with my mom. Being away from her was probably the hardest part of adjusting to my new school. We’d always been

so close, and I don’t think I’d truly appreciated how lucky I was to always have her around until I’d come to Weybridge. I missed being at home with her, and I hated that I couldn’t just wander into the living room whenever I wanted to talk.

“I miss you so much, Mom.”

“I miss you too. I know it’s hard being apart, but I’m so proud of you and all the amazing things you’re going to achieve. This school is just the beginning.”

I nodded and tried to stop tears from gathering in my eyes. Mom truly believed that being at Weybridge was going to help me conquer the world, and I wanted to make her proud.

“Well, if I achieve anything in life, it isn’t going to be because of some school. It’s going to be because I have the world’s most amazing mom.”

Mom was silent on the other end of the line for a moment, and I could have sworn I heard her sniff. She started to chuckle, so I must have been mistaken. “You know you don’t have to suck up to me right now—there’s no leftover pecan pie in the fridge.”

I smiled. “What? No pecan pie? Is the world ending?”

Mom laughed. “No, it turns out Norma has a thing for it too. I’ve had to start sharing the café’s leftovers with her instead of you.”

“Tell her to have an extra bite for me.”

“I will.”

“Speaking of food, I should probably head to dinner.”

“Okay, sweetie. We’ll talk again soon. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I hated hanging up on my mom and quickly rubbed my eyes as tears started to surface. It was so hard being here without her, especially when we couldn’t always get each other on the phone. I really needed to make sure I didn’t let days pass between calls again.

“Are you okay?”

Shivers ran down my spine as I recognized the voice. Somehow Noah’s deep, slightly husky tone had become familiar to me. Like I’d been listening to him for years rather than just a few short encounters.

I slowly lifted my head to look up at him. He was standing by the bench, his hands tucked into the pockets of his sweatshirt. He wasn’t in school uniform anymore. Instead, he was wearing a pair of gray sweats and

a hoodie. It was irritating how easily he managed to make even the most relaxed outfit look good.

“You seem upset,” he continued.

“I’m fine.”

“Of course, you are.” A small smile lifted his lips as he lowered himself to sit on the bench by my side.

I really didn’t know what to make of Noah. Just yesterday, he’d been accusing me of deliberately crashing into him in an attempt to get his attention. Surely, if he believed that he’d be avoiding me like the plague. And yet, he’d helped me back to school and sent the nurse to check on me. He’d talked to me in class, and here he was coming to sit with me as though we were close friends. Cress insisted there was more to Noah than what most people saw, and I was beginning to wonder if she was right.

“How’s your ankle?” he asked.

It was an innocent question. Something you’d expect any normal person to ask. But, coming from Noah, it made me uncomfortable. He wasn’t like most people. He didn’t seem to care about anyone other than Cress and his little trio of friends at Weybridge. He also wasn’t afraid of bluntly telling people outside of that small circle exactly what he thought of them. I got the impression Noah was never polite for the sake of it, so why was he bothering to check on my injury?

I followed his example and asked him outright. “Why do you care?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

His reply threw me for a second, and it took me a moment to figure out how to respond. There were so many reasons why I didn’t expect Noah to care about my ankle. He was known for steering clear of most girls at school, and he thought I was some sort of crazed fan girl who would do anything to get him to notice me.

But the biggest reason should have been obvious to him. I was a nobody, not worth a second thought, especially to someone like him. Apparently, he needed it spelled out…

“Because you’re Noah Hastings and I’m just…” I paused, unsure what to say. I couldn’t reveal the true differences between us—the vast chasm of wealth, power, and privilege.

“I’m just the new kid,” I finally continued. “You don’t know anything about me.”

He searched my eyes for several long seconds, almost as if he thought he could gain access to all my secrets with just one look. He must have failed because he leaned back on the bench, making himself comfortable. “Okay, so tell me about yourself?”

I tilted my head and frowned. What was his game now?

“Like, do you have any brothers or sisters?” he prompted.

A crease still crinkled my forehead, but Noah’s face was calm and relaxed, and his green eyes were staring at me expectantly, waiting for my answer.

“No, I’m an only child,” I finally responded.

“How about pets?”

“No, no pets. I always wanted a rabbit, but my mom would never let me get one.”

“You’re from a place called Rapid Bay, right?”

I swallowed and nodded, wondering how he knew that. He must have been chatting to Luther and Kaden, or maybe Cress had mentioned it to him.

“What’s it like there?”

“Uh, it’s just a small seaside town. People like to vacation there a lot. It’s crazy in the summer but peaceful in the winter.”

“So, you get to live in a place that people wish they were in all year-round?”

“Something like that.”

“How did you swing that?”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

He looked like he was going to continue firing off questions, but I didn’t like the way he was quizzing me on my hometown, so I quickly cut him off. “What’s with you and your friends and asking questions? Finding out a few facts about me doesn’t mean you know me. For all you know, I could be a serial killer.”

A small laugh left his lips, and I thought I could live for that sound. “*Are* you a serial killer?”

“Well, no.”

“Are you sure? You sounded quite certain…”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Because with the way you’re glaring at me right now, I feel like you could have a little Dexter in you…”

“Oh my gosh, Noah, I’ve never even killed a spider.”

He grinned, and wow, it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. That boy should do nothing but smile. *Ever*. Then again, perhaps that would be dangerous. The girls at school were already falling over themselves to get to him—well, all the girls except for me. I just liked to fall *on* him by accident.

“I like it when you say my name,” he said.

Again, I felt unnerved by his words. He had a way of shifting the ground under me and knocking me off balance without even trying. I tried to act unaffected. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the stabby ones.”

“Great,” I muttered. “I’m never living that down.”

“No, probably not.” He was still smiling as he stood. “It was nice getting to know you a little better, Crash.” He turned and walked away before I could remind him not to call me that.

I sat there, staring after him.

I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to punch that boy or kiss him. But what surprised me most was that I hadn’t totally hated our conversation. One thing was for sure. I was doing a terrible job of staying away from him.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It seemed like all anyone wanted to talk about on Thursday was the soccer game taking place that night. I overheard people whispering about it in classes and chatting enthusiastically about it at lunch. Sawyer was on the team and had an endless stream of guys and girls coming up to him to wish him luck during the lunch break, and of course, he lapped it up.

It was hardly the first time I'd watched people worship the ground a jock walked on. But for a soccer player, it was definitely a first. The kids at my old school had acted like our soccer team didn't exist. Football was the most popular sport back home, and it was strange to see the attention flipped at Weybridge.

Apparently, the whole school turned out to watch the Weybridge Eagles' home games, but I was tempted not to go. I wasn't all that into sports and had math homework to catch up on because, thanks to Luther's endless chatter in class, I was already falling behind. When I reached my dorm room at the end of the day, I realized it was going to be impossible to avoid the game.

Cress was all dressed up in her dance uniform with her hair slicked back and heavy makeup on her face. Red was definitely her color, and she looked gorgeous in the short, fitted dress that had Eagles printed across the front of it. She squealed as I entered the room. "Ah, it's your first Eagles game tonight. Isn't it exciting?"

"Uh, yeah?"

Cress kept speaking almost without taking a breath. "Well, if you're not excited now, you will be when you see how amazing our guys are. And

you'll get to see me dance! We're performing at halftime. You are still coming, right?"

There was no way I could refuse to go now, so I smiled and nodded. "Of course, I'm coming. I can't wait to see you dance." That was something I was actually looking forward to. Cress lived and breathed for her dance team, and I was excited to see what she'd been working on.

"Good." Cress spoke with the satisfaction of a parent who had finally gotten their child to do what they wanted. "Now, go and put on something cute. And make sure you're in the school's colors. I have to leave, but Anna said she'd swing by to get you when she was headed down to the game."

"Yes, Mom."

She poked her tongue out at me but then laughed. "I'll see you after the game is over." She grabbed a duffel bag and swung it over her shoulder before hurrying from the room. I felt a little like I'd just been caught up in a whirlwind.

I quickly changed and spent a few minutes brushing my hair. It had gone a little crazy during school today—probably because I'd been pulling it out when Luther wouldn't shut up in math.

There was a knock at the door, but I didn't have a chance to open it before Anna barreled into the room.

"Isobel, are you ready…" Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of my outfit. "Cress told you to dress cute, right?"

I frowned and glanced down at the jeans and T-shirt I was wearing. It wasn't perfect, but I didn't see the problem. Admittedly, the only red top I owned was my school PE top, and it probably looked a little sad when paired with jeans.

"I didn't have another red top," I explained, looking at her again.

Anna was wearing a tight red dress that clung to her body. It seemed far too dressy for a soccer game.

"I'm sure Cress has something…" She marched into the closet, and I slowly followed after her.

I leaned against the wall as she hunted for something I could wear. "Why does everyone dress up so much for a game?"

"It's not really for the game," she explained. "It's because everyone likes to go out after and celebrate. We usually head to the burger joint in town. They have the best fries you've ever tasted, and just thinking about the burgers makes me drool. You're going to die when you try them."

“And I couldn’t wear jeans to a burger place?”

She glanced over her shoulder at me. “The jeans are fine. It’s the top that’s got to go. You’ll look like a freshman if you rock up in actual school clothes.”

“Oh.”

Anna turned back to the closet and pulled a top from the rack. It was a deeper shade of red than the Weybridge sports uniform and looked to be off the shoulder.

“Try this.” She handed the top to me. The material was unbelievably soft, and I was pleasantly surprised by how much I liked the style. I’d half expected Anna to force me into a dress that was just as revealing as the one she was wearing.

“You don’t think Cress will mind if I borrow it?”

“She would be sad if you didn’t. Especially if she saw what you’re currently wearing.”

“I mean, I don’t look that bad, do I?”

She lifted one eyebrow at me, and it was all the answer I needed.

“Okay, okay. I’ll put it on.”

Her face transformed with a smile. “Excellent.”

As we left the dorm, we were met by a crowd of people making their way across the courtyard. They were all headed in the direction of the sports center. There were students from all year groups as well as a few teachers, and everyone was wearing red. It was impossible not to notice the excited buzz in the air as people laughed and chattered to one another. It felt like the whole school was turning out for the game.

“Anna. Isobel. Wait up!”

We both stopped as Wes jogged toward us. He looked handsome in his red soccer jersey, but it seemed a little unfair that he was allowed to wear school attire when Anna had insisted I’d look silly in it.

“You headed to the game too?” I asked as he reached us.

“I don’t think Sawyer would ever forgive me if I missed a game.”

“And that boy knows how to hold a grudge,” Anna agreed.

“Yeah, he still hasn’t forgiven me for putting a frog in his bed when we were six.” Wes grinned at the memory.

“You put a frog in his bed?” Anna gasped. “I wouldn’t forgive you either.”

“And I thought you were the nice twin,” I added. “I didn’t realize you’re secretly evil.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a secret if everyone knew,” Wes said, still grinning brightly.

We continued on our way to the soccer field, and when I saw where the crowd was headed, I had to suppress my shock. I’d expected the game to be played on a basic grass field. At best, I thought there might be some rickety old bleachers bordering the sidelines—this was just a soccer game, after all. I should have known better than to underestimate Weybridge Academy.

A soccer stadium that looked worthy of hosting a world-class team stood before me. Two huge stands towered over opposite sides of the field, both with roofs covering the countless seats. The grass looked so green I couldn’t be sure if it was real or not. There was a huge eagle painted in the center of the pitch, and tall floodlights loomed high above each corner. Weybridge certainly took soccer seriously.

The stands were packed with people when we arrived, and we had to walk up to one of the middle rows to find some free seats. We arrived just in time because the moment we sat down the players began to emerge from the locker rooms.

The people around us started cheering and stood to greet them. As I looked down at the field, I saw Sawyer jogging out with the rest of the team. He was pumping his arms up in the air in an attempt to rev up the crowd.

“Your brother clearly hates all this attention,” I said to Wes, making him laugh.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He started to groan and put his head in his hands as Sawyer began blowing kisses to the crowd. “Let me know when it’s over,” he grumbled.

“I’m pretty sure this goes on for the whole game,” Anna said.

“Then tell me when the game is over.”

I was distracted from Sawyer’s performance as the final player took the field. It was Noah. Of course, he played soccer. His presence on the team was probably part of the reason the sport was so popular at the school. Even the girls who hated sports had probably been converted into soccer super fans because of the way he looked in that uniform.

His expression was so different from Sawyer’s as the crowd cheered him onto the field. His lips were flat, and there was a focused look in his

eyes. He looked ready to demolish anyone who got in his way, and I imagined the players on the opposing side would be smart to give him a wide berth.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from him as the game started. He moved with lethal grace and complete determination. The intensity with which he eyed the ball was enough to make any girl in the crowd wish they could take its place on the field. I'd watched enough sports to know he was a true athlete, and he didn't slow down at all as the game progressed.

"Earth to Isobel…"

The sound of a whistle blowing caught my ear, and I tore my gaze from the field to find Anna grinning at me. "You really like soccer, huh?"

"What? Why?"

"Well, it's halftime, and I've barely been able to get one word out of you all game."

It was halftime already? I blushed because it seemed obvious I wasn't really a soccer fan. The reason I hadn't been paying attention to anyone was because I'd been totally distracted watching Noah play. Thankfully, it didn't seem like Anna had noticed I'd been fixated mostly on one player. If she had, I knew she wouldn't be letting me get away with it.

"Did you play at your old school?" Anna continued.

I shook my head. "I didn't have much time for sports back home, which is probably a good thing. I have terrible coordination."

"Seems you aren't the only one here with terrible coordination." Anna nodded toward the players from the opposing team who were slowly making their way from the field with their heads hung low. "Langley Prep has no chance of winning."

"Yeah, they're getting destroyed out there." Wes had a huge grin on his face as he looked at the large scoreboard that towered over one end of the field. "We're already up three goals. They'll be lucky if they score one."

"I think it's because they're too scared to go anywhere near Noah," Anna said. "It's like he's on a mission tonight."

"Yeah, he looks great," I murmured.

Anna nudged her shoulder against mine. "You've only been here a week, and I see he's already made an impression."

I hadn't meant to say that out loud, and my cheeks flushed. "I mean, he looks good out there. He's playing really well." I corrected myself before quickly changing the subject. "Your brother's playing well too, Wes."

“Yeah, he’s been okay,” Wes agreed. “He’s looking a little slow out there though. I think he’s missed one too many early morning fitness sessions.”

“I don’t blame him,” Anna said with a shudder. “I don’t know how anyone gets up before school to train.”

Wes smiled. “I like mornings.”

“Me too.” I shared his smile. Mornings were my favorite time of day, and I was looking forward to when my ankle was fully recovered so I could get back to my morning runs. The thought made me pause. What if I came across Noah out in the woods again? A nervous tremor ran down my spine, and I couldn’t tell whether it was because I liked the idea of bumping into Noah again or not.

Music started playing over the speakers, and Anna began bouncing on her feet as she turned to the field. “It’s time for Cress’s halftime dance number.”

I grinned and joined Anna and Wes as we clapped and cheered the dance team onto the field. As soon as they kicked off their performance, I could tell the girls really knew what they were doing, and I felt a swell of pride as I watched my friend perform her dance so perfectly. I’d seen her practicing a few of the more difficult moves in our room this week, but it was exciting to see them put together with the rest of the team. She made it look so easy.

The energy in the crowd was electric by the time the soccer players returned to the pitch. If the Langley Prep boys had any hope of turning the game around, it quickly diminished as they trudged out of the locker room only to be greeted by the mass of cheering Weybridge fans. There was no fighting the swell of excitement churning through the stadium, and all of it was directed at the home team.

The Eagles completely and utterly dominated Langley. By the end of the game, Weybridge had seven goals while Langley couldn’t score one. It seemed that had mostly been down to Noah. He played defense, and no one could get the ball past him.

“Now can you see why everyone makes such a big deal about the soccer team?” Anna asked as we made our way from the stadium. We’d lost Wes in the crowd, so it was just the two of us.

“I guess they’re pretty good.” I didn’t know all that much about soccer, but even I couldn’t deny the team was impressive. Especially Noah.

Anna scoffed. “Pretty good? They just annihilated the second-best team in their division.”

My eyes widened with surprise. “*That’s* their biggest competition?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I just figured they were a bad team.”

Anna shook her head. “No, they’re actually considered to be quite good. Weybridge is just a whole lot better.”

I couldn’t believe it. The two teams I’d just witnessed didn’t look close to being evenly matched.

The crowd started to thin as we headed into the parking lot. We were planning to meet Cress there before making our way to the burger place in town, and I spotted her leaning against a flashy pink convertible. She was still wearing heavy makeup from her performance but had changed out of her dance costume and into something more casual.

She grinned brightly as we approached. “So, what did you think?” Despite her confident smile, there was a nervous edge to her voice, and her body was tense as she waited for our verdict.

“You guys were amazing.” It was easy to compliment her when she’d done so well.

“You think?”

“Yeah, Cress, you killed it,” Anna agreed.

“You guys didn’t notice me miss the beat on one of my kicks?”

We shook our heads.

“Everyone looked perfectly in sync the whole dance,” I reassured her.

She finally seemed to relax. “It was our first performance of the season, so there were bound to be a few hiccups. We’ll definitely be better next time.”

“Only you could think there were any hiccups with that dance, Cress.” Anna laughed. “Anyway, are you guys ready to get burgers? I’m starved.”

“You and your stomach,” Cress replied as she opened the car door.

Anna leaned in close to me. “She may mock me, but just wait until you taste the burgers we’re about to eat.”

“That good, huh?”

“Good doesn’t even begin to cut it. Forget the soccer match. The best part of the night isn’t going to be what you watched; it’s going to be what you put in your mouth…”

I stared at her for a moment before the two of us burst out laughing.

“I really hope you’re still talking about the burgers, Anna.”
She winked before hopping in the car. “Well, that and the fries.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Toddy's Burgers was teeming with Weybridge students. Somehow, Cress had managed to work her magic and find us a booth so we could sit and eat, which was lucky, because it was messy work. I probably had sauce on my face, but I couldn't have cared less because Anna wasn't kidding. The burgers at Toddy's were unbelievably good.

I had completely tuned out from the surrounding restaurant the moment I'd taken the first bite of my burger because food like that deserved nothing less than my undivided attention. When I got down to the last few mouthfuls, I almost wanted to cry. How could my burger bliss almost be over?

"Geez, newbie, you're making me wish I was that burger…"

I glanced up at Luther who was standing at the edge of our booth watching me. My eyes didn't stay on him for more than an instant. I looked right past him to Noah, who was at his side. My stomach dipped as he fixated on my mouth. I quickly grabbed a napkin to wipe my lips in case there was any burger sauce splashed across them.

I tried to look unfazed as I turned to Luther. "Don't you know that you should never interrupt a girl when she's eating a burger?"

"But in my head, I *am* the burger," he replied.

A flicker of surprise flashed in Noah's eyes, but I knew Luther was only joking. There was no way I was letting him get away with it though.

I lifted one eyebrow at him. "If you were the burger, there's no way I would be enjoying it this much."

Anna burst out laughing. "Burn, Luther."

He didn’t look the least bit bothered as he slid into the booth beside her. “If I can’t be Isobel’s burger, perhaps I can be yours. What do you think, London, want to take a bite of me?”

She rolled her eyes at him, but a smile still played on her lips as she turned back to her conversation with Cress. There was definitely something between them. Luther’s expression had seemed just a little bit more sincere, even a little hopeful, when he’d joked with her compared to me. Anna didn’t seem nearly as put off by him as she made out either.

“The burgers here *are* really good.” Noah sat down next to me, and my mouth went dry at the total lack of distance between us in the tight booth seat. He certainly hadn’t been this close when we’d sat together in the courtyard the other night, and it set my nerves on edge to have his leg brushing against mine. He smelled of fresh shower gel, and his hair was still damp, making him look like some god of the sea who’d just emerged from the turbulent waves and made his way onto the shore.

He was looking at me expectantly, and I realized he was waiting for a response. What the hell had he even said? As his gaze flicked down to the burger in my hand, I remembered. The food. Right. *Duh*.

“It’s got to be the best I’ve ever had,” I agreed with an envious look at the remainder of my food. I was still upset my last few bites had been rudely interrupted, and the remains of my burger looked so tantalizing as it waited for me to finish it off.

Noah let out a small chuckle. “Don’t let me keep you from it.”

It took me a moment to process the lightness in Noah’s voice and how he was struggling not to smile. The expression seemed so natural, and yet it was completely at odds with the air of indifference he radiated when he roamed the school halls. I definitely saw none of the cold and calculating soccer player who’d decimated his opposition on the field tonight.

It would have been easier to sit beside Weybridge’s arrogant leader—the one I’d first encountered in the woods and saw at school every day surrounded by walls so thick even Superman couldn’t see through them. I knew what to expect from *that* Noah. This Noah’s motives were a mystery, and I couldn’t tell if the friendly routine was simply an act.

“Seriously, eat,” Noah insisted.

I shot him a scowl but focused on my food all the same. Noah was hardly interested in me, so what did it matter if I inhaled the rest of my burger like I so desperately wanted. I couldn’t quite bring myself to eat with

the same gusto as before, and I was slightly more delicate about the whole process. I really didn't want to end up with sauce on my face again.

I glanced up at Noah when I finished and found him watching me closely. His eyes seemed bright with amusement, and while he wasn't exactly smiling, the corners of his lips were lifted like they were fighting gravity to curve upward. My cheeks flushed, and I quickly searched for something to say because I didn't know what to make of Noah when he looked at me that way.

"So, do you guys come here after every game?" I asked.

"Just when we win."

"Oh." It was hard not to be disappointed. I could have really got on board with a regular visit to Toddy's. "So, it's not every week then…"

Noah shook his head before leaning in slightly closer. "Of course, it is. We always win."

My tummy fluttered in response, and I seriously hoped it was at the thought of more burgers rather than Noah's proximity. "Well, I think you've just found your new number-one fan. I will be cheering the loudest at every game."

His alluring half smile seemed tempted to break out on his lips. "So, all it takes for your undying loyalty to the team is a burger?"

"That or good pecan pie. It's my favorite."

"Pecan pie?"

"Yeah, my mom's, more specifically. It's the one thing she bakes at the café and people come from miles around to grab a slice." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized I'd said too much. I hadn't told anyone my mom owned a café, and I hoped Noah had missed my comment.

"Sounds nice," he said. "So, your mom's a chef?"

"Uh, yeah, sort of," I stumbled over the words as I thought about how to explain. "She's a restaurant owner. Do you have a favorite food?" I asked, quickly trying to move past my slipup.

"Pancakes."

I breathed a sigh of relief as we steered away from the subject of my mom. "Really?" I laughed.

"Yep. I will do just about anything for a stack of fluffy pancakes. They're my greatest weakness in life."

"Huh, who would have thought that all it would take to bring Noah Hastings to his knees was some pancakes?"

“Only the fluffy ones.” He smiled.

Noah always appeared so intimidating and distant, but talking to him was far easier than I had ever imagined. I had no idea why he was talking to me when a whole room of people was vying for his attention. They all seemed to be hovering, waiting for the right moment to approach him. I imagined they wanted to celebrate the team’s win with their star player, and I could constantly feel eyes on us as everyone waited for the perfect moment to steal his attention.

Levi had a similar effect on the people in Rapid Bay after a football game, but he preferred to soak up the adoration as much as possible. Noah didn’t seem to give it a second thought, and he hadn’t taken his eyes off me since the moment he sat down. It was almost enough to convince me he might actually be interested in me. But I knew there was no way that was possible. I was just the shiny new student, and everyone, including Noah, would be bored of me soon enough.

“Well done on the win tonight,” I said, realizing I hadn’t congratulated him yet. “You played really well.”

“Thanks.”

“You looked pretty intense out there. I wouldn’t have wanted to be a Langley player coming up against you.”

He looked slightly uncomfortable as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, I can sometimes get a bit lost in the moment. Soccer’s my outlet.”

“Outlet for what?”

He shrugged, and his gaze detached from mine for a rare moment, a slightly distant look entering his eyes. “It just lets me stop thinking for a while.”

I couldn’t imagine what he needed to avoid thinking about, but I wished he’d tell me more. I felt an intense urge to dig deeper, to see if there was anything he wanted to talk about, but quickly stopped myself. I was the last person Noah would want to confide in if he needed to.

“I should go find Kaden,” he said, breaking my train of thought. “I’ll see you at school, Crash.”

He left without another word, and Luther quickly moved to follow him. I was surprised by Noah’s abrupt departure and had to wonder if I’d said something wrong.

I continued watching him as Noah was swarmed by a group of people. They couldn’t wait to slap him on the back or shake his hand to

congratulate him. I had been right. Almost everyone in the room was waiting for the perfect moment to swoop down on him. He was like a lone french fry amid a squabble of seagulls who were constantly tugging him one way and then another. I didn't envy him one bit.

My stomach tensed when Veronica appeared at his side. Apparently, their argument at Luther's party hadn't deterred her because she was running a hand down his arm and smiling up at him. Something about her smile was a little too forced, and her eyes glowed with a strange combination of pride and jealousy. It was like she both loved and loathed the attention Noah received. Noah didn't seem to notice, and he barely even looked her way, but seeing them together still left me feeling a little uneasy.

I wondered if the feeling was jealousy, but I quickly dismissed the thought. I'd only just met the guy, and I certainly didn't want Noah that way. It was far more likely I was just having a negative reaction to seeing Veronica after she'd been rude to me in English.

A look of relief crossed Noah's features as Sawyer burst through the front door of the restaurant, his arms held aloft. He had scored four goals in the match, more than any other player, and he was ready to bask in the achievement. The crowd of students was more than happy to oblige him, and most turned to welcome him to the restaurant. The hive of activity around Noah briefly dispersed, and even Veronica stopped pawing at his arm. His tense shoulders relaxed slightly, and he looked like he could finally breathe.

The difference between Sawyer and Noah was almost laughable. Sawyer ate up every bit of adoration that came his way. Not only that, but people seemed far more comfortable and confident about approaching him than they were with Noah. It was clear they were far more at ease around him, and within minutes, Sawyer had the entire place singing one of the Eagles' chants.

I'd heard the song enough times during the match to quietly sing along, but Cress and Anna belted out the tune. I felt a little sorry for the one table of people—a family with two young children—who had likely just come for a quiet dinner. They were well and truly outnumbered.

"Is it like this every Thursday?" I called across our table as another chant started up.

"Pretty much," Cress replied. "Though I'm sure Sawyer is riling everyone up a little more than usual tonight because he had such a great

game.”

“Yeah, and be prepared,” Anna added. “We’re going to be hearing about his goals for at least the next week. I really hope he doesn’t repeatedly force us to watch the video of them too.”

“Why would he make you watch the video?” I asked. “You were there.”

She shrugged. “To remind us of his fabulousness.”

“That sounds like Sawyer.”

“So, what were you and Noah talking about?” Cress asked.

Her question caught me off guard. “Oh, uh, I don’t know. This and that.”

She tilted her head at me. “He doesn’t usually talk *this and that* with girls.”

“He doesn’t?”

“No. He doesn’t usually talk with girls at school at all.”

“Yeah, he barely talks to anyone,” Anna agreed. “Maybe he likes you.”

I scoffed. “I doubt that.”

“Why?” Cress said. “He is a guy, after all. And you’re so stunning and sweet.”

“There’s plenty of stunning, sweet girls at this school,” I argued. “You said he’s just not interested in the girls at Weybridge.”

“Yeah, but you’re different from most of the girls at Weybridge,” Anna replied.

I flinched at the word different. I was trying my best to fit in and had barely told them anything about where I was from, but I still stood out like a sore thumb. Was I that obviously out of place? Either way, I couldn’t believe that made me at all interesting to Noah. I looked back to where I’d last seem him, but he’d disappeared in the crowd. Thinking back on our conversation, he’d seemed so relaxed, and we’d talked so easily, but I knew Cress and Anna were reading into it too much. Noah wasn’t interested in me like that.

“I’m sure he was just being polite because I’m his cousin’s roommate,” I eventually decided.

“Maybe,” Cress wondered, but as she shared a look with Anna, I could tell neither of them was convinced.

Thankfully, all talk about Noah and how different I was came to a stop as Wes took a seat at our table.

“So, my brother clearly needs to get out more,” he said, his tone laden with sarcasm as he slid into the booth beside me. “Poor thing is such an introvert. I have no idea what I’m going to do with him.”

“Yeah, I can see how much he hates all this attention,” I agreed.

Wes laughed before he put on a solemn expression and bowed his head. “I just hope we can get him the help he needs.”

He then grinned brightly and turned his attention to Cress. “I loved your dance number tonight, by the way.”

“Really?” Cress was practically glowing in response.

“Yeah, you girls killed it out there.”

“Thanks.” She sat a little straighter. “Hopefully, the new recruits we get from the trials this weekend will fit in nicely with the rest of the squad.” She gasped suddenly and slapped a hand down on the table in front of me. “Isobel, you have to come try out for the squad.”

“Uh…”

“Yes, oh my gosh, it would be so fun to have you dancing with us.”

I couldn’t help but grimace. The thought of me on a dance team was ridiculous. “I hate to break it to you, Cress, but I can’t dance, so that’s a really terrible idea.”

“Aw, I find that hard to believe,” she said. “Won’t you at least try out? I’m sure you’d be great, and dance can be a lot of fun.”

“Sorry, Cress, but I’m far too uncoordinated.” I’d only been at Weybridge a few days, and already I’d managed to hurt myself with my own clumsiness.

Wes let out a soft chuckle. “Yeah, unfortunately, some of us have to go through life with two left feet.”

“You can’t dance either?”

“I make Elaine in *Seinfield* look good.”

“Wow. So, you’re really bad.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “It’s a miracle anyone here still talks to me after prom last year.”

“We warned him not to hit the dance floor,” Cress said.

“He refused to listen though.” Anna gave a sad shake of her head before she looked at Wes. “It’s lucky you made varsity crew, Wes, or people would still be talking about how you punched a teacher while doing the robot.”

“Hey, don’t blame my robot skills,” Wes said. “Mr. Wagner was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I’m sure that’s not how he remembers it,” Anna replied.

Wes definitely sounded like he was just as bad at dancing as me. I was hung up on something else Anna had said though. “What’s crew?” I asked, a blank look on my face. “It sounds like some kind of gang.”

All three of them gave me similar looks of confusion, and their surprise at my question made the blood rush from my face. Was I an idiot for not knowing what crew was?

“Didn’t your last school have a rowing team?” Anna asked.

“Oh, rowing, of course.” I wanted to thump myself for being so awkward. I imagined most wealthy schools like Weybridge had rowing teams, and I was worried I’d just made myself look even more out of place. “It wasn’t a big deal at my last school.”

“Well, it’s a big deal here,” Anna explained. Thankfully, she didn’t question my lack of rowing knowledge. “And Wes is one of the best rowers at school.”

“I’m not that good.” He shrugged, but I could have sworn there was an embarrassed glint in his eyes.

“He’s being modest,” Anna continued.

“Really, I’m not.” Wes seemed uncomfortable with her praise, and I was surprised by how humble he seemed for a guy from such a privileged background. He was so different from his brother who I imagined would have been more than happy to brag.

“Fine, you win,” Anna said. “You’re just as average at rowing as you are at dancing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Wes grumbled, making us all laugh.

We stayed at Toddy’s for a couple of hours but had to leave when it drew close to curfew. Plenty of students stayed at the restaurant and took the risk, but Cress was tired anyway and didn’t want to have to talk her way out of trouble.

Wes got a ride back to school with us, and I walked beside him as we returned to the dorms while Anna and Cress wandered just ahead.

“So, Sawyer mentioned you have a girlfriend,” I said as we left the parking lot and followed the path that led around the side of Esher Hall to the dorms. “Does she go here?”

Wes’s expression softened. “No, Sarah goes to school back home.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“Cool. I’ve never been there before.”

Wes gave me a funny look, and I realized how strange it must sound for a kid who attended Weybridge Academy to have never been somewhere like New York. I quickly kept talking so he didn’t get a chance to ask me about it. “It must be hard, not getting to see her very much,” I said.

He nodded slowly. “It’s not easy, but we’ve been together for years, and we’ll hopefully be together again when we go to college.”

“How long have you guys dated?”

“It’s been four years. We started dating when we were thirteen.”

My eyes grew wide with surprise. “Wow, really? That’s forever.”

He chuckled. “I guess it does seem like a while.”

“My longest relationship was a year.”

“That’s still a pretty decent chunk of time.”

“Yeah, I guess. It’s a shame it was wasted on the wrong guy.”

He tilted his head as he looked at me. “Perhaps you’ll find the right guy here.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

I glanced away from him and focused on the soft spray of water bubbling from the courtyard fountain we were passing. “I’m not sure I’d be a good fit for any of the guys here.”

“What? That’s crazy.” Wes looked genuinely shocked but quickly calmed his expression. “I mean, why do you say that?” He looked a little embarrassed as he asked the question.

“Let’s just say I don’t think I’m the type of girl Weybridge guys are looking for.”

“Well, if there’s anyone here who thinks that, I’m sure that will be their loss.”

I laughed and shook my head. “You’re just saying that to be nice.”

“No, I’m saying that because, even though I only met you this week, I can tell you’re one of the good ones.”

I tilted my head to look up at Wes. He was giving me such a cute smile I couldn’t help but return it. I could see why his girlfriend put up with a long-distance relationship to be with him. “I think you might be one of the good ones too.”

“Nah, I’m nothing special. It probably just seems that way to you because this school is totally nuts. I often feel like I’m the only normal guy

here.”

“You think you’re normal?” My eyes narrowed slightly as I assessed him. I couldn’t help but notice the way he’d described himself as *normal*. It was the exact word I’d used when Lily had asked me what type of guy I went for. I’d only really said it to wind up Noah and because I was convinced there were no normal boys at this school. But maybe I was wrong about that.

“Well, I’m as normal as you can be in this place,” he clarified. “Why? You think I’m weird?”

I laughed. “No, it’s not that.”

“Really? Because you’re looking at me like you disagree. You think I’m crazy, right?”

“No, not at all,” I hurried to reassure him. “You’re right. You’re perfectly normal, which is probably the best compliment you can pay a person in this place.”

He grinned in response.

By the time we reached the girls’ dorm, Cress and Anna had already disappeared inside. It was almost curfew, but I hesitated by the front door. “I guess this is me,” I said.

“I guess it is.” He started moving backward as he went to leave. “I’ll see you later, Isobel. And just so you know, I think you’re perfectly normal too.”

He smiled again before turning to walk across the courtyard to the boys’ dormitories, thankfully missing the way my cheeks turned pink in response.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Saturday morning dawned, it was with dread rather than relief that I greeted the weekend. I was supposed to be having lunch with Matthew today, and I desperately wished I hadn't agreed to it. I was tempted to cancel on him because this only felt like another opportunity for him to remind me of all the ways I wasn't living up to the LaFleur name. I couldn't bring myself to bail on him though because a small, silly part of me hoped he'd prove me wrong.

More than anything, I wished it were my mom who was waiting for me at lunch. It was only a week since I'd seen her last, but it felt like forever had passed, and I knew it would be a while still before I saw her again. I'd probably have to wait until I had enough time to make the trip home, and given it was more than a day's bus ride, I imagined it would be Christmas before I could get back.

I took my time as I got ready for the day. I was normally such a morning person, but it was hard to garner my normal enthusiasm when I just wanted the day to be over with. I spent forever in the shower, washing my hair and letting the hot water run over my face. I still wasn't confident about jogging on my ankle, and the warm shower was the next best way I could think of to clear my mind.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Cress was already dressed for dance practice, and I felt a rush of guilt. She'd been happily asleep before I got in the shower, and I'd taken so long she'd clearly had to get ready without the use of the bathroom.

“Sorry for taking so long in the shower,” I said. “You should have knocked.”

“Don’t be silly,” Cress reassured me. “I’ll grab a shower after practice. I just need to jump in there to brush my teeth.”

She went into the bathroom and came out a second later with her toothbrush in her mouth. “You better get dressed,” she said, nodding at the towel that was still wrapped around me. “Anna came by while you were in the shower and said she’d be back in a minute so you guys can grab breakfast together. You know how she gets when she’s hungry.”

Cress returned to the bathroom to spit out her toothpaste before flitting back into the room and grabbing her bag off the bed. She was normally a bit of a zombie in the mornings, but perhaps that was just on school days. She seemed to be bounding with energy today.

“We’ve got tryouts today, so I’ll be at practice for the next few hours, but we should go hang out by the lake this afternoon.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “I have to head into town around lunch, but hopefully I’ll be back by then.”

“Perfect.” She hesitated by the door. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to try out?”

“Not even a *confundus charm* could convince me it’s a good idea.”

She let out a small sigh. “Well, it was worth a shot. I’ll see you later.” She flashed me a smile and headed out the door.

Once she was gone, I went to the closet to find something to wear. I had no idea what kind of outfit would be considered appropriate for lunch with Matthew. I also wasn’t sure why I cared. It was just a stupid lunch with a man I barely knew, and I didn’t even want to go. The clothing I wore shouldn’t matter, and yet I couldn’t bring myself to select something without giving it any thought.

A knock at the door pulled me from my dilemma.

“Come in.” I raised my voice so I could be heard from inside the closet. I knew it would be Anna, and she was probably going to be annoyed I wasn’t ready yet. If there was one thing I’d learned about Anna this week, it was that she hated to be kept waiting—especially when food was involved.

I heard the bedroom door creak open, and I called out to her. “Sorry, I’m just going to be a few more minutes. I’m in the closet. Could you come and give me a hand?” Anna was much better at choosing outfits than I was, and I knew she’d have something selected in minutes.

I heard a sharp intake of breath, and as I glanced over my shoulder, I met Noah's wide eyes. "Noah?" I jolted with surprise. "What are you doing in here?"

He was the last person I expected to see, and my horror magnified as I realized I was only wearing a towel. He immediately looked away, but there was no erasing the fact he'd practically seen me naked.

"Shit!" I clutched my towel tighter to my chest. "Noah, get out of here!"

"Sorry!" He turned and darted back out to the bedroom. "I knocked. You said to come in!"

"You can't just barge into a girl's bedroom! Let alone her closet!" I grabbed the first clothes I could find and threw them on.

"I didn't barge in," he protested from the bedroom. "Like I said, I knocked, and you told me to come in."

"Well, you shouldn't have."

"Well, you shouldn't have said to come in if you didn't want me to come in."

"I thought you were Anna!"

"I could have been anyone."

When I was finally dressed, I emerged from the closet and into the bedroom. Noah was standing close to the window, staring outside, his back to the room.

"You can turn around now. I'm dressed."

He slowly turned, like he wasn't sure whether to believe me, and his shoulders relaxed when he saw I was telling the truth. Was he seriously worried I'd lie about something like that? I knew the girls at school acted crazy around him, but he didn't actually think they'd try to trick him into seeing them naked, did he? It was a little hard not to be offended. I didn't call him out on his reaction though. The sooner this little incident was forgotten, the better.

"So, is there a reason you're barging into my room on a Saturday morning?" I asked as I tied my wet hair up. There was nothing worse than wet hair dripping on clothes—well, other than a cute boy seeing you in nothing but a towel. God, this moment was going to haunt me forever.

"How many times am I going to have to tell you? I didn't barge in."

He probably had a point. I did tell him to come in, after all. "Okay, I'll rephrase. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this morning?"

He released a breathy laugh and shook his head. “I was looking for Cress.”

“Oh.” Obviously, that’s why he was here. “She’s at dance practice.”

“Right.” Noah hovered in place and ran a hand through his hair like he wasn’t sure what to say next.

“Do you want me to pass her a message?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll catch up with her later.” From the way his shoulders dipped, I got the impression this wasn’t just a casual drop-in. Something seemed to be troubling him.

I moved toward him, my feet stealing steps completely unbidden by me. “Noah, is something wrong?”

He frowned, and as he looked into my eyes, I could see whatever was worrying him still stirring there. He opened his mouth to respond but then closed it and looked away. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

He didn’t get a chance to respond as my phone rang. It was sitting on my bed, and as I glanced at the screen, I could see it was my father calling —or more likely Caldwell. I’d answered several calls from the number this week, expecting to talk to Matthew, only to find Caldwell on the other end of the line. In the end, I’d changed his contact name to the old butler’s, seeing as it was never actually Matthew LaFleur who called.

“Do you need to get that?” Noah asked. He was standing right by the phone, so there was no doubt he’d seen the name on the screen.

“No. It’s just one of my father’s employees. I’m sure they’ll leave a message.”

Noah frowned. “Your dad doesn’t call you himself?”

“Not unless he has to, I guess.”

He nodded with understanding. “I’m sorry to hear that. A lot of parents here are too busy for their kids. The only person who has time for me is my grandfather, and sometimes I think that’s more of a curse than a blessing…”

“Oh, why’s that?”

Noah shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Because everything with my grandfather comes with strings attached.”

His eyes had fallen to the floor, and he seemed to be slightly hunched over. He suddenly appeared so much younger and smaller, like he had shrunk at the mere mention of his grandfather. His vulnerable stance was a

stark contrast to the proud figure he portrayed most other times I'd seen him. A hard lump formed in my chest as I watched him.

"That must be hard" was all I could think to say.

"It's not easy." He let out a heavy sigh, and I could almost feel the weight of his sadness in that one breath. I was surprised by how open he was being with me. He didn't really seem like the type to talk about his family with people. Then again, I didn't really like talking about my dad either, but it felt natural talking with Noah.

"So, do you always dodge calls from your father's employees, or is it just because I'm here?" His voice was a little lighter now, and as I looked at him again, his confidence and composure seemed to have returned.

"It's not just because of you," I admitted. "Things with my dad are complicated. I didn't know him growing up and only recently met him. He wants to get to know me, but I'm not sure if I want to get to know him. So far, I haven't been all that impressed by the guy."

"Ah." He gave me a sympathetic smile. "Well, if it's any help, you should know that people can surprise you sometimes."

"Do you mean by barging into their room when they're only wearing a towel?"

"Well, that's one kind of surprise." He chuckled under his breath. "But, no, I was thinking more like when you meet someone and expect them to be just like everyone else, but they keep proving you wrong."

From the way he was looking into my eyes, I knew he was talking about me. I blushed and glanced away. "So, you think I should give him a chance?"

"That's up to you." He shrugged. "I just know that, if I was in his shoes, I'd want to be given the opportunity to get to know you."

I knew he was only saying that to make me feel better, but my heart still did a small flip. Noah was just being nice. I had to remind myself that several times before I managed to respond.

"I'll keep that in mind," I murmured.

There was a knock at the door, and as it opened, I moved a step back from Noah. Without me even realizing it, we had drawn closer to each other. It was like we'd slowly been pulled together by some magnetic force. Surely, he had moved toward me. Or had I stepped toward him? I couldn't remember.

“Isobel, you better be ready for…” Anna’s voice drifted off, and she stopped in her tracks as she glanced between Noah and me. Her eyes were wide, and I could tell she was surprised to find him in my room. She wasn’t the only one.

“Hi, Anna, I was just leaving,” Noah said as I struggled to think about how I was going to explain the situation to her. She already looked like she was bursting with questions. “Isobel, if you could let Cress know I was looking for her, I’d appreciate it.”

Right, there was a simple explanation. He was here looking for his cousin. “Sure, I’ll let her know.”

Noah made his way to the door but paused before leaving the room. “If you girls are free tonight, you should come to the old boathouse. A few of us will be hanging out. It’ll be fun.”

There were a few moments of silence before I realized both Anna and Noah were looking at me waiting for an answer. It wasn’t as if he’d asked me personally. Had he?

Anna rolled her eyes before turning to Noah. “Sounds great,” she said. “We’ll be there.”

He nodded and gave me a small smile before he left the room. As the door closed behind him, Anna burst into action.

“What was Noah Hastings doing in your room?” she squealed. I really hoped Noah hadn’t heard her through the door.

“He was looking for Cress, just like he said.”

“It didn’t seem like he was here for Cress,” Anna replied. “You should have seen the way he was looking at you.”

“He wasn’t looking at me any way.”

“He was. *And* he invited you to the boathouse tonight.”

“He invited both of us.”

“Because he wanted *you* to come.”

I shook my head. “I really think you’re reading into things too much.”

“Am I?”

“*Yes*.”

Noah Hastings was the most unavailable boy in this school. He was emotionally closed off to all but a few select people and left a trail of brokenhearted girls in his wake. He was everything I didn’t want in a guy. But that didn’t stop my body from gravitating toward his or my heart from beating faster whenever he was near. I kept trying to ignore the way I

reacted to him because I didn’t want to like Noah. But it was getting harder to pretend my feelings were completely neutral toward him.

“I guess we’ll find out if I’m right at the boathouse tonight,” Anna said.

I rolled my eyes, not wanting to argue with her any longer. Even if I did like Noah, *and I didn’t*, there was no way he liked me in return.

Besides, tonight felt like a lifetime away. I had to get through lunch with my father first.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Matthew had arranged for us to eat on the outdoor terrace of his Weybridge mansion, and the sun was shining as I followed Caldwell to the large paved balcony that overlooked the back of the property. My father wasn't out there yet, so I walked past the elegantly laid table to the edge of the balcony and took in the view. Beautiful old trees and sprawling lawns surrounded the house, and the terrace overlooked a pool that was just as big as the one at school.

After a week at Weybridge Academy, I was slightly less overwhelmed by the obvious wealth surrounding me. *Slightly*. But I still found it almost impossible to believe that my father could afford a place like this. That my mother had known how rich he was and had still chosen to struggle through raising me on her own. It was so hard to understand; I couldn't help but think there must be more to the story or something I was missing.

"Isobel, I'm glad you came."

I'd started to relax a little as I admired the scenery, but the sound of my father's voice caused my body to tense once more. I had mixed feelings about meeting him today. Part of me wanted it to go well, but mostly, I expected it to be a disaster. I was still so angry with him for forcing my hand and railroading me into attending boarding school. I hated having my decisions stolen from me, so even though I'd quite liked Weybridge Academy so far, I wasn't sure how to forgive him.

I slowly tore my gaze from the beautiful garden to face my father. It was the weekend, but he was still wearing a suit. I wondered if he owned any

casual clothing at all. I tried to picture him in a pair of jeans and had to smother a laugh at the thought.

“Hello, Mr. LaFleur.”

His jaw gave the slightest twitch in response to his name. It was the only hint I’d had that perhaps he didn’t like the formality between us.

“Please, take a seat.” He gestured toward the table that was set up for lunch. An impressive buffet of salads and sandwiches was laid out on top of a pure white tablecloth. As I took a seat, a server appeared out of nowhere and poured a glass of water for me and placed a napkin across my lap.

“Would you like something else to drink?” Matthew asked.

“Water’s fine.” I took a quick sip before placing the glass back on the table. Matthew had convinced me to come, and now I was curious to see what he wanted with me. I felt quite sure he didn’t plan to spend our time simply chatting.

“How was your first week at school?” His voice was slightly gentler than the first time we’d met, and his expression seemed a little less hard. It didn’t stop my skin from itching with irritation at his question though. No matter how he framed it, I was always going to be annoyed when he brought up the school he was forcing me to attend.

“If I told you it was horrible, would you let me go home?” I asked.

He barely batted an eyelid before he responded. “I’d suggest you give the school a little longer before you make up your mind about it.”

I scoffed. I was fairly certain that was his way of saying he would never let me leave Weybridge Academy.

“Was it horrible?” he asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“Of course, it matters.”

I let out a sigh. I had a feeling he wasn’t going to let this go, so I answered honestly. “It wasn’t horrible.”

He relaxed when he heard my answer. “Good. And you’re making friends?”

“A few.”

“I hear you’ve been getting close to the Montfort twins.”

I frowned across the table at him. How did he know I was hanging out with Sawyer and Wes? He must have teachers watching me and reporting back to him or something. The thought made me want to cut all ties with the twins just to avoid being spied on by my father.

“I wouldn’t say we’re close,” I answered. “It’s only been a week.”

“Well, I have to say I approve of that friendship,” he said. “They come from an excellent family. The Montforts are good people.”

My feeling of discomfort only increased as I listened to him. “I didn’t realize who I was friends with mattered so much to you.”

“Of course, it matters. It’s important to surround yourself with good people in any walk of life. You should be mindful about which friendships you are furthering.”

I couldn’t tell if he was offering genuine, supportive advice or just trying to control my every action.

“I’m sure I can figure out the friendships I want to further,” I replied. I didn’t exactly have a great track record when it came to making good friends, but I liked to think I’d learned from my mistakes. And I refused to build relationships with people simply because my father approved of them.

“Well, you seem to be doing well so far,” he agreed. “Though you should be careful. Not everyone who attends Weybridge Academy can be considered to come from a good family.”

For a moment I wondered if he was warning me about Noah again, but I quickly disregarded the thought. Noah was from one of the wealthiest families at the school. And if I’d learned one thing this week, it was that money was all that mattered to people like my father.

Maybe he was talking about Lily and the other scholarship students. I gritted my teeth in response. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, but I had no intention of giving his warning another thought.

Matthew took a sip of his water before he continued. “How’s your ankle feeling?”

His question threw me for a second. How many teachers did he have on his payroll? Or maybe he was having me followed. “Oh, uh, it’s fine,” I stuttered. “How exactly did you hear that?”

“The school nurse called to let me know you’d injured it on a run.”

“Right.” That made more sense. Still, I really didn’t like that he was getting updates on me, even if it was about something you’d expect the school to call a parent for.

“So, it’s healed? Because I could send for my doctor to give it a look…”

“No! No, that won’t be necessary.” The last thing I wanted was to see Matthew’s doctor.

“If you’re sure.”

“I am. It feels good today. I’m sure I’ll be back running again come Monday.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Matthew gave an approving nod. “I used to enjoy running too. I was on the track team at university, but I never have any time for it now. I’m always far too busy with work. Are you thinking about joining the track team?”

I could tell he was trying to open up and connect with me, but it was hard to talk to him about myself like this. As my father, he should already know these things about me.

“Competing takes the enjoyment out of it for me,” I said before I quickly tried to divert the conversation back to him. Seeing as Matthew seemed to want us to get to know each other, I thought it might be a good opportunity to find out how the hell he was so ridiculously rich.

“So, what is it exactly that you do?” I asked as I loaded up my plate with food. If I could stuff my mouth full of food, I wouldn’t have to do as much talking.

“You don’t know about my work?”

I shrugged. Mom had briefly mentioned Matthew had taken over his family business, but I hadn’t been particularly interested in anything to do with my father at the time. I honestly thought our meeting last week would be the first and only time I’d ever see the man.

“I run The LaFleur Corporation,” he said. “We’re a biotechnology company with a primary focus on cancer treatments.”

“You’re helping cure cancer?”

“Among other things.”

Damn. It was a little harder to hate the guy when he was trying to help people with cancer.

“I’ve only taken over the business full-time in recent years,” he continued. “My father passed last year, and his shoes are quite difficult to fill.”

I felt a lump in my throat as I realized he was talking about my grandfather. I didn’t know the man, but I couldn’t help but feel sad, and I wondered how Matthew was dealing with it.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I murmured. “About your dad.”

He gave a solemn nod. “Yes, well, we weren’t all that close. But we did share a love of science. Your mom says that’s something you’re interested in too?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I was still trying to process the fact my father wasn’t a total villain. I wasn’t quite ready to come to terms with the knowledge we also shared a common interest.

“Well, from what I’ve seen of your grades, you’ve got a true talent for it. I hope you’ve been enjoying the business subjects I enrolled you in as well.”

“They’re okay, just not really my thing.”

“Business studies were never my thing either, but they will certainly be helpful in whatever field you decide to go into later. Maybe you’ll be like me and find that side of things more enjoyable with hands-on experience.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that I think you’ll be able to learn more on the job. I’m sure you’ll make a great addition to the company when you’re ready.”

“Your company?”

“Of course.”

“You want me to join your company,” I repeated.

“You’re a LaFleur. It’s as much your company as it is mine.”

My hands started shaking as my anger got the better of me. I wasn’t a LaFleur, and I never would be. He thought that by sending me to the right school and helping me choose the right friends he could turn me into the daughter he wanted rather than the one sitting before him. I hadn’t even graduated high school, and already he was talking about me joining his family business like it was inevitable. I wasn’t just some pawn he could mold as he pleased, and if I was going to work for one of my parents, it was most certainly going to be my mom. He’d know that if he actually bothered to try and understand who I was.

I wasn’t sure I could take another second of lunch with Matthew, and I let out a hard breath as I pushed my chair back from the table. “Coming here was a mistake.”

“Have I said something wrong?”

I stood and placed my napkin on the table. I was crazy to think Matthew deserved another chance. I thought he wanted to get to know me, but clearly, he didn’t actually care about that at all. We’d only just met and he was already planning my life out for me.

“Isobel, I can see that I’ve upset you,” Matthew said, leaning forward in his chair. “But if you tell me what’s wrong, I’m sure I can rectify it if you give me a chance. Please, sit back down and talk with me.”

“That’s just it.” I shook my head. “We can talk all you want; it’s not going to be enough to make up for all the years you’ve missed. You seem to think that a little conversation about school and sports makes us father and daughter and gives you the right to start controlling my life. You don’t even know me.”

“I understand that, but this is a start.”

“Yeah, well, we’re starting seventeen years too late.” I turned from the table and stormed away, but the scrape of Matthew’s chair sounded behind me as he hurried to catch up. I’d almost reached the patio doors when his hand touched my wrist.

“Please, Isobel, give me a chance.”

“Why?” I spun to face him. “Why do you deserve a chance after all this time?”

He seemed taken aback by the question, and real emotion shone through his eyes. He was hurt. I could see that clearly, but I didn’t know why he would be. I was nothing more than an inconvenience to him, and he was trying to make the best of it by forcing me to fit into his world.

He cleared his throat before he spoke. “Because even though I don’t know you, I still care about you,” he said. “I know I’ve made a terrible first impression, and I’ve absolutely no idea how to be a father, but I’m trying.”

“Trying?” I repeated. It seemed to me like I was the one doing all the heavy lifting. Leaving my home and my school, changing myself to fit the LaFleur framework. Sure, he had made an effort to see me again this weekend, but did that really mean he cared? It felt like this visit was simply another opportunity for Matthew to make me into something I wasn’t.

“I know it’s too much to expect you might see me as your father,” he continued. “But I would like to be a part of your life.”

“If you wanted me to be a part of your life, you should have done something about it before now.”

“That was out of my control,” he replied, his voice almost a whisper.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I shook my head. If he couldn’t even take responsibly for being absent my whole life, there was no hope for us. “Look, I should really get back to school.”

“But…”

“No, I need to get back to school.”

A defeated look fell across his face when he saw the determined glint in my eyes. “I’ll have Caldwell fetch your driver for you.”

“Thank you.”

The two of us walked through the house together, and the small distance between us felt like miles. Our lunch had only served to push us further apart, and I wasn’t sure if there was any coming back from it. I didn’t know how to move beyond the bitter feelings that welled up inside me whenever I was in Matthew’s presence. It felt like an impossible obstacle for us to overcome. He could have been the nicest guy in the world, and I still would have held it against him.

Matthew waited with me on the front steps as the black SUV that had brought me here pulled around to the front of the house.

“Isobel, I just want to try and explain...”

I lifted a hand. I didn’t need to hear any excuses or explanations. I just wanted to leave. “Look, I’m going to go to your school, mostly because I haven’t been given any choice. But please stop trying to change me. And stop trying to get to know me. It’s only going to hurt us both more.”

I turned from Matthew and walked down the steps. He didn’t try to stop me.

When I got in the car, I tried to keep my gaze on the shiny leather of the seat in front of me. But as the driver pulled away from the house, I glanced out the window. Matthew was still waiting on the steps. I was used to seeing him stand with a straight back and his chest puffed out with importance, but he seemed deflated now, and his shoulders slouched as he watched the car leave. He probably wasn’t used to people biting back at him or not giving him exactly what he wanted.

I tried to put Matthew from my mind as the car drove through the front gates and continued on to the academy. But, despite my dramatic exit, I couldn’t help but wonder what excuse he was cooking up for taking seventeen years to reach out to me. He’d said it was out of his control, but if he truly cared about me and wanted to get to know me, as he claimed, what was it that had prevented him for all these years?

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CHAPTER TWENTY

I decided I wasn't going to go to the boathouse that night. I didn't want to face Noah again after the towel incident that morning. Not when the embarrassment was still so fresh in my mind. I was also emotionally exhausted after lunch with my father, and I much preferred the idea of cuddling up with a book than socializing at a party.

Anna had spent most of the afternoon trying to convince me to change my mind. She kept telling me what a big deal Noah's invite was. She seemed certain he'd invited me personally. But what she failed to understand was that I didn't want to accept any invite from Noah—*especially* if it had been extended exclusively to me.

I might have developed a morbid curiosity for the guy, but that was about as far as I wanted my connection with him to go. I was quite content to keep my distance. I figured the farther I was from him, the less chance I had of getting trapped in his green eyes or experiencing any kind of unwanted tingles when we accidentally touched.

Anna wouldn't listen and kept insisting Noah was interested in me. But there were more than enough girls at this school ready and willing to pump up Noah's ego. Just because he'd spoken to me a couple of times didn't mean I'd caught his attention above all of them.

Even if Anna was right—*and she wasn't*—I had a sense that getting close to Noah would only cause trouble. My heart was already so battered from the last time I took a chance on a guy like him. I knew that if I opened my heart to Noah he wouldn't just bruise it, he'd decimate it, and that was a risk I didn't want to take.

I’d only been here a week. I’d only just shaken off the devastating junior year I’d had back in Rapid Bay. All I wanted was to get through this school year without repeating my past mistakes. It was pretty straightforward; I just had to avoid backstabbing girlfriends and steer clear of boys—especially boys with striking green eyes.

I sat in my room that night watching Cress as she got ready for the party.

“You’ve been so quiet this afternoon,” she said, pausing from straightening her hair to look at me through the reflection in the mirror.

It wasn’t surprising since I’d been stewing over my disastrous lunch with my father. I hadn’t told her I’d met up with him. Mostly because I knew she’d ask too many questions. I wished I could tell her about it, but I didn’t know how to open up about Matthew without spilling my guts about the rest of my past. I was terrible at lying, so it felt safer to avoid saying anything at all.

“I’m just tired,” I replied.

“Yeah, first week back can be exhausting,” she said. “Still, I really can’t believe you’re not going to come with us tonight. Are you sure I can’t twist your arm?”

“I’ll come next time, I swear.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Cress pointed her straightener in my direction, and I had no doubt she meant what she said.

“So, did Noah end up finding you today?” I wasn’t sure why I’d asked about him, and I kind of wanted to kick myself for bringing him up at all. I was supposed to be putting the guy from my mind.

“Oh, yeah. I bumped into him before dinner. He was asking about you.”

“He was?” I responded a little too quickly.

“He seemed worried that he embarrassed you earlier?” She said it in a questioning way, and she lifted an eyebrow as she waited for an explanation.

“Well, he came looking for you and…” I scrunched up my nose, hating that I had to admit this out loud. “He walked in on me when I was only wearing a towel!”

“Oh no!” Cress burst out laughing. “Your cheeks are going so pink.”

“Because it’s embarrassing.”

“Not really. Most girls wear less to the beach.”

She had a point, but it didn't seem to cool my flushed cheeks. I'd been hoping to avoid ever remembering that moment again, let alone having to discuss it.

"So, was everything okay?" I asked, hoping to talk less about my towel. "It seemed kind of important."

"Oh, you know, it was the usual family stuff," she said. "His grandfather can be a total dick, and I'm one of the few people he can talk to about it."

"Why's he a dick?"

"It's a long story. Thankfully, we're cousins on his mom's side of the family, so I'm not actually related to the man. Noah's not so lucky. He's constantly trying to live up to William Hastings' ridiculous expectations."

I couldn't help but feel intrigued. "Why does he have such high expectations for him?"

"Probably because he's going to inherit the family business," Cress replied. "Noah's dad died when he was younger, so his grandfather has been head of the household, as well as the business, for many years. Soon, the mantle passes to Noah. I don't envy him one bit."

My heart dipped at her words. "Wow, I had no idea about his dad."

"It's not exactly a secret," she said. "There was a terrible accident at one of their labs. But it was a long time ago, so people don't tend to talk about it. Mostly they like to gossip about whoever my aunt's shacked up with that week. She's always flitting around the globe with a different dude on her arm. He never sees his mom. None of us do. When Noah lost his dad, he lost his mom too, and his grandfather is all the family he really has left."

"That must be really hard on Noah."

"It's not easy," Cress agreed. "I think that's why he's always been so accommodating to William's incessant demands. He doesn't want to disappoint his grandfather and lose him too."

My eyes widened, and Cress nodded like she too felt the gravity of Noah's situation. It was impossible not to feel some sympathy toward him, and I couldn't imagine what it must have been like growing up in such a way.

"So, what kind of stuff does his grandfather demand?" I asked. I knew I was being far too nosy, but it was hard to keep my curiosity at bay when it came to Noah. Thankfully, Cress didn't seem to mind chatting about her family, so I didn't feel too bad about asking so many questions.

“So many things,” she said, shaking her head. “Today’s problem is a doozy as well. You know how we’ve got the Weybridge White Ball at the end of the month?”

“The what?

“The White Ball,” she repeated. “It’s the school’s first big event of the year. They host it in the ballroom, and everyone dresses up in white. Parents and alumni are invited, so it can be a bit dull, but nobody misses it.”

“I had no idea, but I guess I know now.” I was also mildly terrified. My two left feet didn’t belong anywhere near a ball. “So, what’s Noah’s grandfather got to do with the ball?”

“Well, William makes Noah take Veronica to the ball every year. It’s kind of a tradition between their two families. Anyway, Noah came to me today for help thinking of a way to get out of it.”

“What? Why does his grandfather care if Noah takes Veronica? And why is he so against it?”

“Well, it’s Veronica, so that should answer your second question…”

I gave Cress a blank look. “I thought you said the two of them were endgame.” Plus, Veronica was gorgeous and clearly into Noah. I would have thought those were two of the key things he looked for in a girl.

Cress shrugged. “They might be endgame, but that doesn’t mean my cousin is happy about it.”

I hated the way the tense feeling in my chest eased as she spoke.

“For a few years now, Veronica’s family and William have been pushing the two of them together. Veronica’s always been into Noah and has happily gone along, but he doesn’t feel the same way.”

“Why would they push them together?”

“Business. Why else?”

“That’s kind of messed up.”

“That’s the price of being the sole heir to the Hastings’ empire. Noah does his best to wriggle out of things where he can, but William has always been great at manipulating Noah and making him feel like he doesn’t have much of a choice. Family means everything to Noah, and he hates disappointing William more than anything. I wish I could say the same about his grandfather, but all that matters to him is the company.”

“Wow,” I murmured. “What does this company do that’s so important anyway?”

“Ugh.” Cress scrunched her nose up. “Don’t get me started. Hastings Laboratories is one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world.”

“That’s interesting,” I replied. It sounded like my father was in a similar line of work, and I wondered if that meant Noah and I had something in common.

“Interesting?” Cress scoffed. “More like *evil*. The company is notorious for the way they profit from the sick and dying. William Hastings is not a nice man. He’s been in the news a lot over the years for hiking up the prices of drugs people really need that only *he* makes.”

I’d never seen Cress so riled up. She was usually so smiley and bubbly, but now she gritted her teeth as she spoke. She quickly took a deep breath and lightly shook her shoulders as if to shed her negative thoughts.

“Anyway, my parents don’t have much to do with the Hastings family, as you can probably guess. But Noah and I are still close.”

“That’s nice.” I didn’t know what else to say. It sounded like there was so much more to the story of the Hastings family, but I sensed Cress didn’t want to dig any deeper. “So, uh, did you find a way to rescue Noah from his date?”

Cress glanced at me, the familiar bright smile returning to her face. “Well, William hasn’t told Noah he expects him to take Veronica yet this year, so I told Noah he should ask someone else to the ball. Then he can tell William he’s already got a date. His grandfather might be all about pushing his own agenda, but there are a lot of influential families at this school, and he wouldn’t risk upsetting one of them by having Noah cancel on a date with their daughter.”

“That could work.” I nodded, but the whole concept was completely alien to me.

“Yes, I thought so too. I guess he’s just got to find someone to go with him.”

“How ever will he do that?” I rolled my eyes as sarcastically as I could.

She laughed. “I have no idea.”

I could easily imagine the line of girls that would be following Noah everywhere he went if they knew he was searching for a date. I was also sure that most girls at Weybridge qualified as coming from an influential family. Most girls but me, that was.

There was a knock at the door, and Anna burst through it before either of us could respond. She frowned when she saw me. “Why aren’t you

dressed?" she asked before immediately turning to Cress. "Why isn't she dressed?"

"I'm not coming tonight," I said.

"But we already talked about this. Noah asked you to come!" Anna huffed. "*Noah*!"

"He didn't just ask me. He invited both of us."

"While he was looking at you. It was like I wasn't even in the room. Hell, he probably wished I wasn't in the room."

"I told you you're reading into it too much. He won't even notice I'm not there."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Anna grumbled before letting out a sigh. "I can't believe you're bailing on our first party of the year."

"There was a party last weekend," I reminded her.

"That doesn't count. It was before school started, and you left that one early."

"She's promised to come to the next one," Cress said in my defense. "We should get going, Anna." She placed her straightener down and walked over to give me a hug. "Call me if you change your mind," she said. "I'll come back and walk you out there."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay here. You guys have fun."

"Well, the offer's there." She smiled. "We'll see you later."

"And I'll make sure to send you pics of Noah's sad face when he realizes you're not there," Anna called as she skipped to the door.

"Please don't."

She winked at me and then closed the door behind them.

I relaxed a little once they were gone. I knew they didn't like that I was bailing on tonight, but I really thought it was for the best. I wasn't lying when I told them how tired I was, and I wasn't sure I was mentally prepared to face another Weybridge party.

With the whole night stretching out ahead of me, I wandered downstairs to the dorm kitchen to make myself a hot drink. There were several girls already in the room, raiding the freezer for ice cream. I didn't recognize any of them, but they looked quite young, so I guessed they were freshmen. I made my way past them and smiled when I saw Lily standing by the kettle. She was already dressed in her pajamas and wearing a pair of fluffy slippers.

"Hey, Lily," I said as I came to stand at her side.

“Isobel, hey. You’re not going out tonight?”

“Nah, I’m taking the night off.”

“Me too,” she said. “Amber has a date, so I’ve been taking advantage of having our room to myself.”

“Yeah, Cress is out too. I was planning to curl up and read a book or something.”

“A girl after my own heart,” she said with a smile. “I’m making a hot chocolate. Do you want one?”

“Sure. That would be great.”

I leaned against the counter as Lily grabbed another mug and filled it with chocolate powder.

“What did you get up to today?” I asked.

“Study, study, and then a bit more study.” She sighed. “I have to get top grades to keep my scholarship.”

“That must be a lot of pressure.”

“Yeah, it can be, but I like to think I thrive under the pressure,” she said. “How about you?”

“My dad came to town to visit, and we had lunch.”

“Oh, I’m jealous. I wish I could see my parents, but I won’t be able to get home until Christmas.”

I gave her a sad smile. “Don’t be jealous. I’m not close with my dad, and I probably won’t see my mom until Christmas either.”

“It’s hard being away from home.”

“It is,” I agreed.

She poured hot milk into our mugs and added a big pink marshmallow on top of each one before glancing up at me. “I should warn you the hot chocolate here is addictive. Are you sure you want to get hooked?”

“Yeah, hit me with it.”

“That, my friend, is the right answer.” She grinned and passed me the mug.

We slowly made our way from the kitchen, and I took a small sip of my drink as we walked. The hot chocolate was delicious with a rich, full flavor that tasted a little like an Easter egg had been melted in the cup.

“This is so good.” I groaned with appreciation.

“I told you it’s addictive,” Lily said. “I’m always sneaking down at night for hot chocolate. It’s the best.”

As we started up the stairs back to our dorm rooms, I heard the clopping of heels up ahead. I glanced upward to see Veronica rounding the corner and descending the stairs in front of us. She was followed by a group of five other girls, who were all dressed for a big night out. Veronica was wearing a short skirt and a low-cut top, and her hair and makeup were so perfect she looked like she'd been airbrushed. They were probably all going to the party at the boathouse.

Veronica had her head buried in her phone but looked up as she approached and sneered when she saw us.

"Watch it, *Charity*," she said, stepping forward to push past Lily.

Lily jumped back to avoid a collision and ducked her head so she didn't meet Veronica's eyes. I refused to budge an inch, and I cradled my hot chocolate closely as I scowled at Veronica and her friends. Who did they think they were?

"Don't talk to her like that, Veronica." The words were out of my mouth before I had a moment to consider them.

Veronica stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to face me. "Excuse me?"

The other girls had all paused as well and were glancing between Veronica and me with a combination of shock and anticipation etched on their faces.

"Her name is Lily not Charity. Don't call her that."

Lily swallowed and slowly shook her head. "It's fine, Isobel. Really."

Veronica shot me a smug smile. "Yes, it's fine. It's just a little inside joke. Isn't it, *Charity*?"

Lily blanched, and I felt my blood pulse hot with anger. "Nobody's laughing, Veronica. And Lily isn't some charity case. She's incredibly smart and actually earned her place at this school. She isn't just relying on her parents' money to get her everything she wants."

Veronica raised her eyebrows, and a few of her friends started whispering to each other. My comeback could have been addressed at any one of them, and I realized I'd probably just picked a fight I couldn't win.

"And what about you, new girl?" Veronica snapped. "What makes you so high and mighty?

"Nothing," I responded. "But I'm not just going to stand here while you harass my friend."

“Didn’t Daddy’s money get *you* into Weybridge?” Veronica continued, ignoring my response. “Oh, wait, he’s not in the picture, right?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“So mysterious, new girl.” Veronica gave an overdramatic sigh and shook her head.

“Come on, Isobel, let’s just go,” Lily pleaded, gently placing her hand on my arm.

“Listen to Charity.” Veronica smirked. “You don’t want to make an enemy of me, new girl.”

“I’m not trying to make you my enemy,” I said. “Just don’t call Lily that name again.”

“Like I said, it’s just a joke between friends.”

There was something unsettling about the way Veronica was smiling at me, like she was completely unaffected by my defense of Lily. Before I could say anything else, she turned and continued down the stairs without a backward glance. Her friends hurried to follow her, still whispering to each other and shooting me judgmental looks.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Lily murmured as we watched her leave. “Veronica’s not the kind of person you want to mess with. But thanks for sticking up for me.”

“It was nothing,” I said. The pit in my stomach said otherwise.

I hadn’t set out to make Veronica my enemy, but I think I just had.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

On Monday morning, I went for my first run since my injury, and I was happy my ankle seemed much better. I decided to stick to the path that wove around the lake rather than venturing into the woods. I didn't want to risk hurting myself again, and that place was practically a minefield. I only went a short distance, but I felt like a completely different person by the time I got back to the dorm. There was nothing like a run to clear my head, and I felt pretty positive about starting a new week.

"You're in a good mood," Cress said as we made our way to breakfast.

"Yeah, you're far too chipper for this early," Anna added, making me laugh.

"I'm just happy my ankle is feeling better," I explained. "I hate not being able to run in the mornings."

"Well, it's probably a good thing you can run again," Anna said. "You'll need those legs of yours when Veronica comes for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"We all heard you stood up to her in the dorm on Saturday night," she explained. "You've got some serious balls for someone who's only been here a week, but I love it!"

Despite Anna's enthusiasm, my stomach dropped. "How did you hear about that?"

"Gossip like that spreads like wildfire here," Cress jumped in.

"And she was bitching about it with her friends in the common room last night," Anna said. "I just wish I'd been there to see it."

“There wasn’t much to see. I just told her to stop calling Lily that horrible nickname.”

“I bet she was livid,” Anna continued. “She hates being put in her place.”

“I wasn’t trying to put her in her place. I was just standing up for Lily. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“No, you’re right,” Cress agreed. “It’s horrible how Veronica treats the scholarship students.”

“It’s not just the scholarship students,” Anna said. “It’s anyone who she doesn’t think is good enough to be here. I swear, she only cares about who your parents are and what your credit card limit is.”

“Yeah, she’s only friendly with people she can reap some sort of benefit from,” Cress said. “She’s all about social climbing and networking. Then again, so are a lot of students here.”

They sounded similar to my father, and I imagined he would have been thrilled if his long-lost daughter had turned out to be like one of the girls who went to this school. Instead, he was stuck with me. I let out a long sigh. “Well, I guess I’m screwed then. I have no interest in social climbing.”

“You’re like the anti-Veronica,” Anna said, spreading her arms wide. “The hero we didn’t know we needed.”

“Stop!” I laughed. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“What? I can’t wait for your next showdown. I’m sure she’s already plotting her revenge.”

The smile quickly dropped from my face.

“Don’t listen to her, Isobel,” Cress said. “I’m sure Veronica will have found something else to distract her in a couple of days.”

“And if she hasn’t, I promise we’ll still be your friends—even if you are a social leper,” Anna replied.

That didn’t make me feel much better.

I lost all hope of Veronica forgetting about our confrontation when I got to my first class of the day. She was glaring at me as I walked into English, and the hateful looks she was sending my way only continued in math. She kept glancing over her shoulder at me, and there was a calculating look in her eyes that made me anxious.

“She’s not happy with you, newbie,” Luther whispered from beside me. We were supposed to be working on some problems, but he hadn’t even bothered to take out his graph book.

“It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” he replied. “I’ve seen that look in Veronica’s eyes before.”

“And what look is that?”

“The one she gets when she’s out for blood.”

I groaned and lowered my head into my hands. “All I did was tell her to stop calling Lily names.”

Luther burst out laughing. “I know, and in front of all her cronies as well. I knew you were going to be fun, newbie, but I didn’t know it was going to be this fun.”

“Is that why she’s so upset?” I wondered out loud. “She thinks I embarrassed her in front of her friends.”

“Who knows,” Luther replied. “Veronica wouldn’t like anything that challenges her position as queen of this school. I, for one, welcome our new overlord.”

Luther raised his hands and then lowered them to the desk in front of him in a show of mock worship. I rolled my eyes at him in response.

“I’m also willing to be your bodyguard when she comes for you,” he continued. “I will protect you with my life.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You definitely do.”

I shook my head and tried to concentrate on my math problem. Luther couldn’t be stopped though.

“In other news, you haven’t answered my super secret question of the day,” he said. At least he seemed to be changing the subject.

“You haven’t asked one,” I replied, keeping my gaze glued to my graph pad. “And I’ve already told you. I’m not playing this game with you.”

“Sure, you are,” he replied. “So, today’s question. What is your idea of the perfect date?”

I huffed and put down my pen before looking up at him. He had his hands propped under his chin, and he was blinking up at me with puppy-dog eyes, like my response was the only thing that mattered in the world at that moment.

“My perfect date would be any date that doesn’t involve questions like this.”

“You’re not playing my game properly.” He pouted.

“Maybe because I don’t want to play.”

“Okay, fine. If you answer properly, I promise I won’t ask you another question for the rest of class.”

“Why do you even want to know? I’d never go on a date with you.”

“Ah, *ouch*!”

I sighed. “Don’t be so dramatic. You don’t want to date me either.”

“But I’d never say it like *that*.”

A student sitting in the row in front of us turned, and from the way he was looking between us, I could tell he’d been eavesdropping. Luther straightened his back in response, and his entire demeanor changed as he caught the guy’s gaze. “What are you looking at, Huntington?” There was nothing playful in his voice, and he spoke with a commanding tone.

The guy paled and turned to face the front of the classroom once more. As soon as he had his back to us, Luther relaxed, and his expression transformed back into the teasing guy I’d been sitting next to all class. It was weird to see Luther acting as anything other than a jokester.

“So, the date?” Luther prompted.

“Oh, uh, I don’t know. Something from the heart, I guess.” It wasn’t much of an answer because I was still distracted after witnessing Luther’s serious side. I didn’t know he had one. But Luther nodded along like I’d just given a deep and profound response.

After that, he didn’t bug me as much, and I actually managed to get some work done. Luther hurried off straight after the lesson, so I walked from the room with Kaden. The two of us shared a chemistry class too, but this was the first time we’d really spoken one-on-one.

“Any idea why Luther is still insisting on asking me all these questions?” I asked.

“I could tell you, but I’d have to kill you.” Kaden grinned.

“So, I’ll take that as a yes.”

His smile broadened. “Luther is just being Luther.”

“Because that’s a proper explanation.” I shook my head. It was impossible to get a straight answer out of these boys. “And what was up with him earlier? You know, when he told that guy to look away.”

Kaden shrugged. “He hates it when people are nosy.”

“Huh, you’d think he’d be fine with it given all the prying questions he’s been asking me.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t a hypocrite.”

I laughed. “Still, it was weird seeing him act so different than normal.”

Kaden tilted his head as he looked at me. “Do you know why Luther likes you? Why I like you?”

I shook my head.

“Because you don’t want anything from us. That guy, Trevor Huntington, isn’t interested in us as people but would leap at the chance to claim he’s friends with us and especially Noah. This school is filled with Trevors, and Luther can’t stand most of them.”

“Right,” I murmured.

Kaden gave me a soft smile and lowered his voice. “Also, I think it’s great that you stood up to Veronica. Kindness is in short supply in this place. Not enough people here would be willing to stick their neck out for another student who needed help. She might not forget it, but I won’t either.”

My cheeks warmed as I tried to shrug away his compliment. “It really wasn’t a big deal,” I muttered.

“Well, either way, it was the right thing to do.”

I didn’t think my behavior was all that unusual, but it sounded like most of the kids in this school were pretty self-centered. How anyone could stand by and watch their friend get harassed was beyond me.

I parted ways with Kaden and went to meet my friends for lunch. The girls weren’t there when I arrived, but Sawyer and Wes were already seated in front of trays stacked with food. As I joined them, Sawyer started gushing about his date with the junior while Wes did his best to ignore him.

“You told me all about this last night,” Wes groaned.

“But I don’t think you appreciated just how hot she looked,” Sawyer said. “Besides, Isobel wants to hear all about it too? Don’t you?”

“Not really. It’s kind of putting me off my food.”

Wes chuckled. “Yeah, me too.”

“You two really know how to kill a guy’s buzz.” Sawyer picked up his plate and stood from the table. “I’m sure there’s someone in here who wants to hear my tales of romance.”

Wes smiled at me as he watched his brother go. “I feel like we’ve dodged a bullet.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling Sawyer would have talked about his date all lunch if given the chance.”

“He does like to brag, so you’re probably right. I almost feel sorry for the poor sucker he ends up sitting with. I don’t think the date went half as

well as he says it did, but that won't stop him going on about it."

"For twins, you guys sure are different."

"Very," he agreed. "Sawyer's the annoying one."

I laughed. "How'd you get on with the econ homework over the weekend?"

Wes screwed his nose up. "Don't get me started. It was terrible. I don't understand why Miss Constance hates us so much."

"She has to, right? Why else would she give so much homework?"

"I only got halfway through it all, and I worked on it for hours."

"Me too." I let out a sigh. I expected to struggle with the business-focused subjects this year, but economics was going to be almost impossible if the teacher kept assigning so much work. We were only one week into the semester, and already I felt like I was floundering. It was yet another reason to be angry at my father. He'd been the one to sign me up to the class, after all.

"We should get together in the library tonight and try to get through it all before class tomorrow," Wes suggested. "I'm not sure I can handle spending the whole night slogging through it all on my own."

"No, me neither. That sounds really great, actually."

"What sounds great?" Anna asked as she and Cress joined us.

"Wes and I are going to the library tonight."

"What?" Anna's eyes grew wide, and I was surprised by the concern in her voice.

"It's not a big deal," I said. "We're just going to study. You can come if you want?"

"Don't you guys want to be *alone?"* Anna practically purred the final word.

"What? Why would you think that?" Wes was frowning, so I guessed he shared my confusion.

"Uh, because nobody actually goes to the library to study. They go there to make out in secret." Anna was looking at us both like we were stupid.

"That's not true." Cress slapped her on the arm.

"It is," she replied. "There's this great secluded corner behind the history section."

"Anna!" we called out together.

"What?" She looked the picture of innocence.

"Most people actually do use the library for studying," Cress said

“Well, *I’ve* only ever used it for making out,” Anna replied, gently flicking her hair with one hand. “There’s really something about that history section. I swear it must have magical powers or something because I always have the best kisses in there.”

“No one wants to hear about your cozy little make-out nooks.” Cress pretended to gag.

“Okay, okay.” Anna finally surrendered. “I get it, Wes and Isobel aren’t going to make out; they’re going to study. I still think the former is much more exciting.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not really—Wes has a girlfriend, remember. And we’re just friends. Right?” I looked to Wes for support, and he smiled and nodded.

“Right,” he confirmed. “We’ll be staying firmly at the study tables. I’m happy to leave the history section to Anna.”

“Shame.” Anna shrugged. “You two would make a cute couple.”

We laughed off her comment, but the conversation left me slightly concerned, and I glanced at Wes from the corner of my eye. I hoped people wouldn’t think there was more to our friendship just because we were studying together. I also hoped tonight wouldn’t be awkward after everything Anna had said.

As we were leaving lunch, I walked alongside Wes and touched him on the arm. “So, did you know that stuff about the history section?”

“Honestly, that’s the first I’ve heard of it.” He laughed, but when he saw the concern on my face, he stopped and turned to me.

“Wait, did you think that’s why I asked you to study in the library.”

“No, no, not at all,” I quickly backtracked. “I know you wouldn’t do something like that to Sarah. Anna was just being Anna.”

“True.” He relaxed. “Anna probably has a lot more fun in the library than me, but trust me, I need to study.”

“Okay, then we’re on the same page.” I laughed as we continued to walk out of the dining hall.

“Wait?” He stopped again, and a look of overly dramatic surprise covered his face. “You didn’t accept my invite to the library because *you* wanted to get *me* in the history section, did you?”

“Oh my gosh, no!” I gave him a light shove on the arm. “That was the first I’d heard about it as well.”

“Okay, if you say so.” Wes winked, his brown eyes sparkling with amusement. He was definitely the sweet twin, but it appeared there was also a cheeky side to him.

“You’re as bad as your brother.” I shook my head as I walked away. “I’ll see you later tonight.”

“Looking forward to it,” he called after me. Considering we were just planning to study economics, I was surprised by how much I was looking forward to it too.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The library was in a wing of the main school building I hadn't entered yet, and it was so big it took up several floors. So much of the school was modern with sleek white walls and metal appliances, but the library retained an older charm with a gorgeous carved ceiling high above the tall wooden bookcases that lined the walls of each level.

I'd arrived slightly early to meet Wes, so instead of heading for the study area, I wandered through the stacks. I wasn't even looking for a particular book; I just enjoyed immersing myself in the slightly musty smell of old pages and dust wafting through the air.

"So, this is where you like to hang out."

I turned to find Noah standing behind me, a book clutched to his chest. I was surprised to see him in the library. The backdrop of desks and books seemed to suit him, a little like he was some sexy nerd who'd stepped right out of a romance novel.

I swallowed and quickly shook my head. "No, just tonight. I came here to study. Though, after getting a look at this place, I'm tempted to come back more often."

His expression softened. "Yeah, I like it here too. I have a thing for old, elegant libraries like this."

"I think I might have a thing for them too." I'd never actually been in one so beautiful before, but now that I had, I kind of wanted to see as many beautiful libraries as I could.

"You didn't come to the boathouse on Saturday night."

He sounded disappointed, but I shrugged and glanced away, walking over to one of the shelves to trace my fingers over the spines of a few books. The titles all described dragons or quests, so I assumed I'd found my way to the fantasy section of the library. "I was pretty tired after a big first week."

Noah stepped forward and leaned against the shelf in front of me. I stopped in my tracks and pulled my hand away from the bookshelf. If my finger had continued on its path along the books' spines, it would have ended up right on his chest.

"Yeah, Cress said you weren't feeling up to it."

My cheeks warmed at the idea Noah had asked his cousin about me. I didn't know why I thought that was a big deal.

"Maybe you'll be feeling better and can make it this Saturday instead?" he asked.

I swallowed and peered up at him. He was standing just a fraction too close for my liking. Then again, it was Noah. He could have been standing at the far end of the library and his presence still would have caused my skin to tingle. This boy did something to my heart whenever he was near. The way he was watching my lips as he waited for my answer didn't help either.

He slowly started to smile. "So, what do you think?"

I wished he hadn't smiled. It made my knees feel weak, and I struggled to think clearly when he looked at me like that. "You're asking me to come to the boathouse again?"

"Well, yeah. And I'm hoping maybe you'll actually make it this time."

I frowned. "Why do you care if I make it or not?"

"Maybe if you come this weekend, you'll find out."

"That doesn't really give me much to go on."

He gave a deep chuckle, and the sound sent a shiver down my spine. "No, but I hope you'll come all the same."

I was suddenly regretting my decision to wander the stacks. Being alone with Noah when he smiled at me and laughed felt dangerous. His nearness was overwhelming, and any resolve I had quickly slipped away.

I felt very aware of how alone we were. The library was silent, and there was no sign of anyone else near us. The bookshelves towered over us, casting shadows across the empty aisle, and the warm, yellow lamps that illuminated the shelves only dimly lit the area. There was something about

the way the musty smell of books mixed with the scent of Noah's aftershave that sent my senses wild, and as I felt the air between us charge with electricity, I had to wonder if Anna was right about the library. We were nowhere near the history section, but the secluded spot was perfect for a secret kiss.

A high-pitched giggle broke the silence from behind me, and I took a step back from him. His scent still reached me, and I could no longer tell the difference between his masculine aroma and the musky scent of old books. I wasn't going to be able to read again without thinking of Noah. Maybe I'd have to ditch my paperbacks and start reading on the fancy new smartphone my father got me.

The giggling sounded again. Two girls were standing at the end of the aisle nudging each other and smiling in Noah's direction.

"Looks like you have a couple of fans," I said. He hadn't moved away like I had, but he somehow seemed more distant, like he had shrunk back into the shadows of the aisle to avoid being seen. His smile had diminished, and his eyes had lost the twinkle that had been there just moments ago.

"I'd rather I didn't." His voice was deep and quiet as he responded.

I stared into his eyes, hoping perhaps they might reveal more than he'd voiced. I was beginning to see that Noah didn't want all the attention he received. When we'd first met, I'd assumed he was like Levi and thrived off the adoration and adulation that came with his popularity. He'd acted so indifferent, and I figured it was because he believed he was above it all. That he enjoyed sitting up high on his throne, looking down on the rest of us. The more I got to know him, the more I realized I couldn't assume anything when it came to Noah.

I heard movement and whispering behind me as Noah's fans grew brave enough to venture into our aisle. Noah glanced away from me, and I knew whatever moment we were sharing was well and truly broken. I was surprisingly annoyed it was over. I felt like I could spend all evening lost in Noah's eyes, trying to understand what was lying deep within.

I didn't have all evening, and I was probably late to meet Wes.

"I should go," I said, but my body was urging me to stay. "I'm meeting someone to study."

Noah cleared his throat and nodded as he stepped back to let me pass. I didn't want to leave this quiet nook of the library, but I couldn't think of a reason to stay. I could hardly tell Noah I found him puzzling and I wanted

nothing more than to spend all evening trying to fit together the pieces of him that I was starting to discover.

I somehow found the motivation to move, but Noah reached out and lightly brushed a hand against my wrist as I went to walk past him. “Think about Saturday night,” he said. “I hope you’ll be there.”

His touch was as soft as a feather, and yet it was all I could seem to focus on. How could the briefest brush of his skin against mine be felt throughout my whole body? I swallowed and gave him a small smile in reply. “I will.”

It was only once I left the aisle and returned to the brighter part of the library that I felt my head clear. When I was around Noah, it was too easy to forget the rest of the world existed. In an instant, he could make me ignore all the reasons why I had decided to keep my distance from him.

That was the crazy thing. The more I tried to keep him at arm’s length, the stronger I felt the pull between us. He was my opposite in every single way, but perhaps it was those differences that made him so impossible to ignore.

“There you are,” Wes said, as I joined him at the study tables.

There were several tables around us all occupied by other students. Despite what Anna believed, the library seemed like a popular place to do homework.

“I saw you coming from the stacks. You weren’t over in the history section, were you?” Wes joked, as I took a seat.

I hadn’t been in the history section, but I felt like I might as well have. Noah and I hadn’t kissed, but being with him had felt intimate in a way it shouldn’t.

“You *were*?” he asked when I didn’t immediately answer. “And on our study date. How could you?”

“Gosh, no. I made certain to avoid that corner!” Perhaps Anna needed to add the fantasy section to her list.

“I was joking.”

“You’re not very funny.”

“Yeah, Sawyer’s always telling me that.” Wes ran a hand through his hair and laughed. “Apparently, there’s only room in this school for one funny Montfort.”

“And that’s Sawyer?”

“So he says.”

I smiled at Wes. “Well, Sawyer’s not as funny as he thinks he is, so you might still have a chance.”

“I’ll start working on my comedic set tonight.”

“I look forward to hearing it.” I laughed. “How was the rest of your day?”

“It was fine,” he replied. “Though I’ve been struggling to get hold of Sarah. The last time we spoke was Friday, which is forever ago for us. I keep calling her, but she just texts me back saying she’s busy and can’t talk. It’s really frustrating.”

“I can imagine.” I wasn’t sure how I would have reacted if I’d been in a long-distance relationship with Levi and he was dodging my calls. I’d been quite a trusting girlfriend, but I clearly had terrible gut instincts, so I probably wasn’t the best person to give Wes any advice on the situation.

“I’m sure she’s just getting back into the swing of school,” he said.

“The first couple of weeks can feel crazy,” I agreed.

He nodded and gave me a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, and I knew my words hadn’t consoled him all that much.

I was surprised by how much he cared about his girlfriend not calling him back. I honestly didn’t think guys were all that bothered when it came to stuff like that. Then again, my opinion was based on Levi, and I really hoped he wasn’t a typical example of male behavior. I didn’t have much else to go on. I hadn’t been friends with many guys back at my old school, so I didn’t have that much experience listening to a boy’s side of relationship problems. If I’d shown any signs of getting close to a male classmate, Levi lost it with me. Thinking back, I should have realized far sooner than I did that Levi wasn’t the one for me.

“You’re really worried about this, huh?”

He let out a breath and sank back in his chair. “I just have this feeling that she’s avoiding me. I’m probably overthinking things, but it’s hard to get out of your own head sometimes.” He rubbed a hand across his forehead. “I was thinking of surprising her this weekend with a visit, but if she’s not answering my calls, maybe that’s not such a good idea. What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t know Sarah, so I’m probably the wrong person to ask…” I didn’t know what else to say, but his eyes were pleading with me to offer some semblance of guidance, so I continued. “How did you guys leave things at the end of summer?”

“Everything was great.”

“And is she normally pretty honest with you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then it sounds like you’re just overthinking things,” I said with as much certainty as I could manage. “If you go and visit her, and it turns out there is something wrong, at the very least, you’ll be able to chat about it face-to-face.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” He relaxed a little and sat up a bit straighter. “Thanks for hearing me out. Normally, I talk with Sawyer about this stuff, but he knows a lot of girls who are friends with Sarah, so he’d probably play detective and try to find out why she hasn’t been answering my calls. I’d much rather talk with her myself than hear it thirdhand.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ll be able to talk to her this weekend.”

“Which feels like a lifetime away right now,” he moaned.

“I know,” I agreed. “But do you know what makes the time fly by?”

“What?”

“Economics homework.”

The tightness around his eyes released, and he let out a low chuckle. “I think you might be wrong about that, but I suppose we should get started.”

Wes was at the same stage as me with the homework, so we were able to work together through the rest of the problems. It was much easier to slog through them with his help, and I found we sailed through the rest of the assignment in no time.

“We should do this again,” I said when we finally finished and started to pack up. I normally preferred to do homework on my own, but I didn’t enjoy economics, and it wasn’t nearly so painful with Wes’s help.

“Yeah, I’m down,” he agreed. “Trying to get through it on my own was torture.”

We left the library together and walked back in the direction of the dormitories. As we approached the entrance to the girls’ building, I paused and turned to Wes.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“How did you know Sarah was the right girl for you?” I wasn’t really sure why I’d asked the question. It was probably because Noah was still on my mind. I knew he was the wrong guy for me, for so many reasons, but a small part of me had started to hope that maybe I was mistaken.

Wes paused for a moment as he considered it. “I didn’t, I guess. We were a lot younger back then, and my reasons for asking her out weren’t the same reasons I’ve stayed with her all this time. I think she became the right person along the way, if that makes sense?”

“That’s sweet.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets and tilted his head as he looked at me. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I guess I’m just trying to figure out how I’ll know when I’m ready to date again. I had a bad breakup with my ex.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “Only you can know when you’ll be ready again, but I think the most important part is *wanting* to be ready. You have to want to date again, and I don’t think that’s something you can force.”

“Wow, Wes, that’s pretty good advice.”

He nodded and gave me a smile. “Just call me your dating sensei.”

I laughed. “I’m not calling you that.”

“But seriously,” he continued. “If all else fails, just listen to your gut. It won’t lead you too far astray.”

“It’s that easy, huh?”

“Hopefully. But what do I know? My girlfriend won’t even call me back.”

“She will,” I reassured him. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Just give it time.”

“Thanks.” He smiled. “So, same time next week for our joint dating therapy session…I mean, economics study session?”

“I’ll be there.” I laughed.

He smiled again and turned to head over to the boys’ dorms. As I watched him go, his advice repeated over and over again in my head. So far, I’d been trying to listen to my head when it came to Noah. I was a little scared of what would happen if I let my gut take control.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The teachers must have been going easy on us during our first week back, because now we were in week two and they were piling on the homework. Every night after school, I spent hours slogging through my assignments. I had no idea how my friends managed to get through their homework and their extracurricular activities because I felt totally overwhelmed.

I was drawn back to the library on several occasions. It was so peaceful and beautiful in there it was hard to resist taking my laptop and setting up on one of the desks to study. I didn't bump into Noah in the stacks again, and I wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or not. I thought about our encounter there far more frequently than I should, so it was probably a good thing I didn't see him. I didn't need to be thinking about Noah any more than I already was.

I had to decide if I was going to accept his invite and go to the boathouse that weekend, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea. Any doubt about whether Noah had personally wanted me to come along had been quashed when he'd asked me in the library. Anna wasn't there that time, so there was no denying it.

I couldn't understand why he'd taken an interest in me, and I still wasn't sure exactly what that interest was. There were so many other girls at this school who would be better suited to him, so I was almost certain his intentions weren't romantic. It seemed far more likely he was being friendly to me because I was Cress's roommate. She was one of the few people he

cared about, after all. He couldn’t know the way my heart raced whenever he was near.

I probably would have bailed on the party again, but Anna and Cress didn’t give me a choice. They were holding me to my promise that I wouldn’t back out a second time, and so I trailed after the two of them on Saturday night as we attempted to navigate the darkened trail around the lake to the boathouse.

The girls were wearing short skirts and high heels, their hair and makeup crafted to perfection. Cress had coerced me into wearing a nice dress too, and the only reason my hair and makeup were done was because Anna had accosted me in the bathroom with her makeup brushes. When they set their minds to something, those two took no prisoners.

“Tonight’s going to be so much fun,” Cress said as we walked. “Especially since you’re here with us this week.” She nudged me with her arm.

“You didn’t give me much choice.”

“No, but you did promise…”

“So you keep telling me.”

She grinned brightly like guilt-tripping me didn’t bother her one bit.

I still hadn’t told them Noah had invited me to come tonight. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to bring it up. They would have pressed me for all the details, and Anna especially would have made it out to be a bigger deal than it was. I dreaded to imagine how she’d react if she found out we were in the library when it happened.

“Don’t worry, you’re going to love it,” Anna said. “Though, as much as I like these parties, I’m already getting a bit sick of the same guys being here every week. We need fresh meat.”

“You worried you’re going to make out with Angus again?” Cress asked her.

“Thankfully, I don’t think he’s coming tonight,” Anna replied. “I heard him complaining about having to leave school for the weekend for his grandmother’s birthday.”

“Sounds like such a great guy,” I joked.

“I know. He’s the worst,” Anna agreed. “That’s why we need fresh meat. I’ve got to find someone better to kiss at parties.”

“Maybe you just need to look a little closer at the options that are already available,” Cress suggested.

“That would be like agreeing to eat at that awful diner just outside town.” Anna screwed up her face. “You already know the menu’s old and the food’s terrible, *plus* you’d be missing out on Toddy’s burgers, which are just down the road.”

“So, you want the Toddy’s burger of guys?” I did my best not to laugh.

“Exactly.” Anna grinned. “And I’m pretty certain there’s no one that yummy here.” Her expression dimmed slightly as she tapped the pocket of her skirt. “Ah, shoot. I think I left my phone back in my room.”

“I’m sure you can handle one night without it,” Cress said, but Anna was already heading back the way we’d come.

“I’ll only be a few minutes. Go on without me. I’ll meet you guys there.”

Cress shook her head as we kept walking. “I have no idea how she forgot her phone considering it’s always glued to her hand.”

We rounded a corner, and the boathouse appeared in the distance. Soft lights emanated from the timber shack and reflected across the soft ripples of the lake. A few people lingered on the dock outside the building, but I assumed most were inside given the sound of music that drifted through the air toward us from within the boathouse.

“There it is,” Cress said, waving her hand at the boathouse. “It’s a bit of a dive and not nearly as nice as the new center the school built a few years back, but at least no one bothers us out here.”

It had definitely seen better times, but there was an old charm to the place I felt drawn to. The boathouse felt like it had some character, some stories to tell.

“I like it,” I said.

“I told you, you would.” Cress sounded pleased, but just because I thought the boathouse was cute didn’t mean I was going to enjoy the party she was dragging me to.

We entered the boathouse through the vast entrance that faced the lake. I was surprised by what I found inside. The wide area looked like a large den rather than a storage space for rowboats. The empty metal racks that lined the wooden walls of the room were the only hint of the building’s former purpose. Now, the space was filled with soft lights, comfy sofas, and people—though not nearly as many students as there had been at Luther’s party on the first night of the semester. It seemed to be a more exclusive group, and I

recognized a lot of faces from the celebration at Toddy's after the soccer game last week.

As we made our way inside, my gaze naturally seemed to gravitate toward Noah. He was standing in the far corner of the room, his arms crossed over his wide chest as he stared down at Veronica. She had one hand pressed against his chest while she slowly twirled a piece of hair around one finger with the other. Her face was filled with animation as she spoke, but Noah couldn't have looked more disinterested.

Cress was watching Noah too and started to laugh. "Noah looks like he's eaten something sour. I've barely talked to him all week. I wonder if he's managed to get out of taking Veronica to the ball yet."

I gave a light laugh in response, but my heart wasn't in it. For some reason, seeing them together and knowing Noah was only putting up with Veronica because his family expected him to made me feel sorry for him. He had all the privilege in the world and the kind of money that could make anything he dreamed a possibility. And yet, it sounded as though his family's rigid demands made him powerless to direct his own future. The more I thought about it, the more similar we seemed. We both had obstacles blocking our roads to the future. Mine had always been a lack of money, and his was his grandfather.

"Let's get some drinks." Cress grabbed my hand and led me through the room to a fridge by the back wall. It was fully stocked with alcohol, and Cress reached for the bottom shelf and pulled out a four-pack of premixed drinks.

"These are my secret obsession," she whispered as she handed me one.

"Why are they a secret?" I whispered back.

"Because the sugar content in these bad boys would give my dance teacher a heart attack. She can never know."

I laughed. "I'll take your secret to the grave."

I unscrewed the lid of my drink and took a sip. It was painfully sweet. I wasn't sure why Cress liked them so much. I found the second sip wasn't as bad, and it went down a lot easier after the initial sugar hit.

"Oh, I hope one of those is for me!" Anna had arrived and was puffing slightly as she leaned against the wall for support.

"Did you run here?" Cress asked as she handed her a drink.

Anna twisted off the top and took three long gulps before she replied. "Is it that obvious?"

“Well, you’re pretty much gasping for air,” I said. “And you only arrived a minute or two after us. The real question is, how did you do it in those heels?” Anna’s shoes were far taller than anything I ever would have attempted to wear, and the pathway around the lake was hardly flat.

Anna laughed at my shocked expression. “What? Like it’s hard?”

“More like impossible,” I murmured.

“Ladies.” Sawyer stood behind us, the ever-present cheeky grin plastered across his face. “Is it just me, or are you three looking extra spectacular tonight.”

Anna folded her arms across her chest. “What do you want, Sawyer?”

“What? Can’t I compliment my three gorgeous friends?”

“Oh, you can,” Anna replied. “But your three gorgeous friends happen to know all your tricks, and you only tend to pull out the compliments when you want something.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong,” he said with an easy laugh.

“So, what is it?” Cress asked.

“Beer pong. I’m in need of a partner. Kaden and Luther have been dominating the table all night, and since Wes is in New York visiting his girlfriend for the weekend, he isn’t here to buddy up with me. Clearly, he needs to get his priorities straight.”

Sawyer glanced in my direction as he spoke, but I took a step back. “Don’t look at me if you want to win. I’ve never played before.”

They all turned to me in shock.

“Never?” Cress was staring at me like I’d just said something personally offensive.

I shook my head. I didn’t really want to explain that I had no time for parties back home. I was too busy working at the café. On the rare occasion when I did go to them, I spent the whole night looking after my ex. If the party followed a big win and there was alcohol there, he usually took the celebrations a little too far.

Sawyer reached out and grabbed my hand. “In that case, you definitely have to be my partner.”

I sent Cress and Anna a desperate look as he dragged me away. Neither of them came to my rescue. Maybe I was going to have to find new friends.

“Ah, newbie, you’ve come to challenge the beer pong masters?” Luther called as we approached the table.

Sawyer slung an arm over my shoulder. “She sure has. From what I’ve heard, she’s somewhat of a beer pong prodigy.”

I shrugged Sawyer’s arm away and shot him a glare. He was so full of it, but his smile only widened as he caught the look on my face. “Hey, there’s no need to get angry with me. Word was bound to get out sooner or later.”

I pulled him aside before he could keep bragging. “What are you doing?” I hissed. “As soon as we start playing, they’ll know you’re lying. I’m going to be terrible.”

Sawyer shrugged. “Maybe you’re a natural.”

“Not likely,” I muttered. I barely knew the rules of the game. “How do we play again?”

“Ah, Isobel, always the jokester.” He ruffled my hair playfully, but I swatted his hand away.

“I’m not kidding.”

“Okay, okay,” he conceded, a smile still on his lips. “Just stand at our end of the table and try to throw the ping-pong ball into one of their cups. If you get one, they have to drink it. It’s easy.”

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered before following him back to the table.

My total lack of skill became blatantly obvious once the game started. My hand-eye coordination was bad to begin with, but after losing several cups and being forced to gulp down the lukewarm beer inside, it became even worse.

The grin on Luther’s face only seemed to grow bigger with each shot I missed. The ping-pong ball was too small, and I kept forgetting just how light it was. Every time I threw it toward the cups of beer, it sailed past them and over the end of the table.

To make matters worse, Kaden and Luther landed every shot. It barely made a difference when Sawyer did manage to sink one for our team, forcing the boys to drink. Their aim was consistently good, like the beer didn’t affect them at all. Before tonight, I’d begun to think Kaden was the nice one out of their little friendship trio, but he didn’t go easy on me at all. The game proved he was just as headstrong as Luther and Noah.

“You can’t honestly be enjoying this,” I groaned to Sawyer after he drank our second-to-last cup and threw it to the side. There was only one

left on our end of the table now, so there was no doubt we were going to lose.

His eyes sparkled with humor as he looked at me. “Of course, I’m enjoying this. I arrived late to the party. Playing beer pong against Kaden and Luther is the quickest way to catch up on all the drinking I’ve missed.”

I let out another groan. “You’re doing this to get us drunk?”

“Well, yeah. Why else would I be stupid enough to challenge them?”

I gave him my darkest glare in response. “If I forget this tomorrow, and I probably will because of all these beers, remind me you’re officially on my shit list.”

Sawyer laughed and draped his arm over my shoulder once again. “Nah, you can’t put me on your shit list. I’m far too lovable.”

I rolled my eyes at him but smiled. Sawyer was sly and cheeky, and I kind of wanted to kill him right now. But I got the feeling he would be impossible to stay mad at.

He aimed the ball at the cups on Luther and Kaden’s end of the table, but his shot sailed wide, and the two boys celebrated. My eyes fell to our lone remaining cup, and I sighed, knowing I was going to have to drink it in a matter of moments.

I didn’t have a chance to look up before the ball happily plopped into the beer I was staring at. I let out a moan and scowled up at Kaden who gave me an apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” he mouthed.

“Traitor,” I mouthed back. He was going on my shit list too. I slouched my shoulders and looked down at the beer once more.

Sawyer laughed when he caught my expression. “No need to look so sad,” he said as he picked up the cup. “I believe this is what we call taking one for the team.” He winked before quickly downing the drink. I was already feeling light-headed and slightly woozy, so I was all too relieved watching him drink it for me. I didn’t often drink alcohol, so this game had put me right over the edge.

“Bad luck, newbie,” Luther said, walking over to our side of the table and leaning against it. He looked far too composed for a guy who’d been playing beer pong all night. “Care to challenge us again?”

“Ha, no way.” I shook my head. “I think I’m going to retire from beer pong. Forever.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain.” I went to push past him. “Now, I’m going outside to get some fresh air.”

Luther laughed as he watched me walk away. “Remember, I’m here if you want a rematch.”

I waved him off. There was no way that was happening. As far as I was concerned, I was never playing a drinking game again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The night had grown cooler, but the alcohol rushing through my veins seemed to combat the chill as I left the boathouse. I walked to the end of the small wooden pier and sat so my legs dangled over the edge. The full moon was reflecting brightly on the smooth surface of the lake before me, and a light breeze ruffled my hair. Aside from the slight autumn nip in the air, it was almost the perfect evening.

As I sat there, I wondered what my mom was up to. She'd been so busy the last few times I'd tried to call her, and I felt a twinge of guilt that she was working harder in my absence. It had been two weeks since I'd seen her last, and I wished she had a smartphone so I could call and see her face.

"I guess your secret is out."

I didn't need to turn to know it was Noah who'd snuck up behind me. There was no mistaking the deep timbre of his voice, and I swallowed down a nervous lump that had risen in my throat as I looked up and over my shoulder to meet his eyes.

"Secret? I don't have a secret." My voice wobbled slightly as I spoke, and I struggled to calm my racing heart. Had he somehow discovered the truth about my past? That I was only here because I'd randomly won the genetic jackpot and, unlike everyone else at this school, I hadn't been born with a silver spoon in my mouth? I wasn't ready to try to explain my messy family situation, and my throat felt dry as I imagined what Noah would think about me if he knew I usually spent my weekends waiting tables.

A smug smile pulled at his lips. "Really? Because I could have sworn you're not the beer pong prodigy Sawyer said you were."

“Oh, that.” My shoulders relaxed as I slowly breathed out. “Was I really that terrible?”

He laughed and lowered himself to sit on the edge of the pier beside me. “You missed every shot.”

“Maybe I was just having an off night.”

“Crash, you didn’t even know the rules.”

A small laugh left my lips. “I guess you know my secret then. I’ve never played beer pong before in my life.”

“No? Really?” He nudged his shoulder against mine in jest, and the slight touch drove the butterflies in my tummy wild. He seemed light and carefree, and I couldn’t get enough of it. I tried to remind myself that I’d decided being close to Noah was a bad idea, but it was much harder to convince myself of that when he was sitting at my side.

“I thought you might want a drink of water,” he continued, holding out a plastic bottle. “Here.”

It took me a moment to respond. I was both surprised he’d noticed I needed a water bottle and shocked he’d thought to bring one out for me. For a guy who didn’t tend to engage much with others, he sure was observant. I hadn’t seen him anywhere near the beer pong table while I’d been playing either.

“Thanks.” I gave him a grateful smile as I took the bottle.

“I’m glad you came tonight,” he said as I took a sip. “I was worried you might not show again.”

I swallowed the water and glanced up at him. “Well, Cress and Anna didn’t leave me much choice.”

“Oh.” He exhaled and rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “So, they’re the only reason you came?”

“One of the reasons.”

He perked up a little.

“I also wanted to challenge the beer pong world champions, but turned out that was a bad idea.”

He chuckled, but his eyes still seemed a little tense. “So, my invite had nothing to do with it?”

I wasn’t really sure how to respond. If Cress and Anna hadn’t forced my hand, I think I would have bailed again. It was probably because I didn’t believe there could be anything more to Noah’s invite than a kind gesture. “I figured you were just being friendly to the new girl.”

“I wasn’t.” He quickly shook his head before he continued. “I mean, I was. But I also asked you because I want to get to know you better. You’re different from the other girls here.”

“I wish people would stop saying that,” I muttered. This school made me feel like a pigeon amid a flight of doves, trying not to draw attention to myself as I flapped awkwardly among them. It wasn’t the nicest thing to know that other people saw it too.

“Why?” he said. “It’s a compliment. You’re real and honest, and you’re not blinded by someone’s surname or what their parents do. People always have hidden motives in this place or lie just to get close to me.”

My stomach dipped at his words. Noah thought I was honest, but in reality, I was probably the biggest liar at Weybridge Academy. I didn’t want to know how he’d react if he found out I didn’t belong here.

“I’m sorry you have to deal with that.”

“Tell me about it,” he muttered. “Plus, you’re one of the few people who has yelled at me in a long time.”

I buried my head in my hands and groaned. I felt my cheeks warm as I recalled our collision in the woods and Noah walking in on me in a towel. Neither of those incidents were really his fault, yet I’d nearly snapped his head off. Add that to the list of reasons why I was so surprised he continued to seek me out.

“Don’t worry, I liked it. It was…” He paused as he searched for the word.

“Different?” I guessed.

“I was going to say refreshing.”

“You found my yelling refreshing?”

“Maybe.” Noah laughed. “Also, you’re kind of cute when you’re angry.”

My face felt like it was burning, and I struggled to look him in the eyes. Surely, he was just joking around to make me feel better.

“Then again, you’re cute when you’re not angry too…”

Was Noah Hastings really calling me cute? Perhaps the beers had altered my hearing somehow. I knew Noah didn’t date girls at school, so there was no way he could be interested in me of all people, but here he was, sitting beside me on the pier in front of the pristine lake, looking at me with his striking green eyes and calling me cute.

“You don’t actually think that,” I murmured.

“Why not?”

“Well, because you’re you and I’m me.”

His lips curved in a small smile. “And what exactly does that mean?”

“It means that a guy like you would never be interested in a girl like me.”

“Why would you say that? Don’t you know how beautiful you are?”

I was taken aback. I couldn’t remember anyone calling me beautiful with such certainty, like I was a fool for not believing it as strongly as he did. I rolled my eyes, trying to make light of his comment, but Noah wasn’t laughing.

“I’m serious,” he insisted. “Both inside and out.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” I whispered, glancing up at him from the corner of my eye.

“I’ve never said that to any girl.”

His voice had dropped as he stared deeply into my eyes. His gaze was searching, as if it was diving into the depths of my soul and shining a light on all the messy, dark corners of it. When he looked at me that way, I felt bare before him, and I kept waiting for him to turn from me as he realized he didn’t like what he saw.

It would be better that way. If he could simply realize what a terrible match we were. I was a girl who came from nothing, trapped in a world where everyone had everything. I was never going to fit in here, and Noah was the epitome of all the things I never had and could never be. We were totally wrong for each other. But, even realizing that, I couldn’t seem to do the smart thing and push him away.

“You really don’t believe me. Do you?”

I shrugged and glanced away.

Noah saw far too much when he looked at me, and it left me feeling torn. A part of me was enjoying whatever this was between us and wanted to keep living the fantasy. But that was all this was—a fantasy. And I kind of wished he’d see through my charade to the real me. I was sick of pretending to be something I wasn’t, and I hated lying to my friends. But the moment I revealed I’d been lying about my past, everything would come crashing down around me.

I knew I should get up and leave. Especially when Noah was saying such sweet things to me. It was too easy to get caught up in his eyes and to bask in the tingles that were ever present on my skin whenever he was near.

“You really should believe me.” He’d drawn closer, and I could smell the soft scent of his aftershave as I looked into his eyes. They almost seemed to sparkle in the darkness, and all I could think was how much harder it was to remember why Noah was wrong for me when I was sitting so close to him. This was a mistake, and yet I couldn’t bring myself to move away.

I needed him to talk about something else, *anything else,* other than how beautiful he thought I was. And I definitely needed him to stop staring dreamily into my eyes. Between the moonlight, the soft music in the background, and the light ripples on the lake, this all felt far too romantic. Somehow, we’d landed in dangerous territory, and I’d come thoroughly unprepared.

“So, there’s this ball the school hosts in a few weeks…” Noah said.

“Oh yeah, I hear you’re taking Veronica.”

“You heard that?” His expression dimmed, and he pulled back slightly as he frowned. Somehow, my words had broken whatever moment we’d been sharing, and I couldn’t help but feel grateful. It felt like I could finally breathe and think a little more clearly again.

“Where did you hear that?”

“Uhhh…” I didn’t want to say Cress because it felt like I’d be throwing her under the bus. “Just around. You know how this school is.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” He eased back to rest his hands on the wooden slats of the pier. “It’s probably because Veronica and I go together every year. It’s a stupid tradition, and I’d prefer to take someone else.”

“You don’t want to take Veronica?”

“I don’t want Veronica to get the wrong idea. Besides, like I said, I want to take someone else.”

I’d seen the way she constantly threw herself at Noah, so I could definitely understand why he might be worried that taking her to a ball would lead her on. Still, his answer was rather diplomatic, and it made me wonder how he actually felt about Veronica.

“Well, I’m sure you’d have no problem getting another date to the ball.”

“Ah,” he replied. “See, there lies the problem. The one girl I’d like to ask is the one girl who would say no…”

He hadn’t taken his eyes off me for a single second. He couldn’t be talking about me, could he? I knew the plan Cress made with Noah hinged on him taking a girl from an influential family to the ball, so I was the last

person he should consider. I couldn't tell him I knew that without betraying Cress's confidence.

"Maybe you should try someone who will say yes then," I suggested.

Noah started to chuckle. "Isobel, I'm talking about you…"

I shook my head. "You don't want to take me to some ball."

"I do."

"Really, you don't. I would make a terrible date. You should invite someone who knows how to dress for these things. Who can dance without causing grievous bodily harm. Someone from your world…" I quickly stopped myself. If I kept going, there was a risk I'd expose myself as a fraud at this school and reveal that Cress had told me about her little plan to get Noah to find a date with an influential family. I'd already said too much.

Noah frowned. "Isobel, I don't care about any of that stuff. I like you."

"Why?"

"Because you're you and I'm me," he said with a small smile. "I just feel drawn to you, and it's been that way ever since you came crashing into my life."

I stared into his eyes, uncertain what to say in response. Noah felt the same connection between us that I'd been experiencing since the first moment we met. I'd been trying to ignore it, to deny it even existed, but as much as I resisted, the connection wouldn't go away. Any other girl would probably throw her arms around him and accept his invitation a million times over, but I held back.

"You don't even know me," I said.

"I know enough to know I want to know more," he said. "Look, don't worry about the ball for now. Just give me a chance. Let me take you on one date."

There was so much hope in his eyes, and it triggered a warm feeling inside my chest. It should have been simple to refuse him. Especially when I had a list of reasons a mile long for why it was a bad idea. But my heart was starting to overrule my head. I wanted to get to know him too and understand why there was such a strong connection between us.

"One little date," he continued. "And if it's a complete disaster, I'll never bother you again."

Perhaps I was overthinking it. Sure, Matthew had warned me against Noah, but I hardly trusted my father's judgment. And while I didn't know if I was ready to put my heart on the line again could one date really be so

bad? It would certainly put me in Veronica's crosshairs, even more than I already was, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. Maybe it was time to follow Wes's advice and go with my gut.

Noah's gaze continued to implore mine, and before I realized what I was doing, I nodded in response. "Okay, fine, one little date."

He couldn't stop a wide grin from stretching across his face as he released a heavy breath he'd been holding. "I probably would have preferred a more excited response, but I'll take what I can get."

"Sorry." I laughed. "I'm just ninety-nine percent sure I'm going to end up regretting this."

That didn't seem to bother him in the slightest though. "Well, Crash, I guess I'm just going to have to prove you wrong."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"I still can't believe you're going on a date with Noah," Cress said as we made our way to class on Monday morning. I'd told her and Anna he'd asked me out on Saturday night, and to say they were both shocked was an understatement. They weren't surprised he was going on a date with me specifically; it was more the fact Noah was going out with anyone at all. Everyone at Weybridge knew Noah Hastings didn't date.

"I can't believe I agreed to go." All I could think was that the alcohol must have gone to my head because there was no way I would have agreed to go out with him if I'd been thinking straight. Noah and I had nothing in common. He was a wealthy, popular, soccer-playing, high-school icon while I preferred life in the shadows with my nose thoroughly buried in a textbook. Not to mention the fact that I wasn't even sure if I was ready to date again. This was only going to end in disaster.

Cress looked thoughtful as she considered me. "He must really like you."

"I doubt that." I scoffed. "I'm just the shiny new student."

"I think you should give Noah more credit," she replied. "I don't think he likes you just because you're new here. I think he likes you because you're genuine. There aren't many people like that at our school. Hell, there aren't many people like that outside our school. You're kind of special, and don't you forget it."

She emphasized her final words by waving her finger at me before turning on her heels and marching into English class.

I watched her walk away, guilt flaring in my chest. Cress thought I was genuine, and yet I'd been lying about my mom and how I grew up since the moment we met.

Dishonesty didn't come naturally to me, and I hated skirting around the truth. I'd been growing increasingly sick of feeling ashamed about my home life and hiding it just so I could fit in. I'd always been so proud of my mom and how she'd kept the café running all these years despite the obstacles in her way. I was still so proud of her, and I wouldn't give up the years spent waiting tables with her for anything.

I knew it was my failed friendships back home that made me so nervous about being open and honest with my new friends. But was I really going to let previous betrayals hold me back for the rest of my life? I'd never been the kind of girl who lied to fit in, and I didn't want to be that person now.

As I stared after Cress, I came to the realization that it was time to tell her and my other friends the truth. I knew them all well enough now that I felt confident they wouldn't judge me about my life in Rapid Bay. But what might upset them was the fact I hadn't been honest from the start.

That wasn't a good enough reason to continue lying though. I needed to come clean, and the sooner, the better. I was done pretending to be something I wasn't. It was a risk, but if my friends didn't want anything to do with me once they knew the truth, then perhaps they weren't friends worth keeping.

A small voice in my head also wondered how Noah would react, but I quickly silenced the thought. We hadn't even been on one date yet, so he should be the least of my worries.

I followed Cress into English with a whole lot more on my mind than my date with Noah. She flashed me a smile as I sat at the table beside her, but I didn't return it.

"There's something I want to talk to you about tonight," I said to her.

She frowned slightly when she caught the nervous look in my eyes. "Why do I get the feeling it's about something more serious than what you're going to wear on your date?"

I hesitated.

"What's wrong? Is it something bad?" Cress had swiveled in her seat to face me now, and there was more concern in her voice.

"No, you don't need to worry." I glanced around as I shook my head, worried that other people in the class might sense something was wrong.

“So, what is it?”

“Not here. We’ll just talk about it tonight, okay?” I needed the next few hours to figure out exactly what I was going to say and to build up my nerve.

“Okay, sure.” Cress gave me a cautious smile, but her expression quickly turned cold as she caught Veronica watching us. “Is there something we can help you with?”

“Oh, nothing,” Veronica replied with a shrug. She kept her gaze locked on me though, an unsettling look of smug satisfaction on her face. She’d probably been listening in to our conversation and was enjoying the idea that there might be something wrong.

Thankfully, she didn’t say anything else before she turned to face the front of the classroom once more. The look she’d been giving me stayed etched in my mind. There was a vindictive glint in her eyes, and I had a bad feeling she’d heard about my date with Noah. I knew the news would get to her eventually. It was near impossible to avoid the spread of gossip at this school. But I’d hoped we’d have at least a few days of peace before the gossip started.

I couldn’t worry about Veronica right now. Not when I had much bigger problems. I needed to focus on what I was going to say to my friends. I just hoped that I was strong enough to withstand the fallout if they didn’t accept me once they knew the truth.

I was distracted as I walked into math, but when I heard my name being called, I let out a groan.

“Newbie!”

I’d almost forgotten I shared this class with Luther and Kaden. The two of them were sitting at the back of the room grinning at me.

“Newbie, over here.” Luther was waving frantically at me.

I shook my head, taking a seat at the front of the room. I had enough on my mind without Luther and Kaden distracting me all class. Besides, I was still annoyed with them. I blamed their beer pong skills for the headache I’d been fighting all weekend and the alcohol-induced haze I was certain led to me agreeing to a date with Noah.

I’d barely sat down when I felt a presence at my side.

“What you doing, newbie?”

I scowled up at Luther. “Sitting.”

“You’re sitting in the wrong place.”

“Yeah, because you and Kaden are on my shit list for getting me drunk on Saturday night.”

Luther laughed. “Don’t be silly. You barely drank anything, thanks to Sawyer’s willingness to help you out. *He*, on the other hand, was wasted.”

“I still don’t want to sit with you guys. You’re a bad influence.”

“What if I promise to be good?”

There was a look of pure innocence in Luther’s eyes, but I didn’t believe him for one moment. I barely had a chance to respond because he started talking again. “Ding, ding, ding,” he sang out in a high-pitched voice. “You’re too late, and that offer is officially expired. Looks like we’re doing things the hard way.”

Before I could react, he grabbed my bag and carted it to the back of the room.

I watched him go, irritation sizzling down my spine. I was tempted to just ignore him, turn back to the front of the room, and sit through class without my laptop. I couldn’t stand the idea of not being able to take notes though, and he totally knew it.

I huffed before slowly trailing after Luther. “You know I hate you, right?” I said, sitting in the chair next to him.

He smiled brightly and placed my bag on my desk. “You can’t hate me. You’re dating my best friend.”

“We’re not dating. It’s one date.”

“Which will turn into two, then three, and then you’ll both live happily ever after.” Luther was speaking so loudly I was scared the whole class would hear. “And it’s all thanks to me.”

“Calm down,” I hissed at him. “And you’re to blame for this because you got me drunk before he asked.”

“You were barely tipsy,” Luther argued “And no, you and Noah should both be grateful because I was the best wingman ever and figured out all your deep dark secrets beforehand.”

My eyes widened, and I worried he’d somehow learned the truth about me.

“Though I still never learned what your type is…” he continued. “Noah really wanted to know the answer to that one.”

“Wait, Noah made you ask all those absurd questions?” I wanted to relax because Luther clearly wasn’t talking about my life back in Rapid

Bay. But it was hard to calm down when it sounded like Luther had been trying to get dirt on me for Noah.

“Well, he didn’t have to. I’m just that good a wingman and wanted to help a brother out. I may not know your type, but I know Noah’s, and you are exactly the kind of girl he likes.”

“You don’t know that.” I blushed. “And besides, you started quizzing me the first night we met…”

Luther shrugged. “I saw the way he was looking at you when you arrived at the party. I knew right away he was interested.”

I found it hard to believe him. There was no way Noah was interested in me from my first day at Weybridge. He hadn’t even said two words to me that day, and he had completely shrugged me off when Cress introduced us.

“You should probably name your firstborn after me,” he continued. “He wouldn’t exist if not for my matchmaking, after all.”

I often wondered what was going through Luther’s head, but this conversation really took the cake.

“Look, Luther, I hate to burst your bubble, but Noah and I aren’t going to end up together.”

“Sure, you are.”

I looked at Kaden, who was sitting on his other side listening with an amused smile. “Kaden, will you tell Luther he’s wrong?”

Kaden’s smile only grew. “But I don’t want to lie to him.”

“Ugh, you both suck.”

They chuckled in response.

“Nah, you love us,” Luther said.

I hoped the boys would quiet down once class started, but Luther seemed to have no inclination to listen to the teacher at all.

“So, are you excited for the date on Saturday?” he asked.

Apparently, we weren’t done talking about Noah, and his question had drawn the attention of several other students in the room. Veronica, in particular, shot us a scowl over her shoulder.

“Luther, can we talk about this later?” I pleaded. “I’m trying to listen.”

“But it can’t wait.”

“I’m pretty sure it can.”

“It really can’t. My curiosity is going to kill me.”

“Wouldn’t that be a shame,” I muttered, making Luther splutter out a muffled laugh.

“You get kind of feisty when you’re annoyed.”

“Funny, you’re the only one who brings that out in me.”

Luther laid a hand against his heart. “I’m touched I have such a profound effect on you.” He was enjoying all this far too much. Even Kaden, who usually seemed more interested in listening to the teacher, was smirking as we spoke.

“Come on, newbie, talk with me.”

“Not going to happen, Luther.”

“But math is boring. Wouldn’t you rather talk with me?”

“No.”

I focused on the teacher, but a moment later, someone poked my arm with a pen. With a sigh, I looked at Luther once more.

“Just answer my one little question, and I’ll be quiet.”

“Fine. Are you asking if I’m excited for the date because you want to know or because you’re digging for information for your friend?”

“Can it be both?”

“Well, if it’s both, then no comment.”

“Oh, then only *I* want to know.” He winked at me.

It was hard not to smile in response. “I’m not answering that.”

“I promise I won’t tell.”

I let out a sigh. “I wouldn’t have agreed to the date if I didn’t want to go.” My answer surprised me. I kept telling myself this was a bad idea, but I’d gone with my gut, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t at least a little intrigued to find out what a date with Noah was like.

Luther beamed in response. “I knew it. You like him.”

“Now I’ve answered your question, can I concentrate on class?”

“Of course.” He gestured toward the front of the room, and I returned my attention to the teacher.

A moment later, there was another prod in my arm. “Do you think the two of you will kiss?”

I turned once more to see Luther innocently batting his eyelashes at me.

“Luther, you’ve had your one question.”

“But I just realized I have another one…”

I was never going to get any work done in math this year.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After lunch, I saw Lily leaving the dining hall on her way to our next class, and I rushed to catch up with her so we could walk together.

"Hey, Lily, wait up!" I called.

She turned and smiled as I fell into step beside her. "Hey, stranger. Are you excited for another thrilling business management class?"

"Uh, no."

"Yeah, it's not the most exciting subject," she chuckled. "Though given who sits right behind you, I have a feeling that class must still be one of your favorites." She wiggled her eyebrows, and I blushed because I knew she was talking about Noah.

"Your cheeks are turning bright pink." She giggled.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied.

She tilted her head and smiled, totally unconvinced.

As we continued into the corridor, I noticed people watching me. Being the new girl, I had gotten used to receiving curious looks, but this seemed different. I thought people had gotten bored of me by now. Some students appeared as though they were trying not to laugh when they saw me while I could have sworn others were looking at me with pity.

"Am I being paranoid, or are people looking at me weirdly?" I murmured when yet another kid glanced at me and struggled to smother a laugh.

Lily stopped and glanced around. "Yeah, maybe. I wonder what's going on. It's not like you have food on your face or your uniform is on inside out.

You look really cute today.” She was frowning as she scanned me, trying to figure it out.

My skin started to prickle under the constant gaze of everyone around me. I’d just been in the dining hall with pretty much the whole school, and no one was watching me in there. Something must have happened in the short time since, but I had no idea what.

“They’re holding something,” Lily said.

“Huh?”

“Everyone who’s watching you has a piece of paper in their hands.”

I turned my attention to one of the closest students. The girl was intently studying a sheet of paper that she held with both hands. When she glanced up and caught me watching her, the girl blanched, and her eyes darted between me and whatever was on the page.

I didn’t know the girl I’d caught looking at me, but she seemed younger, probably a freshman. I walked over and held a hand out toward her. “Can I see that?”

The girl pulled the paper close to her chest. “Uh…”

“We know it’s something to do with Isobel,” Lily added as she stepped beside me. “Can you please show it to us?”

The girl swallowed before slowly passing the sheet to me. I turned it over in my hand to see what was printed on it, and my stomach dropped. It was a photo of Nina and me taken at my mom’s café. I was wearing my uniform, including my dirty black apron, and the clean but tired booths that lined the restaurant were evident in the background. Across the top of the page, a word had been scrawled in large letters with permanent marker. I read it out loud. “Liar.”

“Isobel, what is this?” I could easily hear the worry in Lily’s voice, but I couldn’t really focus on that right now.

“Where did you get this?” I asked the girl.

She pointed over her shoulder toward the end of the corridor. I gasped at what I saw. A large crowd of students had gathered, and more were flocking to join them. They were surrounded by white pieces of paper, similar to the one I held in my hand. They flitted through the air, were clutched in people’s hands, and were plastered to the walls and floor. The blood drained from my skin as I realized the sheer number of people who were discovering the truth about me.

“Isobel?” Lily prompted.

I started to move forward, slowly at first, but I quickly gained momentum as I drew closer to the crowd and saw the extent of the damage. There were other pictures of me stuck to the walls—one of me mopping the floor at the café and one of my mom and me standing outside, pointing to the sign above the front door. Each image had a different word written across the top.

"Fake, Phony, Peasant, Charity…"

I could barely bring myself to look at what the rest of them had to say.

As I reached the throng of students, one voice shouted above the whispers and laughter. "Step right up. Step right up. Come see for yourselves the embarrassing truth the newest addition to Weybridge Academy has been hiding from you all."

I pushed to the front of the crowd and found Veronica standing against the wall. She was grinning widely as she handed out pieces of paper from a huge stack that one of her cronies was cradling in their arms. When she saw me coming, her eyes lit with delight.

"Ah, if it isn't the liar herself."

Laughter rang through the crowd behind me, and I shrank under the weight of it. I was too shocked not to react. Too hurt by all the painful truths that were splayed across Veronica's posters. I didn't know how to defend myself. How could I when it was all true?

"It's funny," she continued. "You'd think someone who's intent on lying to the whole school about where she came from would remember to delete their old Instagram account."

So, that was where she got the pictures. Nina had made the account for me on her phone years ago. I didn't have a smartphone back then, and I'd forgotten the account even existed.

"So, it seems we have another scholarship student in our midst," Veronica taunted. She was really putting on a show for those gathered behind me, making certain to project her voice so that everyone could hear. "And this one was so ashamed of it she thought she could pretend to be something she's not and lie to the whole school."

"It's not like that…"

"Isn't it?"

Lily finally caught up to me and lightly touched my arm. "Is this true?" She had one of the posters clutched to her chest, and her eyes were filled with hurt as she looked between Veronica and me.

I slowly nodded. I didn't know what else to say. There were no lies written on the pages that were plastered on the walls and littering the floor. I might not be a scholarship student, but I was the biggest charity case in this school.

Lily took a sharp step back from me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I…"

"Are you ashamed to be like me?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why didn't you say anything?"

"Yes, Isobel, why didn't you say anything?" Veronica stepped forward to stand at Lily's side and glared at me. "Is it because you think you're too good to admit you're just another charity case? Or is it because you're a pathological liar?"

I opened and closed my mouth several times as I tried to come up with a response. I was completely lost for words though. I could sense the eyes of the crowd on me from every angle. But it was the sadness and betrayal in Lily's gaze that struck me the most.

"No one will ever trust another word you say," Veronica continued. "You're a fake."

Tears started to well in my eyes, and I turned away before Veronica could spot them. I was met with a sea of judgmental stares, and I knew I couldn't stay here a moment longer. I started to push my way past the other students, hurrying as I desperately tried to get away.

Once I emerged from the crowd, I fled back down the corridor. I didn't know where I was headed, only that I didn't want to be anywhere near those stupid posters or Veronica's gleeful expression. She hadn't just enjoyed taking me down; she'd treasured every brutal second of it.

I raced around a corner and almost plowed straight into Cress and Anna who were coming out of the dining hall. I wobbled as I screeched to a halt, and Anna laughed as she went to steady me. "Where are you going so fast? Are your shoes on fire?"

The two girls were smiling until they caught sight of my expression. "Isobel, what's wrong?" Cress reached out a hand to me.

I couldn't look them in the eyes, and I took a quick step back as I shook my head. "It's nothing," I replied before I continued past them, keeping my head down as I made for the exit. I didn't look back, and I hoped they didn't

follow. Everything written on those posters about me was true, and soon, Anna and Cress were going to know it too.

I waited until I got to my room before I allowed myself to break down. Sobs racked my body, and I curled up in a ball under the covers of my bed. I wished my mom could be here to console me, and that made the tears flow so much faster. I'd been so worried my friends here wouldn't accept the real me I'd broken the biggest friendship rule there was—tell the truth. The real kicker was, I'd been planning to come clean with them about everything tonight. Not that it mattered now.

The bell rang to signal the start of classes, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I couldn't face school right now. I was a mess. The shattered feeling inside me was just as bad as when Levi cheated on me. I hadn't realized just how much my friends here had come to mean to me, but they'd already burrowed their way so deeply into my heart I wasn't sure how I'd recover from losing them.

I heard the click of the door opening and someone move into the room, but I kept myself firmly hidden under the covers.

"Isobel?" Cress's soft voice sounded from across the room.

I scrunched up my eyes, wishing I could disappear, but unfortunately, I was a complete Muggle without a lick of magic when I really needed it. Instead, I slowly pulled down the covers and turned to the door.

Cress was standing in the entrance, flanked by Anna and Lily. Their arms were filled with scrunched-up posters, and they were all looking at me with sympathy in their eyes.

"Are you okay?" Cress walked over to sit at the end of my bed while the other two girls sat on the bed across from us.

I was still struggling to form words, and I knew my appearance would tell what my voice could not—I was a wreck. My cheeks were still stained with tears, and I was sure my eyes were red. I wasn't one of those girls who could look pretty when they cried. I usually looked like I'd been punched by the tissue box I was clutching.

"Veronica's a stupid troll," Anna said. "She gets pleasure in life from being horrible to people. What she did back there was just mean. But, don't worry, we got rid of the posters." She lifted a handful of the ripped and torn paper sheets to show me.

It was kind of the girls to do that, especially since they'd all just learned I'd been lying to them. But the damage had already been done. There was

no erasing the fact that everyone knew the truth about me now. I nervously looked at my friends, trying to guess what they thought about it all. “You guys must hate me.”

“No!”

“Not at all.”

“Of course not.”

They all spoke at once and shook their heads.

“We are confused though,” Cress added. “Is what Veronica said true?”

My stomach was tied in knots as I considered how to explain it to them. “I didn’t intend to lie,” I started. “And despite what Veronica assumed, I’m not here on a scholarship. My dad wasn’t around when I was young. I just met him recently, and he’s the one who paid for me to be here.”

“So, the photos…” Lily said. She had a poster in her hand and was looking down at the first photo I’d seen—the one of me in my café uniform.

“Yeah, that’s me.” I took in a deep breath. “That photo is from my mom’s café. She doesn’t have a chain of luxury restaurants or anything like that. It’s just one struggling café by the beach. We never had much money, so I always helped her out by cleaning and waiting tables.”

“So, why didn’t you say anything?” Cress looked both confused and upset.

“I guess when I got here I already felt so out of place. I knew I didn’t belong. I might have felt better if I was here on a scholarship because at least then I would have known I’d earned my place here. But being here because of a father I’d only just met and don’t really want anything to do with just didn’t feel right.”

I blew out a breath before I continued with the messy truth. “I had a really bad falling-out with my friends back home at the end of last year. They all ditched me after one of them stole my boyfriend, and I’ve had a really hard time getting over that. When I met you guys and you accepted me so quickly and easily, I didn’t want to do anything to mess that up. And then when I saw how Veronica treated Lily at Luther’s party on the first night of school, I was scared that was how everyone at this school felt about people less privileged than them.”

“You thought we’d ditch you?” Cress asked.

I shook my head, shame pinking my cheeks. “I didn’t know what to think. I’ve been shunned and abandoned by friends for far less, and I really like you guys. I think I was just scared of how you’d react. I’m not

embarrassed of how I grew up. I'm actually so proud. My mom is the most amazing person, and I'm so lucky to have her. I made a mistake keeping all that from you guys, and I'm sorry I wasn't more honest. I understand if you don't want to be friends with me anymore…"

The girls all had a mixture of concern and sadness on their faces.

Cress was the first one to break the silence as she leaned in close and pulled me in for a hug. "Of course, we still want to be friends with you." She squeezed me tightly before pulling back. "I'm just hurt that you'd think I'd ever consider not being friends with you just because of where you're from."

"Yeah, bitch, what were you thinking?" Anna asked, also coming over to give me a hug. "I told you I'd still be friends with you even if you were a social leper. I don't know how I could have been any clearer."

I let out a small laugh. These girls didn't know how much it meant to me to hear that. Especially when my friends back home had all abandoned me.

Lily still hovered in the background, and as I looked at her, she gave me a sad smile. "If I'd known there were some people here who would treat me like they do, I probably would have lied about my scholarship too," she murmured. "Veronica's not the only one. I don't blame you for wanting to avoid that. I really wish you had trusted me though. I, of all people, would have understood."

"I'm sorry, Lily."

She walked over and took my hands in hers. "I know. And I'm sorry for not standing up for you out in the corridor like you stood up for me. I was caught by surprise. Not that it's any excuse, but it took me a moment to get my head around things. I get it now."

"You were right not to stand up for me," I said. "Veronica wasn't that far from the truth."

"Still, you didn't deserve to be treated that way, no matter what the truth was."

"Yeah, that was vindictive, even for Veronica," Anna added. "I hope she wakes up tomorrow with a face full of pimples."

"Mmm, big throbbing ones with oozing white heads," Cress agreed.

"The type that can't be covered with makeup no matter how hard you try." Anna sounded far too excited by the thought.

My friends were so understanding, and it made me regret not being honest from the start. And now, not only did everyone know the truth, but I'd been painted as a liar to the whole school.

"Do you think everyone here hates me?" I asked.

"No one will hate you for this," Lily said.

"And I think you'll find that the people who matter really won't care," Cress added. "They just might be surprised you felt the need to keep it from them."

I swallowed as another rush of guilt shot through me. "I really am sorry."

"Stop apologizing." Cress said. "We understand, and we still love you."

"Do you think Veronica did this because you stood up to her about calling me Charity?" Lily wondered.

"Maybe."

Anna snorted. "That won't have helped, but I think this has more to do with the fact you're going on a date with Noah. She's trying to sabotage you."

"You're going on a date with Noah?" Lily gasped.

"He asked me out on Saturday." I nodded. "Do you really think Veronica would do that?"

"Ah, *yeah*," Anna said.

"That's definitely the reason," Cress agreed.

The more important question was whether Noah would care. I hadn't had a chance to think about how he'd react to seeing Veronica's posters. The night he asked me out, he told me one of the main reasons he was drawn to me was my honesty. We hadn't even gone on one date yet, and already that was proving to be false.

"Try not to let what Veronica's done get to you," Cress said. "You know you still have us, no matter what."

"Yeah, don't let the bitches get you down," Anna agreed.

I gave them a warm smile and nodded. "Can I give you guys another hug?"

The three of them didn't hesitate as they rushed in and crushed me between them, and I laughed as they smothered me. Veronica might have been trying to sabotage me, but when it came to my friends, it felt like the truth had actually set me free.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I met Wes in the library to study that night. I'd missed my afternoon classes, so it was the first time I'd emerged from my dorm room since Veronica's stunt with the posters. I received more than a few judgmental looks on my way to the library, and even as I sat down at the study table, people kept looking my way. I hated the attention. It felt like people's interest in the new girl had only just died down, and now I'd been thrown back into the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

"People will get over it," Wes said, noticing I was distracted by a group of girls who were clearly talking about me as they walked past. "I'm sure by tomorrow there will be some other piece of gossip that's captured their attention."

"I guess you saw the posters then?" He hadn't brought it up yet, and he'd been acting so normal I thought perhaps he'd somehow missed the whole thing.

"Yeah." He shrugged. "And Anna told Sawyer who told me all the details, so you don't have to explain. I totally get it. I just didn't want to say anything unless you brought it up. You must be having a crappy enough time as it is, and none of that stuff matters to me, so we don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

I let out a breath and smiled at him. "Thanks."

"Though, be warned, Sawyer's probably going to ask you to wear your work uniform to school. He thought you looked hot in it."

I laughed. "At least, he's got his priorities straight."

“Yeah, I really wonder about my brother sometimes.” Wes shook his head. “I sometimes think I might have been better off staying at school in New York just to get some space from him.”

“Oh yeah, you were there this weekend, right? How did it go?” I knew Wes had been nervous to visit his girlfriend because she hadn’t been answering his phone calls, so I was hoping his trip went well.

“It was okay.” His expression didn’t light up the way it normally did when he was talking about his girlfriend. “Sarah was happy to see me, so I was definitely worrying about nothing. But since she wasn’t expecting me, her weekend was already packed. She couldn’t cancel everything last minute, so I didn’t end up spending as much time with her as I’d hoped.”

“Ah, that sucks.”

He pushed a hand through his hair and glanced down at the desk in front of him. “I probably shouldn’t have surprised her. She’s always got a million things going on.”

“Still, you went all that way to see her.”

“I know, but maybe I’ll give her a heads-up next time.”

I nodded, but I didn’t really agree. I loved that he’d tried to surprise her. It was super sweet how he’d gone to so much trouble, and I was shocked his girlfriend hadn’t made more effort to spend time with him. She was lucky she had such a great guy who cared so much about her. I kept my thoughts to myself as I didn’t want to upset Wes more.

We tried to focus on studying, but I was really struggling to get my mind in the right place to concentrate. It had been a horrible day, and homework was the last thing I felt like doing. Especially when I could see and hear people gossiping about me at the next table over.

All I wanted was to go back to my bed and bury myself under the covers. I was desperate to talk to my mom too. We kept missing each other’s calls, so it had been days since we’d talked, and I really needed to hear her voice right now.

Wes placed his hands down on his book and looked across the table at me. “We don’t have to study in here if you don’t want.”

“What? No, it’s fine.”

He lifted one eyebrow. “You’re distracted and rightly so. We could go back to the dorms or even set up in the dining hall. No one really goes in there this time of night. Hell, we can abandon our study session altogether if

you want. I can finish off the questions and give you the answers to copy at breakfast."

"You'd do that?"

"Well, yeah." He shrugged like it was no big deal. "You're my friend, and you've had a really rough day."

I shook my head as I tried to fight back tears. I was still feeling so emotional, and just hearing Wes's offer to do my homework was triggering the waterworks.

"That's really sweet, Wes. But I want to stay. I have to get over the fact people are gossiping about me."

"Not tonight, you don't."

"I know, but I also don't want Veronica to win. And if I bail on our study session, it feels like she has, you know?"

"Okay, got it." He nodded. "How about we just take a break instead? I'll go grab us coffees so we're adequately juiced to finish off these problems."

My shoulders relaxed at his suggestion. "Yeah, a break sounds great. I might try to call my mom."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll meet you back here in ten." Wes shared a warm smile with me before he rose from his seat and headed for the library doors.

I pulled my phone out to dial my mom's number, but as I unlocked the screen, I heard sniggers at the next table. I glanced up and saw the girls were still watching me, and I decided this probably wasn't the best place to call my mom.

I got up from the table and wandered into the stacks. There were a few people scattered about, so I kept roaming until I found a nice quiet section. It was deep in the back of the library and led to a dead end, so the chances of someone bothering me were small.

I settled myself down on the floor, pulled out my phone, and tried my mom again. I held my breath for six rings before it clicked over to her voice mail. I exhaled as I ended the call and stared at my phone. Mom didn't usually work Monday nights, so I couldn't understand why she wasn't answering.

I tried to call the café instead. She didn't like it when I called there because it monopolized the line, and she didn't want to miss any telephone orders. I was beginning to feel a little desperate though. I couldn't remember ever going such a long time without speaking to my mom, and I really needed to hear a familiar voice.

“Hello?” An answer came after the first ring, and I immediately recognized the soft husky tone of my favorite waitress.

“Norma, it’s me.”

“Isobel, sugar, it’s so good to hear your voice.”

Tears touched my eyes as she spoke. I hadn’t realized how much I missed her until now. It might not have been my mom who’d answered, but Norma was definitely second best. “It’s good to hear your voice too.”

“How’s that ritzy school of yours treating you?”

“So far, so good,” I lied. The last thing Norma needed was a reason to worry about me, and if I told her the truth, I’d have to explain that I’d been ashamed of my home life, and it broke my heart to imagine telling her that. I’d never once been embarrassed of where I came from, and I hated that this school had briefly changed that in me. If there was one lesson I’d learned from this whole hideous experience, it was that I should be proud of who I was, no matter what.

“Well, we’ve missed your pretty face around the café, but we’re all so gosh darn proud of you for being so brave and facing a new school in your senior year all by yourself.”

“It’s not all that brave.”

“It is in my books.”

“How is everyone?” I asked, not wanting to talk so much about myself.

“They’re all good,” she said. “We’ve got a new waitress to cover for you. She started today and can’t remember an order to save her life, but she’s sweet, and the customers seem to like her.”

I didn’t know my mom had hired a new recruit, and I was surprised she hadn’t mentioned it. Perhaps if we’d actually talked this week, she might have brought it up. Then again, maybe not. I knew Mom wanted me to be at Weybridge Academy, but I felt like I was letting her down by not being at home. The café really didn’t need any added expenses right now, and it was my fault she’d had to go and hire someone new. I should have been there to help her out.

“And that ex-best friend of yours has also been sniffing around the place,” she continued.

“Nina?”

“That’s the one. Though I thought her name was Dory.”

I snorted. “She’s not a fish.”

“Well, after what she did, she’s always going to be wet and slimy in my books,” Norma said. “Anyway, she’s come by several times asking after you. She said everyone at school was worried as no one has seen or heard from you.”

“Oh.” I was surprised they’d given me a second thought. I had been doing my best to forget my old school and the people I once thought were my friends. “I blocked their numbers. After everything that happened, I wanted this year to be a fresh start.” Though after today, things didn’t feel quite so fresh.

“So, what did you tell her about where I’ve gone?” I continued.

“The truth. I said you’d been whisked away by your father and were at one of the most prestigious schools in the country. She seemed hurt to hear you left without saying goodbye.”

“I don’t know why.” She certainly hadn’t missed me over the summer or worried about me when she’d stolen my boyfriend. And a goodbye was the last thing I expected she’d want from me after our encounter at the café on my final day there.

“Well, I might have overheard her talking with one of the girls she was with,” Norma replied. “It seems like things aren’t going too well with the boy. They broke up.”

It didn’t shock me to hear the news, but I was surprised by how little I cared. I should have felt a sense of vindication, but I just felt sad. Nina and Levi had caused me so much pain, and in the end, it was all for nothing. I wondered if that was why Nina was checking on me. Had she finally come to her senses and realized how stupid it was to throw away years of friendship over a guy?

Unfortunately, it didn’t matter what realization she might have come to. Things between us would never be the same. It was a fact I was only more certain of after today. I’d seen what true friendship was, and what Nina and I shared didn’t compare to the relationships I’d built with my friends here.

“Anyway,” Norma said. “My psychic senses tell me you didn’t call to talk to me about Dory.”

I laughed in response. “No, I was trying to get ahold of my mom.”

“Ah, I thought you might be. She’s not here right now. You know she takes Monday nights off.”

“I know, but I’ve been struggling to catch her all week. I thought maybe she’d been pulling extra shifts.”

“Not tonight. I wish I could help.”

“That’s okay. Any chance your psychic powers can tell me where she’s at?”

“Hmm… Well, they’re currently telling me that she’s not near her phone.”

“Anything more concrete than that?”

Norma chuckled. “I’m afraid not, love.”

“It was worth a try.” I let out a sigh, knowing I was just going to have to wait until Mom finally got back to me. “It was really good to speak to you, Norma.”

“You too, sugar. Feel free to call here again anytime. I know your mom hates the line being busy, but I don’t mind if we miss a few phone orders. They always call back.”

“I think Mom might disagree with you.” I smiled.

“Well, she can’t disagree if she doesn’t know.” I could easily picture Norma’s sly grin over the phone. “Now, I’ve got to run. Talk soon.”

“Yeah, talk soon.”

I lowered the phone from my ear and closed my eyes as I slumped back against the bookcase behind me. I’d really hoped to talk to my mom, and I was struggling to understand where she could be and what she was doing. On Monday nights we usually stayed home, ordered pizza and watched movies together. Did she have some new tradition now that I was gone?

“Hey.”

I opened my eyes and found Noah standing over me. His hands were tucked into his jeans pockets, and he was frowning as he watched me. “I’m not interrupting, am I?”

“Not at all,” I replied.

He took that as an invitation to sit at my side. He slid to the ground and leaned back against the bookcase as he stared at the shelves across from us. He didn’t speak right away, and the silence that stretched between us was like a huge empty void. He was sitting so close to me that our shoulders gently brushed, but he still seemed so distant. I was guessing he’d seen Veronica’s posters.

“I was hoping I might run into you tonight,” he said, still keeping his eyes locked on the books on the other side of the aisle. “Veronica showed me your Instagram account.”

Given the way he still refused to meet my eyes, I knew he wasn't reacting well to the news. I should have known that if, by some miracle, he hadn't seen the posters himself, Veronica would have still made sure he knew the truth about me. It sounded like Anna was right; Veronica had done this whole thing to sabotage my chances with Noah.

"She said you were hiding who you were to manipulate me."

I drew a deep breath in before I responded. "Is this the part where you say you want nothing to do with me?" My voice sounded surprisingly scratchy, probably from the nerves that had started bubbling in my chest.

I hated to think that Noah and I would be over before we even began. I'd foolishly begun to open myself up to him and the connection I felt between us. The idea of abandoning those feelings upset me more than the stunt Veronica pulled today. But if Noah couldn't accept me for who I was, then it was probably for the best. I wanted someone who would love every part of me. Still, I knew I would be in for a tough year pretending my pulse didn't quicken whenever he was near.

"No, this is the part where I ask you why you felt you needed to keep it a secret." He turned to me and his eyes were clearly filled with hurt and confusion. "I know there are a lot of jerks at this school, but I didn't realize you thought I was one of them. Did you really think I was so shallow that knowing your mom runs a café would make any difference to me?"

"I don't think you're a jerk or that you're shallow," I replied. "I wish I had been honest, but when I first arrived, I was so overwhelmed."

"So you lied?"

"I didn't know what else to do. Weybridge is a completely different world to the one I grew up in. I knew I didn't belong, and I didn't think anyone here would understand." I could feel my emotions welling up in me as I spoke. For some reason, this felt so much harder than when I'd explained it to my friends.

"I'm kind of broken when it comes to trusting people," I continued. "My ex-boyfriend cheated on me, my friends back home betrayed me, and I have a father who just appeared out of nowhere and will probably disappear just as fast. So, yeah, I lied."

I blew out a breath and stared across the aisle at the books on the shelves opposite us. As I looked at some of the titles, I realized they were history books. I might have laughed if I wasn't so upset. It was pretty ironic

that Noah would end up breaking things off with me in what Anna considered the romantic corner of the library.

Noah's hand brushed against my leg, and my eyes shot back to his. There was still hurt in his gaze but perhaps a flicker of understanding too.

"Just because you had a different upbringing than everyone else here, it doesn't mean you don't belong," he said. "If anything, it might make you more worthy than all the kids here who don't appreciate what they've got. I wish you would have been open with me, but maybe if we'd gotten to know each other better, you would have realized where you come from doesn't matter to me. I guess this is why we need our date on Saturday. So we can both learn to trust each other."

My mouth dropped open with shock. "You still want to go on a date with me?"

A smile tugged the corners of his lips as he nodded.

"But why?"

"Because as much as I was surprised to know you were keeping something from me, I can see you weren't doing it to try and manipulate me. I want to give us a chance."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

I hadn't realized when he sat down how close we were or how his scent seemed to wrap its way around me. We were far too cozy in this corner of the library, and I could see why Anna found the secluded spot so appealing. His eyes lowered to my lips like he wanted to kiss me.

My phone beeped with an incoming text, and I quickly looked away. I was somewhat grateful for the interruption, because I had no intention of kissing Noah for the first time in Anna's secret make out corner.

As I glanced down at the screen, I was hoping to see a notification from my mom. Instead, it was a text from Wes saying he was back at the study tables with our coffees. It was hard not to be disappointed. I let out a sigh as I returned my gaze to Noah.

He nodded at my phone. "Are you expecting something important?"

He was always so surprisingly perceptive, and I could see he was genuinely concerned. I decided to tell him the truth. He'd probably think I was pathetic for missing my mom, but if I'd learned anything today, it was that I needed to be more honest.

“It’s my mom,” I finally said. “I haven’t been able to talk to her all week. She keeps missing my calls, and since she’s not working tonight, I was hoping to catch her.”

“You miss her.”

“So much.” I gave him a sad smile. “I’ve never been separated from her for this long before, and I’m finding it really hard. It’s especially difficult when I can’t even speak to her. I know she’s busy, but after today, I just want to hear her voice, and I would do anything to have a hug from her right now.”

“It’s never easy being separated from the ones you love,” he murmured.

Looking at him now, I got the feeling I wasn’t the only person missing my family, and I wondered if he was thinking about his parents. Cress had told me his father passed away some years ago and his mom was never around. It was difficult being separated from my mom, but I couldn’t even begin to fathom what it was like for Noah.

“What about your dad,” he asked. “Would it help to talk to him?”

“No. He’d probably just give me a lecture on how I’m embarrassing his legacy.”

“I get the same one from my grandfather all the time,” Noah admitted. “What does your father do?”

I let out a tired sigh. “Sorry, I don’t really like talking about him.”

“I understand. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s no intrusion. It’s just, after everything that happened today and when I miss my mom so much, my father is the last thing I need on my mind.”

He gave me a sad smile. “How far is Rapid Bay from here?”

“Far enough that it feels like forever away. I’m guessing I’ll have to wait until school holidays to visit my mom though. It’s too far for me to visit for a weekend.”

“Surely you won’t have to wait until the holidays to see your mom. Won’t she be coming to the ball next week? Parents are all welcome.”

I hadn’t found a chance to tell my mom about it yet, but I already knew there was no way she’d come. She never took weekends off at the café. “No, she’ll be working, so I don’t think she can come.”

“That’s a shame.” From the touch of sadness in Noah’s eyes I could see he truly understood.

“It is.” My phone lit up with another text from Wes, telling me he’d also smuggled us cookies into the library. “I should probably get back to my homework.” I slowly started to stand.

Noah pushed himself up as well. I wasn’t sure why, but I always seemed to forget just how tall Noah was, and as he straightened to his full height, he practically towered over me. His broad shoulders seemed to fill the aisle, and when I raised my gaze to his face, I could see him watching me with concern.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked. “What Veronica did today… Well, I know it can’t have been easy.”

“I’ll be fine.” I somehow always was.

Noah nodded before his eyes dipped to the phone in my hand. “Can I have that?”

“Uh, sure.” I passed the phone over, wondering what he wanted with it. His fingers flashed across the screen, and when he handed it back, I could see he’d given me his phone number.

“If you can’t get ahold of your mom and need someone to talk to, you can call or text me anytime.”

He’d surprised me again, and I wasn’t quite sure what to say. That was actually pretty sweet of Noah and the last thing I would have expected from him after everything that had happened today.

“And, Isobel?”

“Yeah?” I glanced back up at him.

“I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t trust anyone here.” His voice was quiet, and his eyes were earnest, like he truly wished I hadn’t felt so alone.

“I’m beginning to wonder if perhaps I can…”

He shared a soft smile with me. “I’m glad to hear it.” I’d never seen him smile that way before, but it seemed to reach out and thump me straight in the chest. Noah stepped back so I could pass, and it took me a moment to figure out how to use my legs again after being hit by his smile.

Anna definitely had one thing right. There was something special about the history section of the library.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I woke up early on Saturday morning. I was usually an early riser, but today I was awake before the sun had even considered breaching the horizon. I wasn't the least bit drowsy as I checked the time. It was too early to go for a run but apparently not too early to begin freaking out about my date with Noah.

It had been a long time since I'd gone on a first date, and it wasn't nearly so daunting because it was with Levi who I'd known since we were kids. I still questioned whether there was any hope for Noah and I, given our vastly different backgrounds. He said it didn't matter to him, but perhaps he didn't quite grasp just how foreign our worlds were. What if he reconsidered once he got to know me better?

When it was finally light enough, I left my dorm and set out for a jog through the woods. My gut had been churning with anxiety ever since I woke up, so it was probably a good thing our date was in the morning. I wasn't sure I could put up with these nerves all day. Thankfully, my run seemed to help, and by the time I returned to my room, I was feeling much calmer.

"Excited for your date?" Cress asked as I opened the door. She was still in her pajamas and carrying a stack of clothes. She laid them on her bed and started arranging them into outfits.

"Uh, sure." I was more interested in what she was doing. She kept shaking her head before tossing a piece of clothing to the side and replacing it with something else. As I came closer, I realized it was my clothing she had laid out before her. "What are you doing, Cress?"

“Helping you pick an outfit,” she said, lifting her eyes to meet mine with an enthusiastic smile. “My last roomie would never have let me pick a date outfit for her, so I’m really excited you said I could help.”

I couldn’t remember her asking if she could help, but I had no idea what to wear for a date with someone like Noah, so I wasn’t exactly in a position to refuse assistance.

“Thanks, Cress, I really appreciate it.”

Her smile widened, and then she nodded toward the bathroom. “You go and have a shower. I’ll work my magic here and should have the perfect outfit waiting for you when you’re done.”

“You’re the best.”

I quickly ducked in and out of the shower and then proceeded to do my hair and makeup. I usually dreaded trying to tame my hair, but it was being surprisingly cooperative today. I somehow managed to get it sitting in soft waves that cascaded down my shoulders rather than the usual bird’s nest that sat on my head. Even if nothing else went right today, at least I’d had one win for the day.

“So, any ideas what Noah has planned?” I asked Cress as I left the bathroom. The restless energy I’d woken up with this morning had returned while I’d been doing my makeup, and I couldn’t seem to shake it.

“I might have an idea, but my lips are sealed.” She lifted her hand and pretended to zip her mouth shut.

“Not even a hint?”

“Nope. I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“I really hope he hasn’t gone to too much effort,” I said. “What if he decides he doesn’t like me and regrets it?”

Cress gave a soft laugh. “You don’t need to worry. He already likes you. Like, *really* likes you. I think he’s liked you since the moment you tried to take him out in the forest.”

“I didn’t try to take him out,” I muttered. “It was an accident.”

“I’m just saying you don’t have anything to worry about.”

I still wasn’t convinced. “If you say so.”

“I do. Besides, he wouldn’t be taking you on a date if he didn’t already like you.” She passed me a bundle of clothes. “Now, try these on for me.”

“Thanks, Cress.” I shot her a smile and went to the closet to change.

I was surprised by how casual Cress had gone with my look. The outfit was a pair of high-waisted jeans and a black knitted tank with subtle cut

outs on the straps. It was something so simple I might have even picked it out myself.

“Are you sure this is a date-appropriate outfit?” I called to her as I slid into my jeans.

“For what you guys have planned, it’s perfect,” she called back.

Cress was only making me more intrigued. If we were doing something that didn’t require me to dress up, then maybe Noah had planned something relaxed and easy for our date. It was probably a good thing. If we were doing something extravagant, I’d probably feel awkward.

I walked back into the bedroom and checked my outfit in the mirror. I still looked like myself, and I was happy with what I was wearing. It definitely wasn’t what I’d expected when Cress had insisted she dress me. I had imagined she was going to get me into sky-high heels and one of her tiniest skirts.

“Do you like the outfit?” she asked.

“It’s perfect.”

“Not quite.” She handed me a small box, and I frowned as I took it.

“What is this?”

“It’s from Anna and me. Open it.”

I gave her a curious glance before I lifted the lid on the box to reveal a gorgeous chain necklace. Hanging from the end of it was a charm covered in engravings of tiny stars. It was delicate and beautiful. I didn’t wear much jewelry, but I couldn’t wait to try it on.

“I’ve got the same necklace but with the moon on it, and Anna has one with the sun. We thought it would be perfect if you had the stars to round off our little trio.”

Her words hit me hard, and I blinked back tears as I looked up at her. “You guys got this for me?” After everything that had happened this week, I was just grateful the girls hadn’t ditched me. I couldn’t believe they’d gone out of their way to get me such a thoughtful gift.

“Well, yeah.” Cress smiled in return. “I know you’ve only been here a few weeks, but you’re already one of us.”

I reached out and pulled her into a firm hug. I wasn’t used to receiving such elaborate gifts. Let alone gifts for no reason other than the fact that someone liked me.

“Thanks, Cress. I really love it,” I said as I pulled back from the hug. “Will you help me put it on?”

“Of course.”

I lifted my hair out the way and she gently clasped the necklace into place. “See, now you’re perfect,” she said. “We like to think our friendship necklaces bring us luck, so hopefully it will give you some on your date today.”

“A lucky friendship charm, I like that.” I glanced at myself in the mirror and smiled when I saw the chain around my neck. “Is this weird for you?” I asked as I faced her once more. “The fact I’m going on a date with your cousin, that is.”

“No, it’s not weird at all,” she immediately replied. “Actually, I’m pretty excited about it. I’ve wanted to see someone make him happy for such a long time, and he’s so different around you. It’s like I’m seeing the old Noah again.”

“The old Noah?”

She gave me a sad smile. “The Noah I used to know before his dad died. It was bad enough that he lost his father, but since then, his grandpa has had all these expectations of him, constantly pressuring him to fill his dad’s shoes and live up to the family name.”

She let out a sigh before she continued. “People always want something from him, and I guess it takes a toll. He’s so guarded now, but he used to joke around all the time. It feels like forever since I’ve seen him crack a real smile. He seems to feel more like himself when you’re around though.”

I felt a little overwhelmed, and I wasn’t sure what to say when Cress had finished. Noah and I had only known each other a few weeks, so it was hard to believe I’d had such an impact on him. When I thought about the connection I felt between us, it didn’t seem so strange. I’d been in a pretty dark place when I’d started at Weybridge, but every time I was close to him, things felt a little brighter.

A knock sounded at the door, and my heart shot to my throat. “That must be him.”

Cress grinned. “Then I better make myself scarce and give you guys some privacy. Have fun today!” With that, she skipped into the bathroom and I soon heard the rush of water from the shower.

I took a deep breath before I stepped toward the door and pulled it open. Noah was standing on the other side, looking flawless as always. He was dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, much like myself, but he

managed to make even the simplest of outfits look like something out of a catalog. For some reason, he had his hands rested over his eyes.

“Noah, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Just want to make sure you’re dressed. The last time I came through this door I got quite the surprise…”

I laughed and pulled his hands down. “That’s not funny.”

“But it made you laugh. I think it must have been just a little funny.”

I tried to look unimpressed, but I couldn’t wipe the smile from my lips. “Fine, perhaps it was a little funny.”

He grinned triumphantly, and it took me a moment to remember to breathe as I stared into his joyful eyes. I’d seen two sides to Noah since I’d first met him. There was the guarded side that Cress had described, which I’d seen at parties and around the people at school. But more and more, I was catching glimpses of Noah’s lighter side—the side he seemed to hide away. He was so much more buoyant and brighter this morning, which somehow made him unbearably gorgeous.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

I blinked and realized I’d been staring at him. I quickly nodded and grabbed my phone and purse off my desk before following him out the door. We hadn’t even started our date yet, and already I was coming off like a mindless idiot. I’d noticed I found it hard to think straight whenever he was close.

“You look beautiful, by the way.” He gave me a gentle smile as he spoke, and he was looking at me like I was wearing a gorgeous gown rather than a pair of jeans. “Then again, you always look beautiful.”

I blushed under his gaze and returned his smile. “You look pretty good yourself.” Good was an understatement. This boy really had too much going for him. Seriously. It only made me wonder what he could possibly see in me because his interest really didn’t make any sense.

My doubt was only highlighted when we emerged into the courtyard. There weren’t many people about, but everyone we passed stared at us, and they all seemed confused to see me at Noah’s side.

I’d had a strange mixture of attention on me after Veronica plastered posters of me all over the place. There were some people who appeared to feel sorry for me, and some who rolled their eyes like I’d been asking for the attention. Then there were others, like Veronica and her friends, who thought I couldn’t be trusted and didn’t belong here. Whatever people

thought about Veronica's stunt, I felt certain going on a date with Noah was doing little to divert the attention away from me.

"So, are you going to tell me what you have planned yet?" I asked, hoping to distract myself from the many eyes that were on us. We were making our way toward the parking lot, but I still had no idea what to expect. "You haven't given me any clues."

"Don't you like a little mystery?"

"No, surprises aren't really my thing." Especially not recently after my parents had dropped the wealthy long-lost father bombshell on me and then ambushed me with Weybridge Academy. My surprise quota was definitely full for the next couple of years.

"Well, I think you're going to like my surprise." His expression had changed since we'd emerged into the courtyard. His smile had disappeared, and his face stayed blank and neutral; his mask of indifference was well and truly back in place. Yet, when he spoke to me, his eyes still sparkled slightly. He was like a kid on Christmas morning trying to keep his composure but anticipating the day with a carefully contained excitement.

"Well, now you've got me intrigued," I said, earning myself a brief smile.

We continued to garner attention as we walked, and I struggled to ignore it. I already felt like I wasn't good enough for him, and the reaction of those around us certainly wasn't helping.

"I'm not sure people approve of me stealing you away for the morning," I said.

He frowned as he glanced around us, finally noticing the surprised looks we were receiving. "Just ignore them," he said. "They're probably just jealous I'm with the prettiest girl in school."

"I doubt that," I murmured back. I was hardly the prettiest girl at Weybridge, and the way people were looking at us made me feel like the exact opposite. It was like they were watching a troll date a prince, and they couldn't quite believe their eyes.

It was hard to tell if Noah was bothered by the attention because his face gave little away. His expression closed up like this whenever I saw him in crowded places, and I was reminded of how Cress had said Noah was different around me. It made me sad to think he'd become so wary of the people surrounding him every day—to the point where he completely shut

down around them. I wasn't sure why he opened up to me, but I was certain I didn't want it to stop.

Noah remained tense until we entered the parking lot, and he unlocked an expensive sports car parked right by the school. It was white and sleek, and his eyes lightened as he opened the door for me.

"I heard guys that drive fast cars are compensating for something…" I said, lifting one eyebrow at him. I was trying to break the somewhat somber mood that had overcome him, and it seemed to do the job because he let out a laugh.

"I just like fast cars," he said.

"That's what they all say."

He shook his head and closed the door after me. He was still smiling as he walked around the front of the car and sat in the driver's seat. The car rumbled to life as he turned the engine on, and he pulled it out of the parking lot. It was hard to believe only moments ago he'd been looking so gloomy.

"You act differently when other people aren't around," I said.

He let out a sigh, and I was sad to see his expression dim. "Other people always want something from me," he said. "My grandfather is quite influential, and I guess people are always trying to gain status by associating with me. There's nothing worse than people who are only friendly with you because of your last name. I find it far easier to simply shut people out."

"Surely not everyone at Weybridge wants to use you."

"You'd be surprised," he replied. "I've learned it's better to have a few good friends than a horde of false ones."

"You're talking about Kaden and Luther?"

Noah nodded. "I'm not sure I would have survived high school if they hadn't been here with me."

I couldn't imagine growing up and not trusting the intentions of the people around me. Then again, I'd been completely screwed over by my friends back home because I'd been too trusting. Perhaps Noah was right to keep only a select few people close.

"You're lucky you have them."

"Very lucky," he agreed.

My hand lifted to my neck as we spoke, and I traced my fingers across the star necklace Cress had given me. I'd only met her and Anna a few

weeks ago, but it felt like I'd known them for years. If I'd realized anything this week, it was that these girls were keepers and that I should never be afraid of being anything but myself around them. They accepted me no matter what, and it seemed similar to how Noah felt about Luther and Kaden.

Noah sped through the countryside along a winding road that cut between open green fields. I'd only been into town a few times since I'd arrived at Weybridge, but we were driving in the opposite direction, so I had no idea where we were. The sun was out, and the scenery was beautiful, so I didn't mind waiting a little longer to see what Noah had in store for us.

Eventually, Noah slowed the car and turned onto a gravel path. My curiosity only escalated as we drove alongside a high wire fence with nothing but open space on the other side. At the end of the road was a large shed, and as we drew near to it, Noah turned the car through a wide-open gate and into the fenced off area. Several small planes and a helicopter were sitting by the shed.

"Uh, Noah, where are we going?"

His face brightened with a beaming smile. "Somewhere very special."

"That's not an answer…"

"It's all the answer you're getting right now." He winked. "I don't want to ruin the surprise."

Noah didn't say anything else as he pulled up beside a small jet plane. The staircase was lowered to the tarmac, and my heart leaped with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Noah jumped from the car and came round to open my door for me.

"I hope you like flying," he said, still grinning widely.

I was too shocked to respond. He wanted to take me up in a plane? I mean, I should have figured as much considering he'd brought me to an airstrip, but it was only just hitting me now.

His expression started to fall when I remained in the car. "You don't like flying?"

"I don't know." I hesitated. "I've never been in a plane before." I realized I'd been stalling and stepped cautiously from the vehicle.

"Never? Seriously?"

"Seriously." My palms sweated at the thought. I wasn't afraid of the concept of flying, but I was a little nervous. "This is crazy. You know I

would have been fine with just grabbing a burger at Toddy's. It's not too late if you want to change your mind."

"I don't want to change my mind," he replied. "But if you don't want to fly, we can go to Toddy's if you like…"

He was being super sweet, and I imagined he must have gone to so much effort to organize this for me, so I quickly shook my head. "No, let's go on the plane. You only die once, after all."

"We're not going to die." He rolled his eyes and chuckled before he took hold of my hand to lead me toward the plane.

One of the crew walked down the stairs as we approached and shook Noah's hand. "How are you today, Mr. Hastings?"

"I'm good, thanks, Arthur. This is my friend Isobel. She's going to be coming with us today."

The man gave me a warm smile. "It's a pleasure to welcome you on board, Isobel."

I smiled and nodded in response. I was still too nervous to decide if this was also going to be a pleasurable experience for me.

Noah led me up the stairs to the plane, where a hostess was waiting to welcome us. I was struggling not to gape as we entered the cabin. It was open and gorgeous with white leather seats and beautiful wooden tables. There was even a flat screen TV on one of the walls. Noah got us settled next to each other on a couch before the flight attendant brought us over a couple of glasses of champagne.

"I can't believe you did this." I struggled to contain my awe. "How did you organize a plane?"

"It wasn't too difficult," he replied. "It's the company jet."

Noah's surname was everywhere. It was engraved across one of the walls and embroidered on the seat cushions. Even the little napkins on the table had Hastings written on them in gold lettering. If I hadn't been so distracted when we'd arrived, I imagined I would have also seen Noah's last name splayed across the tail of the plane.

"Wow, this is really incredible." I was still in disbelief. I couldn't fathom how much money a business needed to make to own a private jet, but it had to be a lot. "I guess your family's company must be really successful."

"Looks can be deceiving." Noah replied in a low voice.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of his comment so I decided not to press him on it. His definition of success must have been very different than mine. He probably thought they needed a bigger plane.

“Your family is in pharmaceuticals, right?”

“Right.” Noah’s expression had become more reserved, and it made me wonder how he felt about it all.

“Cress mentioned that you’d be taking over one day.”

“That’s the plan.” His voice lacked any emotion, and he became fixated on the window. I could tell he didn’t like talking about his family business, and I wished I’d never brought it up.

“Sorry, I understand if you don’t want to talk about this with me.” I didn’t want to start our date in a negative way, and my curiosity wasn’t worth upsetting him.

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it with you,” he said, glancing back at me. “It’s that I don’t really like talking about it at all.”

“That’s okay. We can talk about something else.”

“It’s fine,” he continued. “It’s just that things with the business recently have been…complicated. A lot has happened that’s putting added pressure on my grandfather, and he ends up passing it on to me. I always knew there was the possibility I would step up to run the business when my grandfather retired, but recently, it’s like I don’t have a choice.”

“Is there something else you’d rather do?”

His eyes swirled with a mixture of emotions. “I’m not sure. I just don’t like the idea of my future being decided by someone else.”

“Have you told anyone this?”

“I told my dad before he…” Noah paused. “Well, there’s only one person that matters these days and my grandfather wouldn’t understand. He’s all I’ve got now. I can’t disappoint him.”

“He’s family. I’m sure he would listen.”

“Not my grandfather.” Noah let out a dry laugh. “I’ve learned by now that you don’t tell William Hastings anything he doesn’t want to hear, especially if it affects the company. He doesn’t see a difference between himself and the business, and he expects a similar commitment from me.”

“That seems a little extreme.”

“That’s my grandfather.” Noah shrugged before he shook his head, and his expression lightened a little. “Sorry, that got deep real quick. I promise the rest of our date won’t be so intense.”

“I don’t mind intense.”

He smiled. “No, but I think I should at least wait until date number two or three before I unload all my baggage on you.”

“Oh, so there’s going to be another date, is there?”

“I hope so.”

My stomach fluttered in anticipation. I already liked the idea of another date with Noah. And it wasn’t the fact he’d organized a private jet for us that had me wanting more alone time with him. There was so much more to Noah than met the eye, and I felt like I could spend a lifetime unraveling the person he was when he wasn’t wearing his cloak of indifference.

The plane jolted as it started to move forward, and I reached out and grasped Noah’s hand tightly. A flash of embarrassment shuddered through me, but Noah gave my hand a squeeze in return. “You ready to fly?”

“Uh-huh.” I wished I sounded slightly more confident. It was difficult to combat the nerves bubbling in my chest. My feet had always stayed firmly on the ground, so I had no idea what to expect. Noah kept hold of my hand as the plane started to accelerate. It was probably sweaty and gross because my nerves were getting the better of me, but I couldn’t bring myself to let go.

I felt like I was being pushed back in my seat as the plane gained momentum, and when it lifted off the tarmac, my stomach seemed to drop back down to the ground. Vibrations shook the plane as we climbed higher, and the engines roared as they powered us upward. The takeoff was much less smooth than I had imagined it would be, and I gripped Noah’s hand tighter and tighter.

“It’s okay,” he whispered in my ear. “I’ve got you.”

I was staring straight ahead of me, but I slowly turned to him. Noah was smiling sweetly, and when my gaze met his, I felt the nerves drift away. As if by magic, the noise churning around us seemed to quiet, and I felt a wave of calm come over me.

“Take a look.” Noah nodded to the window. “The view is worth the take off.”

I leaned over to look out the window and watched as trees and fields and towns drifted below us. I became more excited and less uncertain the longer we were in the air, especially once big fluffy clouds began to move past the window. I’d always figured it would freak me out to look down on the world so far beneath me, but the whole concept was a little surreal. I

especially loved when we broke out above the clouds and they formed a blanket below us. It was like getting a little glimpse of heaven.

"It's kind of magical up here," I said.

"Yeah, it is."

I turned and found Noah was watching me rather than the world below. It was all too easy to get lost in Noah's eyes, but as I stared at him, I realized I was still holding his hand, and I quickly let go.

"Sorry," I murmured. "I forgot I was still holding on for dear life." I'd been squeezing his hand so tightly I really hoped I hadn't hurt him.

"You've got a pretty firm grip," he said, giving his hand a shake.

"You should have said something!"

"Well, I didn't want you to let go." He reached out and linked his fingers between mine once more. "I liked it."

I liked it too. It was crazy how something as simple as the feel of his skin against mine set my heart fluttering or how the way he lightly brushed his thumb over the back of my hand sent tingles all through my body. I'd thought the view outside was magical, but in truth, we could have been anywhere right now, and it would have felt just as surreal.

"So, are you going to tell me where we're going yet?" I asked.

"Nope."

"You won't even give me a small clue?"

"Not even a hint. I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"Maybe I don't like surprises…"

"Trust me, you'll like this one."

The smile he gave me was so open and genuine. When Noah smiled like that, it was impossible not to like him—and impossible not to want to fall deeply and madly in love with him. Noah's smile was lethal, a heartbreak in the making. I wasn't supposed to be falling for him. I was supposed to be protecting myself from getting hurt again. Somehow, I was here with my heart in my hands, open and vulnerable, as I contemplated offering it once more.

All I could think as I stared up at Noah was that I couldn't stop myself from wanting him, even if I tried. Falling for him felt inevitable. And if falling for him meant I was going to get my heart broken again, I was in serious trouble.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The flight lasted for a couple of hours before we landed at another small airstrip. I had no idea where we were, but the sun felt warmer against my skin, and there was a light breeze that reminded me of the ocean. It had only been a few weeks since I'd seen the sea last, but I desperately missed it and hoped that maybe we had made our way to the coast somewhere.

Noah was still as ambiguous as ever as he led me over to a waiting car, and once I was comfortable in the passenger seat, he handed me a blindfold.

"Put this on." He winked as he passed it to me.

"Is this a date, or are you kidnapping me?"

He laughed as he started the car. "You don't have to wear the blindfold if you don't want. I just really want to see the look on your face when we get to our destination."

"Okay, okay." I pulled the blindfold over my eyes and tied it behind my head. "You're really building up this surprise, whatever it is."

"It'll be worth it, I promise."

Although I couldn't see him anymore, I could hear the playful tone in Noah's voice and imagine the smile on his face. No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't guess where we were. The plane had landed somewhere quite rural, so I figured we weren't going to a city. And from the salty sea air, I was almost certain we were by the coast. Given the way the date had played out so far, Noah was probably taking me to some extravagant restaurant or a luxury beach property his family owned. I had to wonder if my jeans were really appropriate for either option.

“When you said you wanted to take me on a date, this really wasn’t what I expected,” I said. “And does the school mind that we’ve just flown away on a jet? Like, surely this is the kind of activity that needs parental permission.”

Noah chuckled. “I think the school is used to its students doing what they want, parental permission or not. Especially the seniors. As long as we’re back come Monday, they won’t care.”

“We *are* going to be back by Monday, right? You haven’t flown me to France or something?”

“No, I can reveal that we’re definitely not in France.”

“I should hope not.”

“We can always go to France next weekend though.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

I shook my head. “I don’t even have a passport.”

“I’m sure that could be arranged.”

I frowned. Although we were joking around, I felt the disparity between Noah and I more than ever. He flew on private jets and popped over to France for the weekend just because he could. This experience was fun and all, but it wasn’t my life. I couldn’t imagine it being more than a onetime thing. I’d been happy enough with the idea of a simple date, and as much as I was enjoying spending time with Noah, it felt like maybe he’d gone a little overboard.

When the car started to slow, my stomach tensed with curiosity and excitement. The date was far too extravagant for me already, but I was still eager to see what surprise Noah had arranged.

“We’re here,” he said as the car pulled to a stop.

I was practically bouncing on my seat as Noah came around to open the door for me, and my hands itched to lower my blindfold. I’d never been surprised this way before, and even though recent events had made me very wary of surprises, I was somewhat enjoying the anticipation.

Noah gently helped me from the car and positioned me so I was facing in a certain direction. He slowly pulled the blindfold from my eyes. “Okay, you can look…”

I blinked my eyes open and gasped. The scene before me was achingly familiar. Tears started to gather in my eyes when I saw the faded blue-and-white-striped awning and the old Beach Street Café sign. I thought my heart

might explode with the frenzy of emotions that wanted to burst from me as I realized where I was. Noah had brought me home.

“I heard the pecan pie is really good here,” he murmured.

I could barely form words to respond. I was in a total state of shock as I stared at the one place in the world I’d wanted to be these last weeks. “You brought me home?”

“Yeah, is that okay?” He sounded so uncertain, and as I turned to him, I could see a nervous look in his eyes.

“Are you kidding me? This is incredible.” I threw my arms around his neck and buried myself in close to him. I was overwhelmed by the smell of him, by the feel of his strong body holding me close, and by the fact he’d gone out of his way to make me so happy. My mind was racing, trying to contemplate how something that seemed so impossible was actually happening.

When I pulled back from him, I quickly brushed my palm across my cheek to wipe away the tears that had escaped my eyes. “We’re really here?”

“Well, I had something else planned, but it sounded like you really missed home this week. I could easily get you here, so why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re kind of amazing. You know that, right?”

He gave me a warm smile in response. “I think that’s the first time someone’s told me that and I’ve wanted to believe them.”

“Well, believe it because you are officially my favorite person.”

“Cress will be bummed.”

“Probably.” I laughed. “Come on.”

I grabbed Noah by the hand and pulled him through the front door and into the café. It was mid-morning, so the restaurant was quiet. The breakfast rush was over, and lunch hadn’t begun. The familiar sound of the doorbell chimed overhead as we entered, and Norma looked up from where she was cleaning one of the tables.

“Oh, Isobel, sugar, you’re home!” She dropped her cleaning cloth on the table and rushed over to give me a hug. The slight scent of cigarettes clung to her clothes, and the familiar smell was enough to make my eyes tear up again. I’d missed this so much.

“What are you doing here?” Norma asked as we separated. “And who’s the hunk?”

“Oh.” I laughed as she gave Noah a thorough once-over. “Norma, this is Noah. One of my friends from school.”

“Oh, honey, no girl can just be friends with a boy like that.”

“Norma!”

“What? It’s true. If I were fifty years younger…”

I smacked her on the arm, but Noah chuckled in response. At least he found this whole thing amusing.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Noah said, holding out a hand in greeting.

A small smile formed on Norma’s lips as she ignored his hand and pulled him in for a hug too.

“Norma,” I groaned.

Noah laughed, and from the smile on his face, I could tell he didn’t mind that she was a little overly affectionate.

“Is Mom around?” I asked before Norma could embarrass me further. Knowing my luck, she was going to continue talking about what she’d do to Noah if she were fifty years younger, and I really didn’t want to hang around to find out.

“She’s out back in the office. She didn’t tell me you were coming today.”

“She doesn’t know. It’s a surprise.”

“Well, I couldn’t think of more perfect timing. She’s missed you.”

“I’ve missed her too.” I actually hadn’t realized you could miss a person as much as I’d missed my mom.

I took Noah by the hand once more and led him through the kitchen to the office. It was so comforting to hear the clatter of pans in the kitchen and inhale the rich scent of fresh waffles. No matter how long I spent at Weybridge Academy, this would always be my home.

When I reached the office, I knocked on the door even though it was slightly ajar. My mom was at her desk, her head bowed over her keyboard. She slowly looked up, and her eyes widened with surprise when she saw me standing there.

“Isobel?” It took her a moment to overcome her obvious shock, but she barely missed a beat before she jumped from her desk and ran over to me.

She gathered me in her arms, and as she held me tightly to her, I felt like I was truly home. The scent of her lavender perfume enveloped me as much as the warmth of her arms. We must have stood there for five minutes before she finally let me go.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped. “You’re supposed to be in school!” I couldn’t quite tell whether she was excited, happy, angry, concerned, or all of the above, and I realized she was probably worried that I’d run away.

“Don’t worry, Mom, I haven’t skipped any classes. My friend has a plane, and he brought me down on it this morning.”

Mom’s brow clenched with confusion as she noticed the boy standing behind me. He was kind of impossible to miss, given his size and those bright green eyes.

“Mom, this is Noah.”

“The friend…” Mom sounded thoroughly unconvinced. I mean, given that he looked like a supermodel, I wasn’t surprised she had similar doubts about my friendship with Noah as Norma did.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Grace,” Noah said.

She gave him a cautious smile. “You too.”

I somewhat understood why mom was acting so wary. After the way Levi had treated me, she was as untrustworthy of guys as I was supposed to be. I hoped she’d relax a little though. Did she really need to act so cold toward him?

“Noah, why don’t you head back out to the restaurant so I can have a quick catch-up with my daughter. Order anything you like from the menu. Norma will help you out.”

“Sure, thank you.” He smiled politely at my mom before glancing at me.

“I’ll catch you out there in a minute.”

He nodded and quickly disappeared back the way we’d come.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Isobel, you left school without asking me and got on a plane with some boy you’ve just met. I don’t even know how I’m supposed to react to that.”

“Mom, it’s okay, seriously.”

“I know you miss home, but you can’t just leave school and fly around the country without letting me know where you are.”

I was a little shocked by the way she was reacting. I’d missed her so much, and when I’d discovered I was home, I hadn’t thought about anything else apart from the fact I’d get to see her.

“Well, perhaps it wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t sent me away without a proper goodbye,” I replied. “I’ve barely spoken to you since I

arrived at school, and this week, we haven't talked at all. Seriously, Mom, why haven't you been answering my phone calls?"

"I've been busy."

"Too busy to call me back?"

"Yes, too busy." Her whole body deflated as she spoke, and as I looked at her more closely, I realized how completely exhausted she seemed. She had bags under her eyes like she hadn't slept in days, and her skin was a sickly shade of white.

I suddenly felt scared. "Mom, is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. At least, it will be."

"Are you having troubles with the café again?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about. Just, with the Starbucks opening, we didn't make as much money this season as I hoped."

How did she expect me to not worry about that? "Why didn't you say something? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It will turn around. It always does. Just seeing you now is more help than I could have ever asked for," she said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get upset. You just took me a little off guard, but I'm so happy to see you."

Tears welled in her eyes, and I gathered her up in another hug. Now that we were hugging again, I could feel she'd lost weight. The stress was clearly getting to her, and I hated that I hadn't been here to help her manage it. How had I not noticed she was struggling so much before I left?

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the plane. Noah surprised me with the trip. But I'm not sorry for coming here," I said. "And seeing you this way, you'll be lucky if I even go back to school."

"Isobel, you have to go back."

"But how can I leave you like this?"

"Because, like I said, I'm handling it. I've been having a bad week, and it doesn't help that I miss you terribly, but everything will be fine. I promise."

I studied her face, weighing her words. Mom had always told me when things had gotten bad before. And if she believed she'd get on top of them, I had to trust her. "Well, if it's not, you know I'll be straight back here…"

"Okay, but next time, you run it by me first." She raised her eyebrows at me as she waited for me to agree, and I slowly nodded.

"Deal."

“Okay, good,” She straightened her clothes and stood tall. “Now, have I made the worst impression ever on your new boyfriend, or do you think we could start over?”

“*Mom*. He’s not my boyfriend.”

She cocked her head to one side as she studied me. “With one look, I could tell that boy is crazy about you. If he’s not your boyfriend, he definitely wants to be.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with her, but it was hard to argue Noah wasn’t at least somewhat interested in me that way considering he’d flown me here on a private jet. It was crazy and extravagant although probably not all that unusual for someone in Noah’s position. I decided to simply ignore my mom’s comment.

“I should probably get out there and make sure Norma isn’t trying to read Noah’s palms or something,” I said.

“Yeah, she’s probably telling him he’s going to end up with a gorgeous blonde who has the world’s most beautiful smile.”

My eyes widened with fear. “Do you think we’re already too late to stop her?”

“I don’t know.” Mom chuckled. “But let’s get out there just in case she also plans to tell him his future holds ten kids and a dog too.”

I was going to die of embarrassment if she had.

“Hopefully, I can rectify the awful welcome I gave him,” Mom continued. “I know I worry about you too much, but that’s no excuse for not being more friendly. Do you think he’ll give me another chance?”

“Yeah, I think so. Just so long as Norma hasn’t already scared him off.”

We walked out to the restaurant arm in arm. Noah sat at a table that was already loaded with food. Noah was a big guy, but even he seemed slightly daunted by the huge spread laid out before him.

“I swear I just asked for the pancakes, and Norma brought me all of this.” Noah held his hands up in front of him as if he was expecting us to accuse him of ordering too much. His tone was a mixture of guilt and surprise, and it made me laugh to hear him so bewildered.

“Yeah, Norma has been trying to fatten me up for years,” I explained.

“It’s her calling in life,” Mom agreed with a smile. Her eyes fell upon Noah, and a brief flicker of uncertainty shot through his gaze. He seemed apprehensive after their initial encounter, but the fact he cared about whether my mom liked him filled my chest with warmth.

“I’m sorry if I wasn’t very welcoming,” Mom said to him. “I wasn’t expecting to see Isobel, and I thought she might have run away from school. It’s really nice to meet you, Noah, and I’m glad to see Iz has made at least one good friend at her new school.”

Noah’s shoulders relaxed, and his expression warmed as he smiled at me. “Well, I’m happy to be considered one of Isobel’s good friends, and I can assure you we haven’t run away.”

“So I’ve heard,” Mom replied. “Though next time you both decide to leave school for the weekend, I’d like to be told first.”

“Of course,” Noah agreed.

Mom seemed happy with his response and gave an approving nod.

“Would you both like to join me for some food?” Noah continued. “I can certainly eat a lot, but I’m afraid this is too much, even for me.”

I eased onto the seat beside him. “I’d be impressed if you could finish a whole table full of food.”

“Are you challenging me to eat it all?” There was a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Because I’ll give it a good go.”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, you don’t need to prove your manliness to me by consuming three days’ worth of food.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I also happen to love our hash browns.” I reached over and grabbed one off an overflowing plate, taking a bite before Noah could try to claim it as his own. “You joining us, Mom?”

She was still hovering by the table watching the two of us. From the gentle smile on her face, I could tell she was already warming to Noah. She flushed when I caught her looking though and quickly took a seat.

“I’ve already eaten, but I could use some coffee.”

Eating breakfast with Mom and Noah was surreal. Weybridge was so different from my home, and having Noah here felt like two worlds were merging. I didn’t think they could work together, but it felt strangely natural. Now that Mom and Noah had gotten over their awkward introduction, they chatted like they’d known each other for years. I didn’t say all that much, but it was only because I was too busy soaking in the moment.

I still couldn’t believe I was here sitting with my mom and with Noah Hastings, of all people. Just a week ago, I had been convinced there was no way someone like Noah could accept someone like me. But today had me

falling hard and fast for the guy. It was really hard not to like someone who went to so much effort to try to make me happy. Not only had he noticed how much I missed home, he'd actually gone and figured out a way to bring me here.

When the lunchtime crowd started to filter in through the door, Mom had to get back to work. "How long will you both be here?" she asked.

"Not nearly long enough," Noah replied. "We have to get back later this afternoon." He gave me a sad smile, like he wished he didn't have to put a limit on our time here. I couldn't complain though because he'd given me something so precious just by helping me enjoy a few hours with my mom.

Mom seemed to share my sentiment because she gave me a soft smile. "I'll make sure I get some more time off after lunch so we can say goodbye," she said. "Why don't you two go explore the town before you leave?"

"I'd like to see your home," Noah agreed. "We'll have to leave here around three though, so we better get exploring."

I let out a small laugh. He would have seen practically the whole town on our drive here, but he looked so eager I didn't want to tell him that. "Okay, let's go."

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Showing Noah around my hometown was far more enjoyable than I expected. He didn't seem to mind that we avoided the glamorous shops and restaurants on the foreshore. Instead, I took him to my favorite places, like the old candy store that made its own homemade treats and the doughnut van that usually had a line a mile long in the summer.

There was the graffiti-covered alleyway with a portrait of the ocean that was popular with visiting Instagram influencers and the lighthouse that overlooked the bay. Each time I showed Noah another part of my home, it felt like I was revealing another part of myself. He loved each and every bit of it, and I hoped he also liked the more he saw of me.

I saved the best part for last. After the lighthouse, I took Noah down one of the winding paths that led to the ocean. I didn't take him to the main beach our town overlooked. Instead, I took him to a small secluded cove none of the tourists seemed to know about.

I pulled my shoes off as soon as we reached the shore and breathed in the salty air as my toes sank into the sand. There was a gentle breeze today, but the sea was surprisingly still, and the water wasn't its usual deep shade of blue. Today it reminded me more of Noah's green eyes.

The beach was small and protected by headlands that jutted into the water at either end of the sand. I'd always appreciated the spot most in the early morning light when the sun's colors danced across the horizon, but even in the middle of the day, there was something enchanting about it.

"This is our best kept secret," I said, gesturing toward the water. "None of the tourists know it's here. So you often get the beach all to yourself."

“I can see why you keep it to yourselves,” Noah replied.

I shared a smile with him. “And now you’ve seen Rapid Bay. There’s not much here, but it’s home.”

“It’s beautiful,” Noah said. “And much more peaceful than growing up in New York.”

Everyone thought Rapid Bay was beautiful, but hearing Noah say it meant more to me than I expected. It almost felt like I needed him to approve of where I was from. I guess I wanted reassurance that maybe we weren’t as different as I feared. “I love it, but it must feel a bit boring compared to life in the city.”

“I’d much prefer to live here,” he murmured.

I thought perhaps he was simply being nice. Living in Rapid Bay might have meant being close to this beautiful beach, but life here wasn’t always simple, and it definitely wasn’t easy. There was no way Noah would want to live here if it meant stressing over money and squeezing into a tiny apartment above a café. That wouldn’t be Noah’s life if he lived here though. No, he’d be living like a prince in one of the large homes on the foreshore, so life here probably did seem appealing to him.

“I’m serious,” he said, having caught my doubtful expression. “You have people here that really care about you. I’d give anything for that.”

I was surprised it was the people rather than the place that appealed to Noah, and I didn’t like the flicker of sorrow that flashed across his gaze. It made me wonder what his home life was like. I knew his dad was gone and his mom was rarely around. I’d lived my whole life without a dad, but my mom was the closest person to me in the world. I couldn’t imagine what it must be like for Noah without either of his parents in his life.

“You mentioned before that your grandfather is there for you though, right?”

“I guess.” He shrugged. “It’s not quite the same. He doesn’t worry about me like your mom worries about you. He wouldn’t care that I’d left school and borrowed his jet unless he needed it for business. Then he’d be furious. He is many things, but a grandfather is not one of them. I’m just a piece of clay he’s constantly trying to mold into shape. He wants me to be just like him and doesn’t care what it takes to make me that way.”

I had no idea how to respond. Noah’s face had turned hard, but his voice was filled with pain. He was looking out to sea like he wanted to dive in and swim away from all his problems. I felt like maybe I’d gotten a glimpse

into his world after meeting my father. Matthew wanted to make me more like him—more like a LaFleur—but I still had my mom so I didn't feel pressured to cave to Matthew's demands like Noah did with his grandfather. Plus, I'd only had to deal with it for a couple of weeks. Noah must have been putting up with that pressure his whole life.

I couldn't find the words, so I reached out and took Noah's hand in mine. I gave it a tight squeeze, and he glanced down at our entwined fingers like it confused him, like he wasn't sure how to react to the offer of support.

"I'm sorry your family isn't there for you like they should be," I said. It broke my heart that he didn't have someone looking out for him—that the one person constantly in his life only wanted him if he acted a certain way. That wasn't family.

"It's fine."

"It's not. Even the toughest of us need to feel loved, and I think you deserve it more than anyone."

His brow creased, and he turned away from me slightly. "You're looking at me like I'm damaged."

"No, I don't think you're damaged, but it sounds like you're trapped in the image of what people want you to be. I feel like I'm just starting to see the real you, and I like it so much better than the guy you show the world. The guy they force you to be."

He shook his head, unable to meet my eyes. "No one wants to see the real me."

"That's where you're wrong." Luther had told me Noah was the heart of their group. I hadn't believed it at the time, but it was so easy now to see why. He cared deeply—almost too deeply. And the fact he did so despite not being surrounded by love himself growing up only made him more special.

He slowly faced me again. "You really think that, don't you?"

"It's hard not to after what you've done for me today."

Noah reached out and tucked a stray piece of hair behind my ear, making my heart beat faster. It was impossible to ignore the connection between us when he was so close, and the invisible strings that tied us together seemed to pull taut, edging us closer still.

He drew in a deep breath as he gazed at me. "It would be so easy to fall in love with you, Isobel."

Out of context, those words would have left me feeling giddy, but his voice was quiet, almost strained, and given the glimmer of uncertainty I caught in his eyes, I knew there was more he wasn't saying.

"But…" I whispered, urging him to continue.

"*But*." He flinched slightly at the word. "After seeing your home today, I wonder if it would be such a good idea."

"I thought you liked my home…" I stopped as the truth hit me. "You didn't realize I was quite so poor. That I'm not good enough for you."

"No." He quickly shook his head. "*Hell no*. If anything, you're too good for me. My life is complicated, and I don't want to drag you into my family mess. You deserve so much better than that."

I nodded. Not because I agreed with him but because I could relate. I had a family mess of my own, and my life was no longer as simple as it once was. It felt tangled and chaotic, and his words were the reality check I needed. They were the warning I'd been waiting for. And yet, despite all reason, I'd given up trying to accept this was a bad idea.

"Shouldn't it be up to me what I do or don't deserve?"

"It should," he murmured. "And I'm far too weak when it comes to you to try and convince you otherwise."

I stared out at the ocean as I processed what he'd said. "You're not the only one who's weak." It took me a moment to realize I'd whispered the words aloud, and when I glanced at Noah, I could see he was waiting for me to explain.

"I've felt something between us since the moment we met," I said. "I tried fighting it, but you can see how well that's worked out for me…"

"Why did you want to fight it?"

I didn't know what to tell him. I'd had such a long list of reasons a few weeks ago, but it had been getting shorter by the day. I had to just be honest with him.

"I recently had my heart broken," I started. "It nearly wrecked me. I'm still piecing myself back together, so I guess I was worried that if I were to trust a guy with my heart again so soon and the same thing happened there would be nothing left to fix." I blew out a long breath. "The thing that worries me the most is that we're so different. How could a pair like us ever have a future?"

"There's nothing wrong with being different."

I let out a sad laugh. “You’ve seen where I come from, and it’s nothing like the world you live in. I don’t fit in. I probably never will. It feels like we’d be destined to fail.”

He didn’t say anything as he stared into my eyes. His gaze was discerning, and a lump formed in my throat because, as much as I wanted him to be logical, I also wasn’t ready to give up on the connection between us.

When he finally spoke, his voice was deep and his eyes unyielding. “You say that like it’s already written in the stars,” he said. “As someone who has had their fate mapped out since the moment he was born, I can tell you that it doesn’t matter how much has been planned. At the end of the day, we are the ones that decide whether to accept it.”

He was closer to me now. Standing so near I could feel the heat of his body against mine. His hand crept up to caress the side of my face, and I leaned in, unable to fight the pull I felt to him.

“Whatever this is between us,” I whispered. “It could end in disaster.”

“Then let’s make it worth the pain.”

His gaze heated as he leaned in, but he stopped just inches away from my lips and hovered there for a moment. I couldn’t decide if he was giving me a chance to pull away or testing himself to see if this was really what he wanted. If he thought I might have found some sense in these last few minutes, he was sadly mistaken. Didn’t he realize my heart and my head had lost all reason when it came to him?

Like two waves finally reaching the shore, we crashed together with unstoppable certainty. It was as though we were two magnetic forces being denied each other and finally succumbing to the pull that constantly drove us together.

All it took was one brush of his lips against mine, and I knew there was no going back. I kissed him deeply and without thought, completely swept up as I felt his hands circle around my waist, pulling me closer. He kissed me as though he had no lingering doubts and with the kind of determined intensity that left me with no option but to give in to him. And I was more than happy to surrender. My mind, body, and soul had all rebelled against caution, and even if I wanted to, I knew I couldn’t walk away.

I’d toyed with the idea of Noah. I’d known he was a bad idea. And that was before he had kissed me. His kiss was both the worst and best kind of torture because I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to give him up now.

“Isobel,” he groaned when he finally pulled away. His eyes burned like they were consumed by fire, and as he looked at me, I felt as if the blaze had spread to my skin.

How could a guy make you feel this way just by looking at you? How could someone’s lips completely erase your mind of all thought?

He took a small step away from me. It was the smallest of gaps, but with it came the ability to think clearly once more. It was like my brain had been deprived of oxygen and suddenly took a gasping breath in.

“I don’t want to break your heart,” he said. “I can’t promise you forever, but I can promise you our differences won’t tear us apart. If anything, I think they might be what keep us together.”

“You really think that?”

“I do. But, even so, you should know I’ve never had a girlfriend, and I’m not very good at trusting people or opening up. I want a relationship with you, but I don’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

“Then don’t hurt me.” I’d been prepared to walk away from him, but after that kiss, I wasn’t sure if I could. I’d never felt that kind of passion before, and I didn’t think I could simply ignore it now that I knew it was there.

He let out a humorless laugh. “You make it sound so easy. I can only control so much of my life.”

“But you can control your heart.”

“I’m not sure I can anymore,” he said. “Not when it comes to you.”

I closed the distance between us once more. Screw being able to think straight. I was tired of trying to do the logical thing. Especially when there was nothing logical about Noah and me. We made no sense together, but sometimes the best things in life came from the least likely of places.

“Are you sure about this?” he said as I drew close. “Don’t kiss me again unless you’re all in. You’re not the only one who doesn’t want to get hurt…”

I gave myself one breath to reconsider. One moment to try to talk myself out of it. But it was too late, and I was too far gone. I’d been falling for Noah since the moment I’d fallen on top of him in the woods.

I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck. We were never going to stop this relationship from failing if we gave up before it even began. “I’m all in.” I kissed him again.

I could feel his smile against my lips as he kissed me back. “Does that mean you’ll come to the White Ball with me next weekend?”

“Only if you’re prepared to hobble out of there at the end of the night. I’m a terrible dancer.”

“That’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.” He chuckled. “Who needs feet when I have you?”



NOAH and I had to rush as we made our way back from the beach to the café. We’d both gotten a little caught up in our beachside kisses and had completely forgotten the time.

“It was really nice to meet you,” Noah said to my mom as we exchanged goodbyes. He held out his hand to her, but Mom pulled him in for a hug.

“I hope we see you here again soon, Noah,” she replied.

He was smiling as she released him. “I hope so too,” he added before turning to me. “Take your time. I’ll wait out by the car.”

“But we’re late for the plane,” I said.

“It can wait.” He winked at me and then smiled, which set my heart racing. I couldn’t seem to stop looking at his lips. Had I really kissed them? It felt like it was a dream.

“See. Totally crazy about you,” Mom said as Noah closed the restaurant door closed behind him. “And I think you might be crazy about him too.”

My cheeks warmed as I realized I’d been staring after him. “He asked me to be his girlfriend on the beach,” I said.

“That’s lovely.” Mom smiled and nodded, but she didn’t seem as excited as I might have expected. She seemed more cautious.

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve got more to say about this?” I asked.

My mom sighed, and she looked a little defeated, like she’d much prefer to keep her thoughts all bottled up. “I *am* really happy for you both,” she said. “I just want you to be careful. He comes from a very different world than you with all those expensive things. A relationship with him won’t be as easy as you might think. Trust me, I know.”

“You’re talking about Matthew, aren’t you?”

She slowly nodded. “Your father and I had a whirlwind summer romance. He tried to charm me with expensive dinners and luxurious gifts, but I wasn’t really interested in those things. I was only interested in him. He was funny and handsome and the sweetest boy I’d ever met. We had a wonderful time together, but when the summer ended, reality hit.”

“What do you mean?”

Mom hesitated, and I could see she was finding it hard to dredge up the past. “Matthew had to return to college, and he invited me to come with him. I thought about it a lot, and a part of me desperately wanted to go. It would have been so easy. He was going to pay for everything to make it happen. But I’d visited his home already and seen the life he led. I knew I would never fit in there, so I stayed here.”

Her eyes fell to floor as she recalled the memory, and it was hard to read her emotions. I couldn’t tell whether she regretted the decision or not.

“A few months after he left Rapid Bay, I found out I was pregnant with you.”

“What did you do?” My mom rarely spoke about Matthew this openly, so I was hanging off her every word.

“It was Christmas by then,” she continued. “I went to visit Matthew at his home in New York so I could tell him about you. I had a whole speech planned and everything, but the moment I rang the doorbell, I forgot everything I wanted to say.”

She laughed and shook her head at the memory, her gaze still dipping low rather than meeting mine.

“Thankfully,” she said. “Matthew wasn’t there. I was almost relieved at the time because, with all the pregnancy hormones rushing through me, I would have been a blubbering mess if I’d had to tell him in person. So, I chickened out. I wrote everything down in a letter, left it with his butler, and came home.”

“And…” I prompted her.

“I received a note in response.”

“What did it say?”

“I can remember it word for word.” My mom’s eyes closed as though she was trying to shut out the memory. “It just said: *Candice, this is all I can offer you. I’m sorry. Goodbye.* There was a check in the envelope.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“I wish I was,” she said, shaking her head. “Of course, I tore both the note and the check to pieces. I was devastated at the time, but it didn’t take me long to realize that it was probably for the best. I knew I didn’t belong in that world, and I’d made the right decision to stay in Rapid Bay.”

She was standing taller now and looked directly at me.

“Once you arrived, I was so in love with you that your father’s presence in your life didn’t matter to me anymore. The last seventeen years haven’t always been easy, but I wouldn’t trade a moment of that time for anything.”

My mom stepped forward, and I opened my arms to pull her in for a hug, squeezing her extra tight. I wished it hadn’t taken me escaping from school on a private jet and Noah becoming my boyfriend for her to finally tell me what really happened between her and Matthew, but I was glad she had. It was probably a good thing she hadn’t told me sooner, or there was no way I ever would have agreed to meet with my father.

“How am I supposed to pretend I don’t hate his guts after learning this?” I asked when I pulled back from my mom’s embrace.

“I didn’t tell you this to make you angry with him,” she said. “And there’s more to the story. I think you need to hear your father’s side. I just wanted you to have your eyes open when it came to the kids at this new school. People who have the kind of money your classmates grew up with come from a very different world to us.”

“Noah’s not like that,” I said.

“I’m not saying he is,” she agreed. “I just want you to be careful and go into this relationship with a clear head.”

“Okay, I will.” Even as I said the words, I had to wonder how honest I was being with myself. I’d already abandoned a whole lot of caution when it came to Noah. Was I already being too reckless with my heart?

I knew Mom had been burned before, but that didn’t mean a relationship with Noah would end just as badly. Still, I couldn’t help but look at him in a different light. Was Noah the kind of guy who thought he could make his problems disappear with a check in the mail too? I hoped I never had to find out.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"How did the date go?"

I looked up from my breakfast bowl as Lily lowered herself into the seat at my side. I was the first of my friends to arrive at breakfast, and the rest of the table was empty. It was Monday morning, so I knew I'd be lucky if my usual group joined me at all. Cress had a meeting with her dance coach this morning, and Wes would be at training. Anna usually ran in just before the bell rang, and Sawyer didn't always join us, so I was somewhat glad for Lily's presence.

"It was pretty amazing. Noah flew me down to see my mom."

"What?" she gasped. "Wow, that's so romantic."

It was very romantic, but I don't think Noah had even been trying for that. He was just concerned I missed home and wanted to make me happy, which made it all the more amazing. We'd hung out all of Sunday too, spending the day lazing at the lake down by the old boat shed. We both must have been exhausted from the day before because we hadn't talked that much. There was something so comforting about just being near Noah though.

"So, are you guys official, or are you just seeing where things go?" she asked.

"Well, he told me not to kiss him unless I wanted a relationship with him."

"And…"

My cheeks flushed. "He's a really good kisser."

Lily gave a small squeal. "This is so exciting."

“I thought you weren’t a huge Noah fan?”

Lily’s gaze fell to the table, her forehead puckered. “I don’t really know him,” she said before lifting her eyes to me. “But I see the way he looks at you in class. If a guy looked at me that way, I’d melt into a puddle of mush.”

“A puddle of mush?” Lily sure had a unique way with words. “What even is that?”

“*That* is the dream.” She gave me a wistful smile. “All girls want a guy who can turn their bones to jelly with one look.”

“Has a guy ever turned you to jelly?”

“Not unless they’re in one of my romance books. The boys at school just don’t compare.”

“They might if you give them a chance,” I suggested. I would have agreed with her when I first arrived at Weybridge, but now I thought Noah was better than any guy in a book could be.

“You’re really into him, aren’t you?” she said, studying me closely.

“Yeah, I kind of am.” It was weird to admit it out loud, but I couldn’t deny my feelings for Noah anymore. Things were moving so fast between us. We’d only been on one proper date, after all. But I felt like we’d shared things that bonded us closely. He was beginning to drop his defenses around me, and I was starting to see the guy he truly was when he wasn’t trying to protect his heart and live up to the expectations of those around him.

“Mind if I sit here?”

I started grinning when I saw Noah standing behind me. His hair was still damp from his morning shower, and there was a wide smile on his face as he peered down at me. He wasn’t wearing his school tie today, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up to reveal his strong forearms. I really had a thing for his forearms—it was weird.

“I thought you always sat at *your* table…” I said, playing with him.

He bent down and rested his arms on the back of my chair, leaning in close so his breath tickled my cheek. “Are trying to get rid of me, Crash?”

“No, I just feel like it would do you good to realize you can’t always get what you want.”

He chuckled under his breath. “I think I’m going to sit with you anyway.”

“I kind of figured you would.”

He moved to take the seat next to me, and as I turned, I saw Lily's eyes fixed on us. Her mouth was hanging open slightly, and she looked like a rabbit trapped in headlights.

"I need to get going." She quickly rose from her seat.

"Lily, you don't have to leave."

She shook her head and gave me a brief smile. "I'm meeting a teacher before class, but I'll see you later, Isobel." She darted from the table before I could object.

"You scared away my friend." I turned an accusing gaze on Noah.

"I didn't mean to. I just wanted to sit with you." He looked slightly guilty, but he couldn't really be blamed. It wasn't like he'd growled at Lily or made her feel unwelcome.

"I'm glad you did," I said. "Aren't you hungry though?" I nodded at the empty space on the table in front of him.

"I ate in my room earlier," he explained. "I'm always starving after my workouts and often don't make it to breakfast, so I have a secret stash."

"So, why are you in the dining hall?"

"There's a certain girl I wanted to see."

"Oh, really? Where is she?" I glanced around the room pretending to look for someone, and Noah laughed before he took hold of my hand and squeezed it. "You know I'm talking about you."

I smiled as I focused on him. "I mean, I hoped so."

He lifted a hand and lightly stroked my cheek. "No need to hope. It will always be you."

This guy always knew the right things to say, and I melted a little in response. Perhaps Lily was right about the way Noah looked at me. My bones were feeling kind of mushy as his green eyes locked on to mine.

"We're sitting with the newbie now, are we?" Luther slumped into the chair Lily had vacated, and Kaden took the one on his other side. "Well, isn't this fun?"

Noah lowered his hand from my face, and I rolled my eyes as I turned to the two boys. Fun wasn't the word I would have used to describe Luther's arrival.

"Oh God." Anna said, as she also appeared at the end of the table. "The one time I show up to breakfast on time. Please tell me this isn't going to be a regular thing." She scrunched up her nose in Luther's direction.

“This *is* going to be fun.” Luther’s grin only grew in response. “What do you think, boys? Meals at the newbie’s table from now on?”

“I’m not so sure,” I quickly replied.

“Seconded,” Anna agreed before glancing in Noah’s direction. “No offense, Noah. We like that you’re dating Isobel, and you’re always welcome. I’m just not a big fan of this whole package deal…” Her eyes darted in Luther’s direction once more.

“Are you talking about me?” Luther asked. “I’m cut.”

He didn’t look offended in the slightest. If anything, given his smile, I think Anna had just made his day.

“We’re just visiting this morning,” Noah said.

“Yeah, Anna, so no need to get your panties in a twist,” Luther added.

“Please don’t talk about my underwear.”

“Why? Aren’t you wearing any?” Luther fired back.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” She was practically purring at him.

“Sorry, maybe this was a bad idea,” Noah whispered to me as Luther and Anna continued their banter.

“I mean, it’s terrible but also kind of entertaining to watch.”

He chuckled under his breath. “Those two could have their own reality series. Just stick them in a room together and start the cameras rolling.”

“That would be great TV,” I agreed. “I do feel bad for Kaden though; he’s kind of stuck between the two of them.”

Kaden was resolutely staring at the food on his plate, pretending he couldn’t hear anything at all. It was quite an impressive feat.

“Perhaps next time you could come sit at our table instead,” Noah suggested.

“No one other than you three sit there though.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “I think we can make an exception for you.”

“You *think*?”

I didn’t hear his response because Anna’s voice was louder. “God, Luther, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Noah and I shared a look before we burst out laughing. He leaned back in his chair as if he was trying to make himself comfortable. “I guess we should just sit back and enjoy the rest of this morning’s show.”

“I guess we should,” I agreed with a laugh.

Despite the fact Anna and Luther were on a mission in life to drive each other crazy, breakfast was actually kind of fun with Noah and his friends sitting with us. Wes and Sawyer joined, and even Cress managed to make an appearance before the morning bell rang. It was the lightest I'd ever seen Noah at school. He was cracking smiles and laughing despite the fact the dining hall was full with other students. For once, he didn't seem to be hiding within himself, and I loved every minute of it.

As we were leaving the dining hall, I realized I'd left my laptop back in my room. I told Cress to head to our first class without me, and I hurried back to the dorm to grab it. It made me late for English, and by the time I returned to the main school building, the corridors were empty. I rushed up the staircase that led to the top level and was almost to class when Veronica stepped into my path. She'd appeared out of nowhere, and I tried to walk past her, but she moved so she continued to block me.

I folded my arms over my chest as I looked her in the eyes. "What do you want from me now, Veronica?"

She let out a derisive snort. "You and Noah won't last."

"Uh, okay. Thanks for the heads-up." I tried to get by her again, but apparently, she wasn't done with me as she firmly stood her ground.

"He's not actually serious about you. You know that, right? You're just some fling to him. He'll soon grow bored with you and discard you like the trash you are."

I had to swallow down my anger before I responded. "I didn't realize you cared."

"Oh, I don't. You just need to know that Noah and I belong together and we'll *be* together. You're just a passing distraction."

My jaw clenched as I stared at her. "Look, Veronica, I don't know what's happened with you and Noah in the past, but it's clear you like him. And I know it must hurt seeing him with someone else, but you can't get angry with me because it didn't work out with you guys. Standing there trying to make me feel bad isn't helping anyone."

Her eyes briefly widened, but she quickly controlled the reaction, and a smug smile touched her lips. "Oh, Isobel, I'm hardly angry with you. If anything, I feel *sorry* for you. I mean, Noah's so embarrassed by you that he's taking me to the White Ball this weekend."

I had prepared myself for Veronica to come at me with another hurtful insult, but her comment stole the breath from my lungs. "What are you

talking about?”

“Noah and I are going together,” she repeated.

She must have had her wires crossed because Noah had asked me to go with him to the ball just two days ago. I knew Veronica and Noah traditionally went together, so maybe she was confused?

“I think you need to talk to Noah because he’s asked me to go with him,” I said as gently as I could.

“I think you’re the one who needs to talk to him.” Veronica sounded so certain. “Just last night, he was saying how much he can’t wait to go with me.”

I didn’t want to believe her, but a hint of doubt started to creep into my mind. Why would she lie? All I’d need to do to find out if she was making it up was have one conversation with Noah.

“Look, don’t take it personally,” she continued. “That’s just the way the world is. Guys like Noah don’t take girls like you seriously.” She turned on her heel and stalked away before I could respond.

I stared after her in a state of shock. I wanted to give Noah the benefit of the doubt. I really did. But it was so easy to believe Veronica when the things she said made sense. I’d known from the start that I was far better suited to serving Noah’s coffee than being his date to a formal ball.

I walked to class slowly, as though I was in a trance, and sat at the desk next to Cress without saying a word.

“Is everything okay?” she whispered. The teacher had just entered the room, and the class was starting to grow quiet as he began scribbling on the board.

I gave her a tight smile and nodded. “Everything’s fine,” I whispered.

Veronica was seated right in front of me, and she must have heard my reply because she shot a knowing smile over her shoulder at me.

Cress glanced between the two of us, and a small crease appeared at her brow as she focused on me. “Are you sure?”

“Yep. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

At least, I hoped it was nothing. Noah and I had always seemed like an impossible match to me, and as much as I liked him, it was easy to make me question if he really felt the same way.

I wanted to trust Noah. And I wanted to believe he hadn’t changed his mind about me. That he hadn’t decided I wasn’t good enough to take to the school ball. But one run in with Veronica and I was suddenly questioning

everything about us. As much as I hated to admit it, Veronica had gotten under my skin, and after a couple of days of bliss, I was already worried things were about to come crashing down around me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I waited until that night to confront Noah about the ball. I'd been wavering back and forth all day about whether I should say anything. I didn't want to come off as one of those suspicious girlfriends who freaked out over nothing. But I also just wanted to hear the truth from Noah's lips.

It was late by the time I finally worked up the nerve to visit him. I'd never been in the boys' dormitory before, and I had no idea where to begin looking for his room. Thankfully, I ran into Wes as I entered the building.

He smiled as he caught sight of me. "It's very close to curfew for a visit to the boys' dorms, isn't it?"

"This place has a curfew?" I joked. I knew about the rule, but it seemed like the kids here did what they wanted most of the time.

"You wouldn't think it." Wes laughed and scratched the side of his face. "I just meant I'm surprised to see you here so late."

"Oh, yeah, I was looking for Noah."

"Ah, *the boyfriend*." He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"Stop."

"Hey, I didn't say there was anything wrong with that." Amusement played in his eyes.

"No, but you're making fun of me. I swear it's like you actually want to lose your title as the nice twin."

"Sometimes I like to spice things up."

I shook my head and smiled. "So, do you know which room is Noah's?"

"Yeah, I actually sleep just down the hall from him, so I'll show you the way."

I followed Wes from the foyer and up a set of stairs to the third floor. Our building was noticeably different. While we had plush white carpets and crisp white walls, their dormitory was trimmed with rich woods and deep blue colors.

“I missed our study session tonight,” Wes said as we walked.

“Yeah, I still can’t believe Miss Constance gave us the weekend off. I thought we were going to be drowning in economics homework all year.”

Wes leaned in close and lowered his voice as he replied. “My guess is that she had a big night on Thursday night and hadn’t planned our lesson for Friday.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Did you see the size of her coffee cup Friday morning? It had *hangover* written all over it.”

“Ha! You think? Maybe she was just being nice.”

“I doubt it. She’ll probably give us double the work to make up for it this week.”

That was a terrifying prospect. “So, what did you get up to over the weekend?” I asked.

“Not a whole lot. Sawyer decided he wanted to cash in our bet on Saturday night and kicked me out of our room. I ended up sleeping on one of the common room couches.”

“Really?”

“Yep. One thing is for sure about Sawyer; he takes our bets incredibly seriously.”

“And here I was thinking the one thing I could be certain about with Sawyer was that he’s a terrible influence when it comes to drinking.”

“Well, there’s that too,” Wes agreed. He slowed and gestured toward one of the doors that lined the hallway. “Here we are.”

“Thanks, Wes.”

“No problem at all. Normally, I’d expect Noah to kill any guy who led a girl to his room, but I’m hoping he’ll make an exception for you.”

“Well, if he doesn’t, your secret is safe with me.”

Wes pointed a finger at me. “I’ll hold you to that.”

He turned and left me standing by Noah’s door, so I took a deep breath in and knocked.

“Come in,” Noah called out.

I slowly cracked the door open, and stepped inside. His room was much like the corridor with deep navy walls and dark wooden accents. There was only one large bed, so it seemed Noah didn't have to share. He wasn't currently in his bedroom, and as I turned to search the rest of the room for him, he stepped out of the connected bathroom.

My throat went dry when I saw he was only wearing a towel. His chest was bare with a smattering of water droplets clinging to his skin. I'd seen Noah topless before, but there was something so intimate about seeing him in nothing but a towel. Surprise lit his eyes when he saw me, and I realized I was staring.

"Shit." I quickly spun to face the wall.

Noah let out a deep laugh. "I'm getting a sense of déjà vu here."

"You said to come in!"

"Yep, this definitely feels like it's happened before." He was still laughing, but my cheeks were hot with embarrassment. It didn't help that I'd been totally checking him out. "Give me a sec, and I'll change."

I heard his light padded footsteps as he walked over to one of his drawers, and I swallowed deeply as I heard his towel drop to the ground. It was a miracle I managed to keep my breath slow and steady because my heart was racing.

"Okay, I'm decent."

I relaxed slightly when I saw he'd put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. He ran his towel through his hair as he watched me, looking far too sexy and decidedly not decent.

"So, do you normally let people into your room when you're half naked?" I asked.

"I could ask the same of you, Crash…"

I winced at the memory, making him chuckle.

"No one normally bothers me in here," he explained. "If someone's knocking, they usually need something important."

"So, you thought it was an emergency?"

"Or one of the guys." He lifted one shoulder. "I'm much happier it's you though."

Heat filled my cheeks again, and I turned from him. Noah had a way of getting to me without saying much at all. I started to inspect his room as I waited for my flaming cheeks to settle. There wasn't all that much in here. Just a bed, some drawers, and a desk. A guitar was settled against the far

wall and a pile of novels were stacked on his bedside table. I had to withhold the urge to walk over and inspect the pile. What would a guy like Noah read outside of assigned books for class?

“So, do all the guys have their own room? Or are you just lucky?” I asked as I slowly studied the surroundings.

“One of the perks that comes with having the surname Hastings, I guess. There are a few others who don’t have to share, but most of those guys are prefects who pulled some strings.”

“Uh-huh.” I was still struggling to look directly at Noah. Now that I’d gotten over the initial shock of seeing him half naked, my mind returned to the reason I had come. I swallowed down my nerves as I faced him once more.

“I had a run-in with Veronica today.”

His easy expression became tense as he looked at me.

“She’s not very happy about us dating, which I understand,” I continued. “It’s obvious she likes you. But then she told me you were taking her to the White Ball. Is that true?” I hated how pathetic I sounded. I really wasn’t this girl. I did want Noah to be honest with me though.

He didn’t answer right away, and after a few seconds, I could only assume the worst. “It *is* true?”

“No.” Noah finally found his words. “Well, not exactly.” His whole demeanor had stiffened, and he looked upset. “I haven’t asked her to the ball, and I certainly haven’t agreed to go with her. We go to this thing every year together, so she’s probably just assumed that nothing has changed. I’ll have to have a talk with her.”

His explanation should have put my mind at ease, but I still felt apprehensive. “Noah, she told me that you spoke with her last night and told her you can’t wait to go with her…”

“She what?” He took a quick step backward. “I didn’t say anything like that to her. I didn’t even see her yesterday.”

“Then why would she think that?”

Noah paced toward the window. He leaned on the frame and looked out at the darkened lake and the forest beyond. His eyes were narrowed, and his forehead was firmly creased. When he faced me again, he let out a heavy sigh.

“I spoke with my grandfather last night,” he said. “I told him I’d invited you, and he wasn’t happy. He may have decided to take matters into his

own hands and told Veronica how much I was looking forward to it. It sounds like something he would do."

"But you didn't invite her?"

"Hell no. I can't imagine spending the night with anyone but you."

My heart swelled in response, but my mind was still whirring. "I still don't understand. Why would your grandfather go behind your back like that?"

"He probably hoped it would force my hand and I wouldn't have a choice but to go with her."

I couldn't believe his grandfather would be so manipulative, but Noah didn't seem all that surprised. "Why does he care so much?" I asked.

He drew in a deep, almost reluctant breath. "My grandfather is in the middle of a major business deal with Veronica's parents. He seems to think the whole thing will fall to pieces if I don't take her to the ball."

"Surely, he's exaggerating?"

"I wish he was. But a lot of his deals hinge on personal relationships rather than figures or words on paper," he said with a grimace. "And our families have been pushing us together for as long as I can remember. He thinks it would be too humiliating for Veronica if I pull out now and her parents will blame him."

He returned to pacing back and forth between the window and me, and I could feel every ounce of his frustration in his powerful strides. "I just wish he didn't have to involve me," he said. "It makes me feel like I'm letting our whole family down. Like the fate of the Hastings empire rests solely on my shoulders."

I didn't say anything as I tried to wrap my mind around it all. I couldn't pretend to understand why this was so important to his grandfather. But one thing I was sure about was that I hated seeing how much pressure Noah was under and how it pained him to let his grandfather down.

"Maybe you should just take her…" I suggested.

"What? No—"

"Noah. It's just a stupid dance, and I can see how hard it's going to be for you if you don't do this." Noah's grandfather was the one family member he had left, and it was clear how being put in this position was tearing Noah apart. If I could make it easier on him, why wouldn't I?

"It will be harder for me not having you by my side." He rubbed a hand down the side of his face, like he wasn't sure what to do. I knew if I asked

him to take me to the dance that he would, no question, and that was enough for me.

“Just take Veronica. It’s not like you have to marry her.”

Noah blanched.

“You won’t have to marry her, right?”

“No, of course not.” He blew out a breath. “I guess all I’d have to do is arrive with her and make small talk with her parents for a while. I’d be yours for the rest of the night.”

“So why is this even a problem?”

“Because I don’t want to spend one second of the ball without you, and I never want to let you down.”

I tried to roll my eyes at him, but my heart distracted me with a small flip because I knew how much he meant it.

“And after what Veronica did to you with those posters…” he continued. “Well, she’s the last person I want to be seen with.”

“It’s okay, Noah, just go with her.” I didn’t particularly like insisting, especially because it was *Veronica*, but it felt like a small sacrifice if it would make Noah’s life easier.

“Are you sure?

“I’m sure.”

“Isobel Grace.” He stepped toward me so he was just inches away. “You. Are. Amazing. I’m sorry this isn’t going to be the ideal second date.”

“Well, no, it’s not,” I agreed. “I guess I’ll just have to make you promise you’ll be spending most of the night with me.”

A small, uncertain smile crept onto Noah’s lips and he leaned toward me so his forehead rested against mine. “I promise most of my night, all of my smiles, and every single dance will be with you, Isobel.”

“You don’t smile in public so that shouldn’t be hard.”

He chuckled. “I can’t seem to help it when I’m with you.”

His attention dropped to my lips, and that one simple movement sent a charge of energy into the air and tingles racing across my skin. I think he felt it too because he slowly reached up and cupped my neck in his hands, and his thumb trailed wickedly across the soft skin of my jaw. I shivered as the light tickling sensation moved down my neck and across my shoulders.

His mouth was only inches from mine. He wasn’t kissing me yet, and every breath his lips hovered close to me felt like a form of torment. In one sudden movement, his lips captured mine. His kisses were hot and intense.

My hands dug into his shirt, grasping him tightly as he worked at destroying any doubt that plagued my mind about us.

The girls at school wanted Noah for many things—his looks, his wealth, his status, and even his prowess on the soccer field. What they didn't realize was that his kisses outstripped every one of those reasons. Noah might have been great at soccer, but he was a damn pro at kissing.

When our lips finally parted, I felt dizzy, and it was only after I'd caught my breath that I realized my phone was buzzing.

"You going to get that?" he asked with a confident smile. It was like he knew he'd completely blown my mind with his kisses.

I quickly checked my phone and saw my father was calling. He'd tried to get ahold of me several times over the last week, but he always called at the most inconvenient times. There was no time less convenient than right now, so I quickly put my phone away.

"It's just my father. I'll call him back later," I said, wrapping my arms around Noah's neck. "I'm kind of busy right now."

"Oh really? I guess that means you want to kiss me again."

"That wouldn't be completely terrible."

"Wouldn't be completely terrible? You could give a guy a complex with talk like that," he said. "Maybe I need to practice my kissing."

"Hmm. I think you might have to. But it could take a while."

"Well"—he grinned—"I guess we better get started."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"Are you really okay with Noah taking Veronica to the ball tonight?" Anna asked.

It was Saturday afternoon, and we were getting our hair and nails done at a beauty salon in town. The place was fully booked up with Weybridge students, so Anna was keeping her voice down to make sure we weren't overheard.

"I told you already. I was the one who suggested he go with her. It's fine," I muttered.

"He really wouldn't be going with her if he didn't feel like he had to," Cress added, giving me a reassuring smile. "I know my cousin, and I can tell he's crazy about you."

"I still don't like it," Anna grumbled.

I wasn't totally on board with the whole thing either, but I understood why Noah had little choice in the matter. It really didn't help that Veronica had been all over him this week. She always seemed to be hovering around Noah and took every opportunity she got to touch him. He never responded to her advances, and I knew he had to put up with her because his grandfather was doing business with her parents, but it still made me uncomfortable.

"I'm just glad my parents don't choose my dates for me," Cress said. "I could think of nothing worse than being stuck all night with a guy I didn't like."

"You're only saying that because you're going with Sawyer," Anna grumbled. "It's the best of both worlds. You both get to arrive at the event

with a hot date, but because you're going as friends, you get to leave with whoever you like. I wish I'd thought of that."

"You didn't have to agree to go with Angus," Cress said.

"I know." Anna let out another grumble. "But he's hot. *So hot*. And when he asked me to go with him, I forgot for a moment what an ass he is."

"How could you forget?" Cress laughed. "That's all you ever complain about."

"Yeah, but we were at the boathouse party, and I'd had a few drinks, and he was kind of kissing me when he asked me, so I think my brain kind of short-circuited."

"We really need to find you a new hook-up buddy," Cress said.

Anna slumped in her chair. "Ugh, we totally do."

The conversation turned much lighter after that as the girls started making plans for after the ball. The event itself was apparently a bit of a drag because so many parents attended, but the party afterward was meant to be awesome. Everyone was heading to Luther's house, and according to Anna and Cress, the party lasted all night and people didn't head back to their dorms until the sun came up.

I wasn't so keen on the crazy party part, but I was looking forward to having Noah back once the formalities of the night were through.

We spent several hours at the salon before Cress drove us back to school. We were walking back to the dormitory when we spotted Wes pacing up ahead. He was on the phone, speaking quickly and quietly, and from the way he kept gripping at his hair, he seemed stressed. His usual friendly smile was nowhere to be seen, and I had a bad feeling that whoever was on the other end of the call was giving him bad news.

He hung up as we approached and let out a heavy sigh as he tucked the phone away in his pocket. It wasn't until he looked up that he realized we were there.

"Oh, hey, guys." His voice was melancholy, and it wasn't hard to see that he was upset.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

He traced his hand across his jaw as he looked at me. "Sarah just canceled on me for the ball tonight. She was supposed to be coming down for it, but something's come up, and she can't make it."

"Oh no," Anna gasped.

"She couldn't have told you sooner?" I asked.

“Guess not,” he replied.

Cress reached out and squeezed his arm. “Wow, that really sucks.”

Wes nodded, but he looked far more miserable than I would have expected. A part of me wondered if there was more to his disappointment than simply his girlfriend not coming tonight. He’d told me she didn’t make time for him when he planned a surprise trip to visit her in New York a couple of weekends ago, and I had to wonder if things were a little rocky with them. I hoped she had a good reason for letting him down tonight because he didn’t deserve to get ditched at the last minute.

“What are you going to do?” Cress asked, her voice soft and gentle.

“I guess I’ll have to go stag.” He shrugged. “My dad’s supposed to be coming, so he’ll expect me to be there.”

“You should go with Isobel!” Anna practically yelled the words, and she was grinning widely as she looked between the two of us. “Just as friends, obviously. She doesn’t have a date either because of the whole Noah situation. At least you both wouldn’t have to rock up alone this way.”

Wes seemed unsure as he looked at me and then back to Anna.

“Really?” It wasn’t clear whether Wes was asking Anna or me.

“Yeah, of course,” Anna replied. “Cress is going with Sawyer as friends. You two can go together. This way we all have a date.”

“What do you think?” Wes was looking directly at me now. “I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, but it might not be so bad if we went together. As friends, of course.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t be silly,” Anna interrupted, clearly worried I was about to ruin her grand plan. “Noah won’t mind, and by the end of the night, I’m sure we’ll all be hanging out together anyway.”

Maybe she was right. Noah would be busy putting on a show for his grandfather for the first part of the dance. There was no reason why I shouldn’t have some fun while I waited for him. I slowly started to smile. “Yeah, okay, it actually sounds really great.”

“You sure?” Wes’s expression had clearly brightened.

“Yeah, I think we’d have a good time together.” I was also relieved knowing I wouldn’t have to arrive at the ball on my own. And if I couldn’t go to the ball with Noah, I was glad I got to go with Wes.

“Great.” His face transformed with a wide smile, and I found myself echoing the look in return. Wes’s sweet smiles were contagious.

“This is going to be fun.” Cress clapped her hands together in excitement. “You can come meet us beforehand with Sawyer, and we can all head across together.”

“Sounds perfect,” Wes agreed. “I better go get ready. I’ve got to look good if I want to impress my hot date.” He winked at me, and the gesture reminded me far too much of his brother.

I folded my arms over my chest. “We’re going as friends, Wes, so you can’t say I’m hot.”

“As your friend, I can’t be expected to lie.”

“But—”

“Just accept the compliment, Isobel. I’ll see you later.”

He was still smiling as he left, and I felt a little better myself. I hadn’t exactly been looking forward to going to the ball alone, and I knew Wes would be good company. Knowing Veronica, she’d be all over Noah tonight, so I was going to need someone to distract me.

“Thanks for suggesting Wes and I go together,” I said to Anna as we continued back to the dorm. “I’m almost looking forward to tonight now I know I won’t be going alone.”

She waved my thanks away. “It was nothing. Though I have to admit, I’m kind of jealous. I wish my date had zero expectations of me tonight.”

I laughed at the sour expression on her face. “If Angus is all that bad, just ditch him and come hang with us.”

She perked up a little at the idea. “You make a good point. Although, knowing my luck, he’ll kiss me, and I won’t be able to resist him the rest of the night.”

“You’re hopeless,” I said with a laugh.

“Completely.” Anna smiled, and her eyes seemed to cloud over briefly as she became lost in her own thoughts. “Kisses are my kryptonite.”

“Me too,” I agreed.

Once we got back to our room, we all got dressed in our formal white gowns. I was surprised to find I’d actually arrived at school with one already packed for me. The stylist Matthew hired must have known about the White Ball because the dress they’d selected was perfect for the occasion. I’d tried it on earlier in the week to make sure it fit, but it was only now with my hair elegantly twirled up and my makeup done that I didn’t feel like a total impostor. I was surprised by how well it suited me,

and for the first time since I'd arrived at Weybridge Academy, I finally felt as though I looked like I belonged.

"Damn, Isobel, I wish I had your legs," Cress gushed as I stepped into the bedroom. The dress had a fitted bodice with a long slit that reached high up my thigh. I never would have picked something quite so revealing myself, but as soon as I'd touched the material, I'd fallen in love with it. It was crafted from the softest silk that had a gorgeous shimmer when it caught the light. I'd never worn something so luxurious before, and the dresses I'd worn to dances back home all paled in comparison.

"I wish I had your booty," I replied.

"Well, I have been doing extra squats all week to look good in this dress." Cress wiggled her butt in my direction, and I laughed as I swatted at her to keep it away from me.

"And we all know you both wish you had my boobs," Anna said, walking in behind me. Her dress had a low-cut front that really drew the eyes to her cleavage. There was no denying it; she was right.

Cress started to laugh. "Our nicknames should be Tits, Legs, and Ass."

"Ah, I love it!" Anna exclaimed. "We should get matching tattoos with our new nicknames to celebrate."

I didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm, but I couldn't help but lift an eyebrow in response. "You really want to walk around with the word tits tattooed on you?"

"Hell yeah, I do," Anna shot back. "If anyone asks about it, it'll be a great excuse to tell them how great my tits are."

I burst out laughing. "How have I spent seventeen years without you guys in my life?"

"I know, right?" Anna agreed.

Now that we were dressed, we spent the rest of the time before the ball listening to music and putting the finishing touches on our makeup. Just before eight o'clock, there was a knock at the door, and Anna went to answer it.

She grinned as she started to pull it open. "Legs, Ass, your dates are here," she called over her shoulder to us.

The door opened wide to reveal the twins both standing in the entrance with equally confused looks on their faces. They were always strikingly similar, but their matching expressions and tuxedos made them look more identical than ever.

“Do I even want to know what you’re talking about?” Wes asked.

“I definitely do,” Sawyer said, a cheeky grin forming on his lips as he stepped through the door. With the tall, athletic Montfort twins now in the room, it suddenly felt a lot smaller.

“Those are their new nicknames,” Anna said with a proud expression on her face. “And mine is Tits, just in case you were wondering.”

“Are you planning on telling absolutely everyone?” Cress gently slapped Anna on the arm.

“Everyone who will listen.”

“I can totally see where you get the names from,” Sawyer said as he ran an assessing eye over our outfits. “You girls look hot. If I didn’t actually like you, I’d probably want to bang you.”

Wes had walked over to stand near me, and I leaned in close to him. “I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not,” I murmured.

“It’s the biggest compliment you can get from Sawyer,” he said with a laugh. “You do look beautiful though, Isobel.”

I flushed at his compliment. “You look quite dashing yourself.”

“Thanks.” He smiled and tugged proudly on the lapels of his jacket.

The twins were both wearing matching tuxedos, and if I didn’t already know who was who, it would have been nearly impossible to tell the two boys apart. Wes’s hair wasn’t gelled back like his brother’s, and it was easy to tell it was him when you looked into his kind brown eyes.

“So, who wants some vodka before we get this party started?” Sawyer grinned, offering a hip flask.

Cress and Anna happily took a swig, but I quickly shook my head when he held it out to me. “I’m not letting you be a bad influence on me tonight, Sawyer.”

He winked. “The night is young, Grace. Don’t make declarations you don’t intend to keep.”

“Oh, I’m keeping this one,” I muttered.

Sawyer moved on to offer a drink to his brother, but Wes also refused. “I think I’ll follow your lead, Isobel. If I have too many drinks, I’ll probably start spilling my guts about Sarah ditching me tonight.”

I reached out and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. “I’m sorry she bailed on you.”

He smiled and shrugged. “I guess it’s not all bad. I do get to take the infamous *Legs* to the ball, after all.”

“Shut up!” I swatted a hand against his chest, and he laughed. “Who’s to say I’m Legs anyway?”

He glanced down at the long slit that cut up my thigh, and my cheeks heated under his gaze. “How could you not be?” he asked.

My throat restricted slightly, and for a moment, I had to remind myself that Wes was just a friend—a really hot, sweet friend who happened to have a girlfriend. He also wasn’t Noah. He didn’t come close.

“We should get going,” Anna said. “I’m meant to be meeting Angus there in a minute.”

“He’s not coming to get you?” Wes asked. It wasn’t hard to miss the judgmental tone in his voice.

“Nope. Angus is a dick.”

“Yeah, remind me, why are you going with him again?” Sawyer asked.

“Because his lips are my greatest weakness,” Anna said, a hint of defeat in her voice.

Sawyer scoffed. “Angus? Really?”

“Yeah, the guy has skills.”

“Huh. I’ll have to ask him what his secret is.” Sawyer had a thoughtful look on his face as he considered the idea.

“No need,” Anna immediately responded. “I can tell you right now what it is. He has this way of curling his tongue—”

“Why don’t you guys talk about this later!” Cress practically leaped forward to interrupt them.

I nodded, relieved Cress had stepped in before we all had to hear about Angus’s tongue. “Yeah, we don’t want to be late.”

“We aren’t done with this conversation,” Sawyer said, pointing at Anna who nodded firmly in response.

Cress and I began to usher everyone from the room before Anna and Sawyer could start up another conversation we didn’t want to be a part of. We left the dorm and headed across the courtyard to the main building. I’d been at Weybridge a month now, but I hadn’t come close to exploring the entire school in that time. To get to the ball, we walked to the far end of Esher Hall where people were gathering outside a set of wide-open doors.

The women were all dressed in gorgeous white gowns while the men wore tailored tuxedos that fitted them perfectly. I’d never seen so many people all dressed so beautifully before. The air practically radiated with wealth and privilege. I smoothed my hands over the front of my dress, once

again caressing the unfamiliar feeling of smooth silk. I might have looked the part, but I was still worried people could see I didn't belong in this dress, let alone this school.

"Ugh, there's my date," Anna groaned. She reached out and swiped Sawyer's hip flask from his hand before taking a long drink. She grimaced as the alcohol hit her mouth, but that was the only sign of discomfort as she quickly knocked the drink back.

"I'll see you guys inside," she said, giving a miserable scrunch of her nose before she marched over to greet Angus.

I skimmed my eyes over the waiting crowd, looking for any sign of Noah. It was the first time since we'd started dating that I wasn't completely sure whether I wanted to see him or not. As much as I understood his situation, I hated knowing he'd have Veronica on his arm tonight, and it wasn't something I particularly wanted to witness. I felt slightly relieved when I couldn't find him among the huddled crowd outside the entrance.

"You ready for your first Weybridge event?" Wes caught my attention as he took my arm in his.

"Sure, let's go," I replied with an empty smile. The truth was, I wasn't ready. Not even close. Thoughts of Noah and Veronica had wedged their way into my mind. And even with Wes by my side, I had a bad feeling this night was going to be far more difficult to endure than I'd imagined.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The ballroom inside Esher Hall was strikingly elaborate. Tall pillars lined the walls, and glistening chandeliers twinkled overhead. The room was already filled with people dancing as a large orchestra played a classic tune from their spot on a raised stage at the far end of the room. I'd never felt so out of place in my life.

"God, I hate these things," Cress said as the twins went to get us drinks. "I wouldn't have bothered coming if my parents weren't going to be here."

"Your parents are here?" I was a little surprised as Cress hadn't mentioned it to me. I would have expected her to spend some time with them today if they were going to be in the area. Especially since Weybridge Academy was in the middle of nowhere.

"I mean, they said they were going to try and come when we talked earlier this week, but knowing them, they've jetted off to some remote island for the weekend and forgotten all about it."

"Wouldn't they let you know either way?"

"They can be a bit flighty." Cress shrugged. "I love them to death, but they're not the most reliable parents. How about you. Is your mom coming?"

"I wish." I'd considered telling Mom about the ball, but she was already so stressed with the café, and I didn't want her to feel bad she couldn't make it. She would have needed to take the weekend off work, and given how things were going, I knew there was no chance it would happen.

As I was watching Cress, I noticed her gaze lock on to something behind me. Her whole body tensed, and an angry look entered her eyes.

“What are you looking a—” I turned to see what had caught her attention, and immediately wished I hadn’t. Noah had just entered the ballroom with Veronica on his arm. His face displayed his infamous mask of indifference, but it didn’t stop my stomach from curdling as Veronica clung tightly to him.

She looked beautiful tonight. They both did. Like they were made for one another. If it weren’t for the cold look in Noah’s eyes, I’d probably have burst into tears. I knew this wasn’t what he wanted. And yet, it was impossible not to feel hurt as I watched on.

Cress lightly touched my arm. “Why don’t we go see how the twins are getting on with the drinks?”

I nodded and let her drag me away. Avoiding Noah was going to be my new mission for the night. I just had to grit my teeth and bear it until he was finally through with whatever formalities were expected of him.

“I’m so sorry he’s here with her,” Cress said as we made our way through the crowd.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I told him to come with her.”

“But only because you could see how much Noah hated letting his grandfather down. I hate that William always gets his way with Noah.” Anger laced her voice. “He’s always abusing their relationship, and it drives me crazy.”

“I can’t imagine how hard it must be for Noah.”

“I know,” she agreed. “He’s constantly torn between what he wants and what his grandfather commands, and if there’s any conflict between their needs, it’s always Noah’s that get pushed aside. The company always comes first. I sometimes think William knows how worried Noah is about losing him and plays on his fear. It’s sick.”

I felt a wave of sorrow for Noah wash over me. He always acted so strong, but I couldn’t imagine what it would be like growing up without both parents. And it was heartbreaking that he was constantly worried about losing the one parental figure he had left too. William Hastings sounded like a piece of work. What kind of person would knowingly abuse their relationship with their grandson in that way?

We found the guys just as Sawyer was slipping a hundred-dollar bill to a waiter in exchange for a few glasses of champagne from his tray. When I caught his eye, he grinned and offered a glass to me. “Ready to join the dark side yet?”

“Screw it,” I said, grabbing the glass before taking a long drink.

“That’s our girl,” Cress said with a smile.

“I knew it wouldn’t take much to get you on board,” Sawyer added.

“I might as well have one too.” Wes reached out and took a glass for himself.

We lifted our glasses in a quick toast and then drank our champagne before any of the adults noticed. I wasn’t sure they were all that bothered about students drinking. The parents didn’t seem to mind. I was more worried about the teachers who were walking around the ballroom with discerning eyes.

“We should dance,” Sawyer said, placing his empty glass down on the closest table.

Cress didn’t need any convincing and happily took his arm as he led her onto the dance floor. I hesitated and shared an uncertain look with Wes. He had a similar expression on his face, and I let out a laugh. “We’re going to make a scene, aren’t we?”

“I promise I won’t accidentally punch you.”

“And I’ll try my best not to step on your toes.”

He grinned and held out a hand toward me. “Let’s just shuffle about and hope no one notices.”

“Okay, but if there’s an injury, we call it quits for the night.”

“Agreed.”

Dancing with Wes wasn’t nearly as embarrassing as I expected. We probably looked awkward to anyone watching us closely, but at least Wes was easy to talk to, and it was much nicer than spending my time worrying about what Noah was up to with Veronica.

We were halfway through our second song when I felt a presence at my side. “May I cut in?”

My stomach flipped as I recognized the voice, and I slowly peered up into my father’s ice-blue eyes.

My arms dropped from Wes’s shoulders as I faced Matthew head-on. “What are you doing here?”

“Attending my daughter’s first school ball, of course.” He turned his attention to Wes and held out his hand. “Matthew LaFleur, Isobel’s father.”

Wes straightened, and his eyes widened with recognition. “Wesley Montfort.” He shook my father’s hand firmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir, my father has many good things to say about you.”

“Ah, one of August’s sons. Is your father here tonight?”

“He intends to be,” Wes replied. As he let go of my father’s hand, he caught my eye, and I could tell by the confused look on his face he was wondering how the hell he hadn’t known Matthew was my father.

“Excellent. I hope to see him later,” Matthew responded. “Now, if you’ll excuse us. I’d like to dance with my daughter.”

Wes nodded and stepped back. He hovered in place for a second, still glancing between Matthew and me. I could practically hear the cogs whirring away inside his head as he considered what he’d just learned about me, but he composed himself and hurried away, disappearing into the crowd of dancers without another word. I was more concerned by the fact I was now alone with my father, and I couldn’t help but feel betrayed by Wes for leaving me with Matthew. I let out a sigh and stepped into Matthew’s waiting arms, unable to relax as he started to guide me around the dance floor.

We danced in silence for several minutes. He held me at a distance, and it seemed that neither one of us could relax. It didn’t help that there seemed to be a slightly pained expression on Matthew’s face whenever he looked at me. I found myself wondering if maybe he disproved of the dress I wore.

“Is there something wrong?” I finally asked him. “You keep looking at me strangely.”

“No, there’s nothing wrong. I’m sorry, you just remind me very much of my sister tonight. You look a lot like her. I hadn’t noticed until now.”

“I have an aunt?”

“Yes, but…” His voice trailed off before he took a deep breath. “I’m afraid she died a few years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

"Thank you,” he said, bowing his head. “She would have loved to meet you. Especially tonight. An event like this was more her scene than mine.”

We both fell silent again, and it was hard not to feel a little sympathy for my father. I couldn’t imagine what it was like to lose a sibling, and I wondered if they were close. Given the way he’d been looking at me, I got the feeling that he missed my aunt terribly. I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to know more about my aunt, but I was still brimming with anger toward him after learning how he’d treated my mom.

“I tried to call you several times this week,” Matthew said. “To let you know I was planning to come tonight.”

“Oh, that’s why you were calling.”

“Yes.”

“I just assumed it was your butler on the line.”

Matthew stiffened, but his expression didn’t change. If there was one thing he appeared to be good at, it was maintaining an air of composure. I, on the other hand, felt ruffled by his sudden appearance. I hated that he’d taken me by surprise tonight, and I wished I’d answered his calls this week so I could have told him not to come. I didn’t want to see him, let alone in such a public place. And I was only putting up with him now because I didn’t want to cause a scene.

“I know you’re still angry with me,” Matthew said.

I huffed and looked away. Would I ever not be angry with him?

“But I hoped that if I came here tonight you might let me explain.”

I shook my head. “Why do you think I’d listen to you now? I finally managed to get my mother to open up about what happened between you two. And if you thought I was angry before, it’s nothing compared to how I feel now.”

“Just give me five minutes,” he said. “I know what your mother has told you doesn’t look great on my behalf, but she didn’t know the full story until very recently.”

His expression was drawn, and his eyes were pleading with me to give him a chance.

“You have until the end of this dance,” I said. It felt like a much more generous offer than he deserved, but my mom had told me there were parts of the story only he could tell. Perhaps it was worth a listen.

“Fair enough.” He drew in a deep breath. “I guess I’ll get right to it. The truth is, I didn’t know you existed.”

I stilled in Matthew’s arms as his words pummeled into me. The admission felt like a punch to the gut, and it was the last thing I expected to come out of his mouth. I felt breathless and confused. I didn’t know how to voice a response.

“I only found out about you a couple of months ago,” he continued. “And since the moment I discovered I had a daughter, I’ve been doing everything in my power to be a part of your life.”

“That can’t be true.” I refused to believe him. “Look, if I’d known you were going to lie to me…” I went to step from his grasp, but he held on a little tighter.

“It’s the truth, Isobel,” he said. “Please, you gave me until the end of the song. I just need another minute.”

“Okay.” I was struck by how different he looked, so vulnerable and open, as his eyes pleaded with me to listen to him. “Go on, but your time is running out.”

He slowly started to guide me around the dance floor once more as he continued. “Candice never told me she was pregnant. She sent a letter explaining the situation, but I never received it. From what I can gather, my parents intercepted the letter. I’m not sure what they were thinking, but I guess they were hoping, if they hid the truth from me, the whole situation would go away. And it did. Until my father died and I found your mother’s letter in his safe. It was seventeen years too late though.”

I was speechless, and my mind raced as I compared my father’s story with the one Mom had told me. There was one thing that didn’t quite add up. “What about the note and the check my mom received from you in the mail?”

Matthew frowned slightly. “Your mother told me about that when I first reached out to her,” he said. “It was the first I’d heard of it, and it didn’t come from me. My parents must have sent it, hoping she was just looking for money.”

“Well, she wasn’t,” I said. “She tore it up.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.” Matthew let out a long sigh. “I don’t know why your mother didn’t come and speak to me. Why she didn’t call me. But I don’t blame her for what happened. All I know is that I’m certain our lives would have been completely different if that one piece of paper had made it into my hands. I promise you that.”

The song had come to an end, and we stopped dancing as everyone around us applauded the orchestra. Matthew and I stood like statues though, staring at each other.

“That’s all I can really say in that one dance,” he finished. “But I hope that you’ll give me another chance to talk about this. And I hope that one day we’ll have an opportunity to dance together again.”

He slowly released his grasp on me before he turned and walked away. I felt numb after listening to Matthew’s explanation, and I was somewhat grateful he’d left rather than waited for a response. I didn’t know how to process what he’d told me.

My grandparents had kept me a secret from my father and tried to silence my mom with money. It seemed impossible to believe, and yet I felt like Matthew was telling the truth. I was starting to understand this world of wealth and power, and his story fit right in with everything else I'd heard while at Weybridge.

Fingers brushed against my arm, and I looked up to find Noah staring down at me. His face had been a mask earlier when I'd seem him arrive with Veronica, but now he was showing me a gentle smile. "You look a little lost out here," he said.

I let out a laugh, immediately feeling more relaxed now that he was with me. "I always feel a little lost on a dance floor."

"Can I steal a dance with you?" he asked.

"I don't think it's considered stealing if I'm already yours."

He grinned and swept me up in his arms. I felt so small with Noah wrapped around me, and every inch of my body buzzed from the contact. I wanted to get caught up in the moment with him, but my conversation with Matthew was still rolling around in my head.

"Is everything okay?"

I looked up and found Noah watching me with a look of concern. I'd been waiting for him all night, but now all I could think about was my father. I needed to shelve everything I'd just learned and try to digest it later, at a time when I could properly process it all. For now, I just wanted to enjoy the ball with Noah.

I pushed Matthew from my mind and smiled back at Noah. "Yeah, everything's great." And it was because we were together. "I'm surprised I managed to tear you away from your date so early in the night. Shouldn't you still be with Veronica?"

"I'm right where I'm supposed to be," he said. "I agreed to come here with her, but if I recall correctly, I promised you all the dances."

"You did."

"And when I saw you alone on the dance floor, I knew I had to whisk you away before someone else did," he continued. "You look gorgeous tonight. I'm the envy of every guy in here right now."

My cheeks warmed as I shook my head. "You're just saying that."

"Am I? Because none of them can take their eyes off of you."

I swallowed nervously and glanced around us. He was right. People were looking our way, but it was far more likely they were interested in

Noah rather than me.

"See?" he prompted.

I had to laugh. "You always like to be right, don't you?"

"It's not a matter of liking to be right; it's knowing I'm right."

I rolled my eyes. "And what if all those people looking at us are doing so because of you? You did arrive at the ball with a different date, after all. That's good gossip."

"Well, we know how much they like gossip. But if they're looking at me instead of you, they're idiots." He reached up and cupped my neck with his hands, tracing his thumbs lightly over my skin as he looked into my eyes. "Because you're the only one I see."

He lowered his lips to mine and chastely brushed them with a kiss. It might have been brief, but it made my pulse race. Was I ever going to get used to how my body reacted to Noah?

"I'm glad I promised you all my dances," Noah said as he lowered his hands to a more appropriate dancing position. "Because now that I have you in my arms, I'm not sure I'll be able to let you go."

"Well, luckily, you don't have to." I felt the same way. It had hurt to see him arriving with Veronica tonight. But now that part of the night was over and I had him in my arms, I didn't want to let go of him either.

We continued dancing for several more songs. I usually hated the dance floor, but I didn't feel nearly so clumsy when I was swaying in Noah's strong arms. I probably wouldn't have complained if we'd stayed on the dance floor all night, but eventually the principal halted the orchestra to welcome everyone to the ball.

He had just started to address the crowd when Noah grabbed my hand. "Let's go get some fresh air." There was a sense of urgency in his voice, and he glanced past me as he started to pull me from the room. I looked over my shoulder to see what had caught his attention and saw an older man watching us, a deep frown denting his lined face. The way he was looking at me made my stomach dip with anxiety.

Noah tugged on my hand, and I lost sight of the man in the crowd. I'd only caught a glimpse of him, but it was enough to leave me curious. It felt like Noah was running away from him.

"Is everything okay?" I asked as he led me outside to the courtyard in front of Esher Hall. With everyone inside now, the night was quiet and we

were completely alone. I was hoping he'd explain why that man had spooked him, but Noah just smiled lightly.

"That speech is the same every year." He shrugged. "It goes on forever. I might fall asleep if I have to listen to it again. Besides, I'd much rather spend my time hanging out with you. We can go back inside once the music starts again."

I didn't think he was lying, but he wasn't telling the whole truth either.

Noah lifted his eyebrows. "You're sad to miss the speech?"

"No, it's just that…" My voice trailed off as the playful look in Noah's eyes disappeared. His attention was on the entrance to the ballroom. I turned as the man who'd been watching us walked through the doors, following us from the building.

He was tall and broad for a guy his age, and he walked as if the world might crumble beneath his every prideful step. He held himself in a way that radiated power and with the kind of confident authority that I imagined instilled both fear and respect in those who crossed his path.

When his eyes landed on us, he marched toward us. "Noah, what is the meaning of this?"

Noah gripped my hand a little tighter.

"Grandfather, I didn't realize you were coming tonight."

"I can see that."

Noah cleared his throat and tried to smile, but it didn't meet his eyes. "But I'm glad you are here. This is Isobel. The girl I was telling you about. Isobel, this is my grandfather, William Hastings."

Now that the man was standing right before us, I could see the resemblance between the two of them. Noah had his grandfather's firm jaw and green eyes, but it was the way the old man managed to dismiss me with one sharp look that I thought was their greatest similarity. I'd seen Noah give that same look to other people countless times.

I swallowed and tried to give him a warm smile I didn't feel. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

Noah's grandfather barely glanced my way before he returned his focus to Noah. "I don't give a damn who this girl is. Where's Veronica?"

"She's inside. I came with her as you requested," Noah said, his voice sounding smaller than usual. "But I wanted to be with Isobel."

"Apparently, I'm going to have to spell things out to you a little more clearly in future. You're supposed to be ensuring the Cordeaux girl has a

nice evening. What do you imagine her parents will think if they see you sneaking off into the shadows with the help?"

"*Grandfather*!"

I guessed that meant William knew where I came from. Noah sounded far more outraged than I felt. I was no longer ashamed of my past, but I didn't particularly want to hang around while William Hastings continued to look down his nose at me.

I gently let go of Noah's hand. "I should go so you can talk with your grandfather," I murmured.

"You don't have to leave," Noah replied.

But I was already taking steps away. There was no way I wanted to get caught between these two. I'd already had more than my fair share of family drama tonight.

"Isobel, there you are." I turned to see my father walking from the ballroom. "I have to leave and was looking for you to—" He stopped suddenly when he caught sight of Noah's grandfather, and he seemed to push his shoulders back as he came to stand at my side.

"William," my father said in greeting.

"Matthew?" William's expression darkened. "What are you doing here?"

The tension between the two of them was palpable, and it wasn't hard to work out they not only knew each other but they also weren't on friendly terms. I shot Noah a confused look, but he appeared just as lost as I was.

Matthew rested a hand on my shoulder. "My daughter attends Weybridge Academy."

"Your daughter…" William looked at me properly for the first time, and his gaze turned my veins to ice. He quickly spun to face Noah. "You're telling me that you've been dating a *LaFleur*?"

Noah's skin seemed to pale, and his expression shifted from confusion to shock as his eyes darted in my direction. "He's your father?" He took a step back from me. "Matthew LaFleur is your father?"

I slowly nodded, but I was completely lost as to why that seemed to be a problem. I didn't get a chance to ask because William Hastings kept talking, his voice quaking with emotion.

"*That family*…" he hissed at Noah. "I will not have you associating with them."

“I-I didn’t know,” Noah faltered, his eyes darting between me, Matthew, and his grandfather as though he was looking for someone, anyone, to help him understand.

“I don’t care,” his grandfather snapped back. “Your relationship with this girl ends now.”

The man’s words sent a jolt of fear straight to my heart. He wanted Noah to end things with me? Surely, I’d misheard.

“Noah, he can’t be serious.” I reached out to him, but Noah recoiled and refused to meet my gaze.

“Believe me, girl, I am deadly serious.” William Hastings’ eyes sparked with anger as he glared at me. His whole body was tense, and his fists were clenched at his sides. I could practically feel his disdain radiating from him.

“Come, Noah. We’re leaving.” William snapped his fingers and started back toward the ballroom.

“Wait…” Noah started to speak but paused when his grandfather stopped and turned.

“Noah,” he snarled. “I said we’re leaving.”

Noah seemed frozen in place, watching as his grandfather ordered him to follow. His face was still covered in confusion, disbelief and pain, but slowly the anguish seemed to fade, his shoulders sagged in apparent defeat, and he started to nod.

“Okay,” Noah murmured. “Just give me a minute.”

My heart sank at Noah’s response, but William looked satisfied and gave his grandson a brief nod, folding his arms as he waited near the large ballroom doors.

My father cleared his throat, pulling his attention from Noah to look at me. “Isobel, I did warn you,” he said.

“But why?” My voice broke as I spoke. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m afraid it just cannot work.” Matthew slowly shook his head, and there was a hint of sympathy in his eyes. “I’m sorry, but I think this might be the one thing William Hastings and I agree upon.”

I was stunned into silence. Was I the only person who didn’t know what he was talking about? Noah certainly did. His shoulders seemed to slump even further at my father’s words. His head was low, his eyes fixed on the ground, as though he was trying to hide himself from what was happening.

Matthew rested a hand on my shoulder. “This is for the best.”

I shrugged him off and glared at him. “I don’t really care what you think is best for me.”

“Isobel…”

“Weren’t you leaving?”

Matthew hesitated. He looked like he didn’t feel comfortable walking away, but my expression was firm, leaving him no choice. Matthew and Noah’s grandfather might not want us to be together, but this wasn’t up to them. This wasn’t their decision.

“Please, just go,” I said.

Slowly, Matthew released a breath. “Okay, I’ll let you two talk.” He still didn’t seem certain about leaving me with Noah, but he turned and walked back to the ballroom. Thankfully, he didn’t loiter by the open door like Noah’s grandfather who was still watching from a distance. I might not have been happy with Matthew right now, but at least he was willing to afford Noah and I some privacy.

I turned my focus to Noah. The silence that stretched between us felt cold. I was so confused by what had just happened, and the fact Noah still refused to look directly at me only worried me more. His gaze remained on the floor, and I knew he was trying to think, but I didn’t want him processing all this without talking to me. Not when I was so thoroughly in the dark.

“Noah, I don’t understand. Why do your grandfather and my father want us to end things? You’re not going to listen to them, are you?”

“I’m sorry, Isobel,” he whispered, still unable to meet my gaze. “This is just how it has to be.”

“But, why? Noah, if you could just explain…”

His grandfather cleared his throat in the distance, an obvious indication he wanted us to hurry up. I tried to ignore the old man as best I could, but it was almost impossible to pretend he wasn’t there when I could feel his lethal scowl tracing across my skin.

Noah glanced at his grandfather briefly and his shoulders squared as their eyes met. For a moment I thought he might be about to tell his grandfather to go to hell, but then he took a deep breath and turned his hard gaze upon me.

“Explain?” His eyes flashed with anger. “I think you’re the one that owes an explanation. Why did you keep this a secret from me?”

I shook my head, taken aback by his outburst. “I wasn’t trying to keep anything from you.”

“Really? How come you never spoke about your father with me? I asked you who it was that warned you to stay away from me, and you wouldn’t say. It was him, wasn’t it?”

I opened and closed my mouth several times as I tried to figure out how to respond. I’d spent so long worrying about what Noah and my friends would think when they learned about my life back in Rapid Bay, but I never deliberately tried to hide the truth about my father. Now it appeared to Noah as though I’d lied about both. Even if that was the case, I still couldn’t understand why he was so angry with me. His grandfather and my father were the one’s trying to break us up, but all his frustration suddenly seemed directed at me. I looked toward the ballroom and saw William Hastings still glaring down at us.

“You can’t honestly expect me to believe you were oblivious to the feud between our families,” Noah continued, his voice growing louder.

“Feud? What feud? Noah, I don’t even know what you’re talking about. Yes, Matthew warned me about you, but I just assumed it was because you had a bad reputation with girls. I didn’t know about any of this!”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Don’t play dumb with me. So, why’d you do it? Why’d you lure me in? Was it just a sick joke? Or was your family trying to ruin mine more than it already has?”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. I didn’t try to lure you in, and I wasn’t trying to ruin you. I had no idea there was some tension between your family and my father.”

“*Some* tension?” Noah scoffed as though my comment was utterly ridiculous. “That’s the understatement of the century.”

I ignored him and continued. “I thought you trusted me.”

“If we could trust each other, you would have told me who you really are.”

“You know who I really am,” I said. “You’ve met my mom. You’ve been to my home. *That’s* who I am.”

“And yet, the one thing you kept from me is the one thing about you that means we can never be together.”

His words almost struck my legs out from under me. We could never be together? It didn’t sound possible. It was clear Noah must have reasons to dislike Matthew, but I couldn’t understand why it mattered so much to him

that I was his daughter. I hadn't done anything wrong. "This is all because of my father? Noah, I barely know that man."

"But he *is* your father."

"Yes, we've established that." Now I was the one growing angry. "And I've only met him twice before tonight. I told you I didn't know him growing up. Matthew LaFleur was just a name to me until a month ago. You have to believe me."

As Noah stared at me, I thought I could see the anger briefly dissipating from his eyes, like he was realizing I was telling the truth and the fight was draining from him. I thought that might mean we were reaching a turning point, but the feeling didn't last long. From the look on his face, I could tell that it didn't matter what I said. As far as Noah was concerned, we were over. He hadn't moved a muscle, and yet I could see he was drawing away from me.

"Noah…"

He flinched as he heard his name. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It doesn't matter that you didn't know. It doesn't change the fact we can't be together."

"But why?"

Anger flared across Noah's face once more and he took two powerful steps forward so he was standing right in front of me, towering over me, his green eyes staring straight into mine. "Because your family is the reason the Hastings empire is in tatters," he growled. "The reason my father's legacy is hanging by a thread, and the reason my grandfather and I must do all that we can to save it. My family has lost everything, and it is all because of your father."

My heart started racing. I knew I only had moments to convince him to reconsider, just seconds to make him realize none of this was my fault, that I was nothing like my father. But how could I argue with someone who had already made up their mind? His eyes were empty now, and I could see he was shutting down on me—distancing himself in a way there was no coming back from.

He turned toward the ballroom, and my stomach dropped with the movement. He was really breaking up with me.

"Noah, please, don't do this. You said we had the power to choose our own fate. You promised our differences wouldn't tear us apart."

He turned his head just slightly, but he kept his eyes from meeting mine. “Like I said, Isobel. This is just how it has to be.” Without another word, he walked across the courtyard toward the ballroom doors, where his grandfather was waiting. William Hastings nodded at his grandson, a stern but satisfied look on his face, and then led him back inside the building, leaving me alone with nothing but the cold night’s empty embrace and tearstained cheeks.

I stood there, shaking as I watched Noah leave. Each step he took was like a dagger straight to my chest. Even after he was gone, I couldn’t seem to move, and I stood in the deep shadows of the courtyard slowly turning numb from the cold that chilled my bones and seeped into my heart. I had no idea how long I stood there. I didn’t really care.

“Isobel?”

I heard a voice in the distance and the crunch of gravel as someone ran up behind me.

“Isobel!”

Strong hands grasped my shoulders, and I slowly peered up into Wes’s gentle eyes. I must have looked even more wrecked than I felt because he immediately pulled me into his arms.

“What’s wrong?” he murmured.

I shook my head, unable to respond. I couldn’t seem to form the words to explain that Noah and I were over. Every time I opened my mouth to try, my brain turned to mush. I’d trusted Noah with my heart, and all he’d done was tear it to shreds.

Wes pulled out of our hug and looked me in the eyes. “Do you want to get out of here?”

“Yes.” I managed to croak the one word.

He pulled his jacket off and laid it over my shoulders as he led me away from the ballroom. I was grateful he didn’t ask any questions. I wasn’t even sure what I would say.

I’d known Noah and I were too different.

I’d predicted things with him would only end in pain.

I’d hoped that perhaps the risk was worth it.

But there was nothing sweet about having your heart destroyed when the shattered pieces left behind were too broken to put together again.

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SWEET
Temptation

BOOK TWO

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CHAPTER ONE

I thought I knew what heartbreak was. I'd experienced the hurt and betrayal of a relationship ending in disaster once before, so I was familiar with the empty feeling that came from my chest being torn open and my heart ripped out. Somehow though, this time felt worse. I'd foolishly trusted Noah with my slowly healing heart only for him to take a hammer to the cracks, shattering the fragile pieces until they were nothing more than specks of dust.

I let out a long sigh as I stared up at the night sky. It was dark and completely clear tonight, and the stars were so bright it almost felt like they were mocking me from above. Why couldn't I be a star? They were perfect and untouchable, and they never had to deal with pain or sorrow.

A low chuckle came from beside me, and I glanced over to find Wes had turned his head and was watching me rather than the sky. It was just the two of us. We were resting on the hood of his car in the middle of a field. He had found me crying alone in the courtyard after Noah broke up with me and had whisked me away. He hadn't pressured me to explain why I was so upset. He just listened to me when I said I wanted to leave the ball and get as far away from the school as possible.

I'd had no idea where Wes was planning to take me. I hadn't really cared. I would have happily gone anywhere to get away from the school, but the quiet field he had chosen was the perfect place. The long grasses rustled pleasantly in the breeze, and though we were only a ten-minute trip from Weybridge Academy, it felt like we were a million miles from civilization. It was peaceful out here and, until now, Wes had stayed silent,

giving me space to work through whatever it was he thought I was going through.

“Is something funny?” I asked, tugging his suit jacket in closer around me as the evening air danced across my skin. Wes had to be cold without his jacket, but he had refused to take it back when I’d offered it to him. I didn’t have the energy to argue.

“You’re scowling at the stars like they’ve done something to piss you off.”

“Yeah, well, maybe they have.” I threw another scowl up at the sky. “It feels like they are rubbing their happy, sparkling butts in my face.”

“I didn’t know stars had butts.”

“Oh, they do,” I replied, rolling to my side so I could look directly at Wes. “They’re big balls of gas, after all. And we all know where gas comes from…”

Wes laughed, and I somehow managed a small grin in response. It quickly fell from my lips though. How could I smile after everything that had happened tonight?

“So, Matthew LaFleur is your father,” Wes said.

Now that we’d broken the silence, Wes was probably eager to start asking questions. I wasn’t surprised this was the first one he ventured, having seen the stunned look on his face when Matthew had introduced himself at the ball earlier.

I slowly nodded in reply. “He is.” I hoped my short response was enough to deter Wes from digging any deeper. I wasn’t particularly interested in talking about my father, but I had to admit it was damn sight better than lying here thinking about Noah.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?” Wes’s voice was soft, and I knew he wasn’t annoyed about being kept in the dark. It seemed he was just trying to understand.

“It’s not like I was keeping it a secret. It’s just that I barely know the man, and I never thought to bring it up. He doesn’t feel like my dad, so why would I say anything?”

“That makes sense,” Wes said, but his head was tilted as though he was still considering my response.

“What?”

“I was just thinking a lot of people at school will be surprised. You’ll probably find them all clambering to be your friend now that you’re a

LaFleur."

"I'm not a LaFleur." My response was immediate, and my defensive tone caught me off guard. I took a quick, calming breath before I tried to explain. "Just because Matthew LaFleur is my father, it doesn't mean I'm a LaFleur," I said more gently. "Surely the kids at school won't care who he is?"

"A lot of them might. Your father has a lot of success and influence in our world."

That was just it. This was Wes's world, not mine. And I didn't care one bit how much influence someone's parents had. In my view, a person's worth came from their actions, not their DNA. Apparently, I was in the minority when it came to that opinion though. At least, around here I was.

"This isn't my world," I muttered.

Wes frowned and nodded, as though he was thinking of a different way to get his point across.

"All I'm saying is that The LaFleur Corporation is just as big and well-known as Hastings Laboratories. And look at how people around here treat Noah. The fact that Matthew LaFleur is involved with Weybridge Academy now won't go unnoticed by the kids or the parents."

"As long as *I* can go back to being unnoticed, then I don't care."

Wes smiled at me but shook his head slightly. I guess that meant I was out of luck.

"Most people at Weybridge would have been shouting from the rooftops on their first day if they had a parent as rich and influential as your dad," he continued. "I mean, Veronica never would have targeted you the way she did or teased you about your mom's business if she'd known who your dad was."

The fact it was normal, expected even, to brag about how rich and influential your parents were in order to make friends at Weybridge only made me more certain I would never really belong there. A wave of guilt washed over me at Wes's words though. While I never had any intention of publicly promoting my messy family history and newly discovered father, I shouldn't have hidden the truth about my mom and my life back in Rapid Bay. She's the parent I should have been proudly bragging about on my first day at school.

"I doubt it would have made a difference to Veronica," I said. "She's been trying to take me down one way or another since the moment Noah

first looked my way. If she wasn't teasing me about being a charity case, she would have done something else."

"Yeah, maybe."

"I guess I won't have to worry about her so much now. She's got what she wanted." The empty cavity in my chest seemed to ache as I uttered the words. I could only imagine how happy Veronica would be when she heard the news about Noah and me.

Wes hesitated but, sensing I might be getting closer to revealing the source of my tears, he continued. "Do you want to talk about what happened tonight?"

"Not really." I glanced away from him, struggling to stop the tears from welling in my eyes again. Just the thought of Noah had me turning into a pathetic mess, and I didn't want Wes to see me that way. But as the silence between us grew once more, I wondered if it would really be so bad to talk to Wes about what happened. He was going to find out eventually, and I hated trying to keep these feelings all bottled up inside of me. If there was one thing my first heartbreak with Levi had taught me, it was that sometimes sharing the burden with someone else lessened the load. My mom wasn't here to help me this time, so maybe it would be good to open up to Wes.

I let out a breath and the words tumbled from my lips. "Noah broke up with me."

"What?" From the shock lighting Wes's eyes, it was clear this wasn't what he expected. "Why?"

"Because his grandfather asked him to."

Wes's mouth dropped open, and it took him a moment to recover from his surprise. "You're kidding."

"I wish I was."

He was quiet for a moment before he continued. "Do you have any idea why his grandfather would want that?"

"I think it's because of Matthew. There was definitely some hostility between my father and Noah's grandfather, and I got the feeling this wasn't the first time they'd clashed. William Hastings told Noah to end things with me, so he did."

Wes shook his head. "I get that they run competing companies, but that's ridiculous. Why do you think they don't get along?"

I hesitated. Noah had been seething when he discovered Matthew was my father. He was convinced Matthew was the reason behind his family's ruin—whatever that meant. He had stormed off without giving me a proper explanation. All I knew was that, whatever the rift, it was enough for Noah to break up with me, no questions asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Our breakup was hardly a discussion."

"I'm sorry, that really sucks."

"Tell me about it."

Wes shook his head again and sat up, bracing his arms against his legs. "I kind of want to pummel Noah's face right now."

"Easy there, tiger." I gave him a soft smile and sat up beside him. I felt somewhat better sitting upright so I didn't have to keep looking up at the mocking night sky.

"I'm serious. Who breaks up with a girl because his grandfather asked him to?"

"Noah, apparently." The more I thought about it, the more heated I began to feel. Noah had dumped me and not even given me a good reason why. Did he really think he could just walk away from our relationship, leaving me heartbroken, and expect me to just accept that? I deserved better. I deserved answers.

My phone lit up, the screen almost blinding in the darkness of the field. It was another message from Cress asking where I was. The ball had finished an hour ago, and everyone had moved on to the after-party at Luther's house.

Wes's phone brightened at almost the same time, and he let out a deep sigh. "Sawyer's hounding me."

"Yeah, I've got Cress harassing me too." I bit my lip as I considered her text. "Do you think we should go to Luther's party?"

"We don't have to," Wes said. "I'll happily stay here all night if that's what you want."

I took a moment to think it over. I was so glad Wes had brought me here. It was exactly the escape I'd needed after everything that had happened at the ball. I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't shown up. I'd probably have still been crying in a heap outside the ballroom doors as the guests started to trickle out at the end of the evening.

I didn't know if I could face the party, especially if Noah was there. I felt like I'd only just managed to get control of my emotions amid the

soothing calm that currently surrounded us. I was worried seeing Noah again so soon would only bring the pain, shock, and anger rushing back to the surface.

But, lying here staring up at the stars only had my mind replaying the events of the evening, recalling Noah's shock when he found out who my father was. The anger in his grandfather's eyes when he glared at Matthew and then at me. Most of all, I couldn't stop picturing the look of resigned certainty on Noah's face as he told me we could never be together.

No matter how many times I went over his words and his reasons in my head, I couldn't understand or believe what had happened. Gazing up at the stars certainly wasn't going to give me the clarity or closure I needed. As much as it terrified me to admit, Noah was the only person who could provide that.

"We should go," I said.

"Really?"

"Yeah." I slid from the hood of the car and landed lightly on the ground. The grass was cool and wet beneath my bare feet. I was probably getting mud along the hem of my white dress, but I didn't really care.

"You're sure?"

"Not really, but at the very least, it might distract me." I did my best to sound convincing, but even I wasn't sure I meant what I said.

"Okay. After-party it is then." Wes jumped off the car and went to open the door for me.

I paused before I climbed into the passenger seat and reached out to lightly touch his hand. "Thanks for rescuing me tonight, Wes. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there."

"You didn't need rescuing. You just needed a getaway driver, and I was happy to help." He smiled. "If anything, you kind of rescued me tonight too."

I frowned as I tried to understand why he'd think that. Then I remembered his girlfriend had ditched him at the last minute. "I'm not sure being your date to the ball counts as rescuing you," I said. "But I am sorry Sarah didn't come tonight."

Wes shrugged. "Things haven't been all that great between us. I guess she didn't see the point in coming if she had something better to do."

I put my arms around Wes and gave him a tight hug. "It's her loss." He slowly wrapped his arms around me in response. He didn't hug me too

tightly, but I felt secure and warm, all the same. Wes gave really good hugs, and I felt like perhaps he needed one as much as I did right now.

The hug went on for a few seconds too long, and the two of us seemed to realize it at the same time. We awkwardly stepped back, refusing to meet each other's gaze.

"So, after-party?" he said.

"After-party," I quickly agreed.

I still didn't sound convincing, but I jumped in the car before Wes could point that out. My heart couldn't take another beating, and it felt dangerous to leave the safety of this random field where I felt somewhat protected. But, how much worse could this night really get? How much more of my heart was there left to break? Maybe if I stopped staring up at the stars and went looking for the answers I so desperately needed, I might be able to start putting it back together again.

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CHAPTER TWO

The after-party was well and truly underway by the time Wes and I arrived. It was in the same clearing in the woods where Luther had held his last party, and tonight there were huge white lanterns strung between the trees that surrounded the wide-open space, and a live band was blasting out a tune on the other side of the dancing crowd.

Most of the students had changed out of their formal wear, but Wes and I were still dressed in our outfits from the ball. Wes was in his shiny black tuxedo, and I was in my flowing white dress. I hesitated at the edge of the clearing as I watched everyone dancing and having fun. I didn't know if I could pretend I was okay when I so clearly was not. It felt like everyone here would be able to see my heartbreak as plainly as if it were written in permanent marker across my face.

Wes gave my hand a tight squeeze. "Let's go get some drinks."

"Uh, sure." I still wasn't certain if I wanted to stay at the party, but if I was, a little liquid courage was probably going to be necessary.

His hand dropped from mine as he started into the party, but I didn't move to follow him right away. Instead, I paused as I watched him disappear into the crowd. The small amount of confidence I'd had in my reasons for coming here was slipping away. I'd thought it might offer a brief distraction and maybe I'd be able to talk to Noah and ask him why all this had happened. The latter was enough to make me shrink back into the safety of the trees. Now that I was here, Noah was the last person I wanted to see.

I lurched forward as someone knocked their shoulder into mine, and I stumbled as I tried to stay on my feet. Thankfully, I managed to avoid falling to the ground and making my dress any dirtier than it already was.

"Oops, I didn't see you there, Charity." I recognized Veronica's high-pitched voice immediately. Her words were met with cackling laughter from her friends. "Although, I guess we can't call you that now we know you're actually Isobel *LaFleur."*

How did she know already? Maybe she'd seen us dancing together. If Matthew was as well-known as Wes had suggested, our dance might have been enough to alert the entire school.

As I righted myself, I turned to face Veronica. The scrap of clothing she was wearing was barely long enough to cover her underwear. She had to be freezing. Not many girls would have been brave enough to wear a dress like that, but she had the build of a model and could pretty much wear anything. Even now I could see several guys drooling as they watched her. It didn't matter how hot she was though; her looks could never wipe away the viciousness that was always present in her eyes. They were a little hazy tonight. Probably from one too many drinks.

"Imagine my shock when your father introduced himself to my parents tonight and I overheard him talking about *you*," she continued. "But don't think that changes anything. Just because your daddy happens to have money doesn't mean you're one of us. Once a charity case, always a charity case. We all know you don't belong in this school."

It was hard to argue with that. Ever since I'd arrived at Weybridge Academy, I'd felt out of place. I'd never be one of them, and I didn't want to be. Certainly not if it meant becoming anything like Veronica. It seemed Wes had underestimated her. Finding out who my father was hadn't dampened her vendetta against me. It seemed to have reignited it.

"This only serves to prove what a fraud you really are," she continued. "First you lie about your mother because you're embarrassed by her. Next you lie about your father."

She lifted her hand and tapped her fingers on her cheek, an exaggerated look of thoughtfulness covering her face. "But why would you lie about such a thing?" she wondered out loud. "Perhaps you were trying to keep Noah from finding out. Understandable, given the history between your two families. Still, I don't think he'll be very happy to hear he was being manipulated again."

My breath caught in my throat. Was Veronica talking about the feud Noah had mentioned? What did she know about it all? I felt the desperate urge to ask her, but Veronica was the last person I wanted answers from, and I refused to admit my ignorance to her. Instead, I gritted my teeth. “I didn’t manipulate anyone.”

She glanced down at her nails, ignoring my response as she inspected her manicure like she was suddenly bored by the whole conversation. “Anyway, I’m sure it won’t be long before Noah learns the truth and breaks up with you. Then everything will return to the way it *should* be.”

My eyes widened with surprise. She didn’t already know Noah had broken up with me? How was that even possible? She had to have seen him when he’d returned to the ball. If she didn’t know the truth, I was hardly about to enlighten her. I couldn’t bear to witness the satisfaction I knew would light up her cruel features.

“Are you done, Veronica?” I asked.

She lifted her eyes to meet mine, slowly lowering her hand back to her side. “It depends. Are you done lying to everyone?”

The girls surrounding her all shared knowing smiles. They were all looking at me like they’d won. And I had to wonder if they had. Would everyone else at school share their opinion? Was I about to be outcast yet again simply because I hadn’t shared private details about my family?

“There you are!” Anna gasped, looping her arm through mine. I hadn’t seen her coming, but I couldn’t have been happier she was here. I didn’t tend to shy away from confrontations with Veronica, but I was feeling too broken to handle her right now. “We’ve been waiting for you to get here.”

Anna was grinning at me, but when she turned and saw Veronica standing across from us, her nose scrunched like she’d just been hit by a foul smell. “Geez, Veronica, did your dress shrink in the wash or something? Seriously, you’ve got to leave *some* mystery for the guys.”

Veronica didn’t look even slightly bothered by Anna’s comment. “At least my clothes are clean.” Her eyes dipped to the mud staining the bottom of my white dress. “I guess you can take a peasant out of the village, but you can’t turn her into a princess.”

She didn’t give us an opportunity to respond as she turned on her heel and disappeared into the crowd with her friends trailing behind her. Anna growled and started after her, but I grabbed her arm, pulling her back.

“She’s not worth it.”

Anna let out a slow breath and nodded. “You’re right. We’ll go get drinks and let karma deal with Veronica.” She lifted her head to the sky. “Karma, if you’re listening, I’m pretty sure I saw some poison ivy on the path here tonight. If you could help Veronica trip into it, I’d really appreciate that.” She grinned as she turned to me. “Just think, she’s got all that exposed skin…”

I shook my head at my friend. “That’s brutal, even for you.”

“Eh, she deserves it.”

Anna took my hand and pulled me into the party. We wound our way through the crowd of dancing students to the other side of the forest clearing. There was a long drinks table set up near the makeshift dance floor, where Cress and Sawyer laughed as they drank shots.

Wes was there too, holding two bottles of beer. He turned as we approached and smiled as he offered me one of the bottles. “I was just coming back to find you. You like beer, right?”

“This is great, thanks.” I took the beer, but I didn’t take a sip. My stomach was swirling uneasily and I wasn’t sure if beer was going to help. Ever since my run-in with Veronica, a wave of nerves had hit me, and I felt kind of sick.

“You’re here!” Cress squealed, gathering me in a hug as she found me standing behind her. She was smiling so brightly, but the smile fell from her lips when she took a good look at me. “You look upset. Why do you look upset?”

I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat. I thought I was holding myself together quite well, considering. But Cress somehow seemed to sense something was off. I didn’t know what to say, and it felt especially hard when my friends were all looking at me, waiting expectantly. I didn’t think I could utter the words without breaking down, and that was the last thing I needed right now. All I wanted was to forget. So, I stole the shot glass out of Cress’s hand and knocked it back.

The liquor burned as it made its way down my throat, and I scrunched my eyes as I shuddered. I wasn’t a big fan of tequila, and I chased the shot with a sip of my beer.

When I opened my eyes again, I caught Cress wincing. “That bad, huh?” she asked.

“It must be something terrible,” Sawyer added. “She didn’t even have salt or lime with her shot.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said. “At least, not right now. Let’s just focus on having fun.”

Nobody pushed me to explain, and Sawyer happily handed me another shot. “Well, if you want fun, you’re going to need another one of these.”

I took the drink without complaint before dragging the girls onto the dance floor. If they had been worried about me before, they would only be more concerned now. I was absolutely terrible at dancing and normally did anything I could to avoid being dragged onto the dance floor. But tonight, dancing was the perfect escape. All I cared about was numbing the pain that radiated through me and fogging my brain so I could stop thinking about the boy who broke my heart.

I danced with the girls for song after song. And for a little while, I was able to forget why I was so damn miserable. But the pain never totally went away. My body grew tired, and my blood started to cool. The alcohol no longer ran hot through my veins, and the ache in my heart returned with a vengeance.

When it grew too much to bear, I left the girls on the dance floor in search of another drink. I wandered through the dancing crowd to the drinks table but hesitated when I reached it. As much as I wanted to numb the pain once more, I wasn’t sure alcohol was the answer.

“You okay there, newbie?” I looked up at Luther standing beside me. My body stiffened. Where Luther was, Noah wasn’t usually too far behind.

“I’m fine. Just searching for a drink.” I gave him a tight smile, trying to hide the tension I was feeling.

“You don’t look like you’re fine,” he said. “Then again, neither does Noah.”

I tried to ignore the way my heart leaped and then plummeted at his mention of Noah. “Oh, I didn’t realize he was here.”

Despite the resolve I’d felt when I’d told Wes we should come to the party, I’d been doing my best not to look for Noah tonight. It wasn’t easy, and I still found myself glancing at people on the dance floor or by the drinks table. My heart would skip a beat when I thought I saw him, but so far, there was no real sign of him.

“He’s not here,” Luther replied. “He refused to come tonight and went back to his room after the ball finished.”

I wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved by this or not. I’d been feeling sick to my stomach all night at the thought of seeing Noah, but there was

still a desire to confront him growing inside me. Another part of me just desperately missed him.

“What happened between you two tonight?” he asked. “Because Noah was like a zombie all evening. You should have seen the way he flinched when I mentioned you. He refused to talk to me at the ball. He said it wasn’t the time, but I know something happened.”

I reached down and plucked the first drink my hand came across out of the ice bucket. I didn’t intend on drinking it. I just wanted a reason to leave. “I’ve got to go. I’m sure you can talk to him about it.”

I turned away, but Luther reached out and lightly grabbed my arm, stopping me. “Noah really likes you, Isobel. I’ve never seen him like this about anyone, or anything. I know it was probably a lot to see Veronica on his arm tonight, but he really wanted to be there with you.”

I spun back to face Luther. “Veronica is the least of our problems,” I replied. “You should talk to your friend.”

His eyes widened with surprise, and he opened his mouth to question me, but then he stopped, a look of confusion and concern crossing his features. Like Veronica, Luther didn’t seem to know Noah had broken up with me. I was also assuming he didn’t yet know about Matthew. Perhaps I had a few more hours to savor before the whole school knew about both.

“Enjoy your party, Luther.” I shook his arm off and walked away.

I briefly considered opening the drink in my hand but then placed it down on the nearest table. I was tired, and the party wasn’t helping to distract me from Noah anymore. Now that I knew he wasn’t here, the small part of me that had considered confronting him was also done with the party. All I wanted was to go to bed, so I hunted down the girls to let them know I was leaving.

They were coming off the dance floor when I found them with Sawyer and Wes following closely behind. I wondered if Cress could sense the pain I’d endured tonight because, as soon as I said I was planning to leave, she wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

“Okay, let’s get you home then,” she said.

I gave her a sad smile and nodded. Anna wrapped her arm around the other side of me, and the boys led the way as we headed back through the crowd and started down the track back to the house.

The twins quickly pulled ahead of us as we followed the lanterns that dimly lit the way. I suspected the guys were giving me some privacy to talk

with the girls. As Wes gripped his brother in a playful headlock, I had to wonder where they found the energy after a night on the dance floor. Then again, simply breathing felt like hard work to me right now.

“Do you feel up to telling us what happened tonight?” Cress asked, as the noise of the party turned to a muffled beat. She said it gently, and I knew she’d leave me alone if I didn’t feel ready to talk about it.

I blew out a breath as I considered my friends. My heart actually contracted in pain when I thought about Noah and the things he’d said to me. It seemed silly because I’d only known him a few weeks, but somehow, he’d managed to embed himself deeply into my heart in that short time. His rejection hurt far more than it should have.

As I looked at the two girls, I remembered Cress was Noah’s cousin. What if she rejected me because of who my dad was too? The thought was enough to steal the breath from my chest, and I struggled to get it back.

Cress’s eyes widened, and she rubbed a hand down my back as I started to hyperventilate. I couldn’t lose both Cress and Noah in the same night. And what if I lost Anna as a friend too? There was no way I could survive another day at this school without my friends by my side.

“Isobel, it’s okay,” Cress said.

“Take deep breaths,” Anna added.

They shared a concerned look as I tried to calm myself down. I was freaking out, but I did as Anna suggested and took some deep breaths in and slowly blew them out. I really didn’t think the drinks I’d had were helping the situation. I’d been blissfully numb for a while there, but now every emotion felt darker and so much worse. Tequila was not a good friend. She was all false promises and bailed on you when you needed her the most. Tequila was a bit of a bitch.

“You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want,” Cress said as I started breathing calmly again.

“No, I want to tell you guys.” I knew they’d find out one way or another, and I’d never meant to keep my father’s identity a secret. I exhaled before I began. “Noah broke things off with me tonight.”

The two girls gasped.

“Why on earth would Noah break up with you?” Cress asked. “He’s crazy about you.”

“My father was at the ball tonight. When Noah’s grandfather found out who he was, he demanded Noah break up with me.”

“What?” Anna scoffed. “Why does it matter who your father is?”

“Apparently there’s a feud between our families…”

“Well, that’s just ridiculous,” Anna replied. “What kind of medieval shit is he trying to pull? Who even says feud these days?”

I shrugged. I was as dumbfounded as she was.

Cress had stayed quiet. There was a look of confusion in her eyes, and I could see she was trying to piece it all together.

“You’ve never really spoken about your father,” she finally said. “Never told us who he is.”

“Only because I don’t have a relationship with the guy,” I explained. “He left my mom before I was born. Even *I* didn’t know who he was until a few weeks ago. I wasn’t intentionally keeping it from anyone. I just don’t particularly like him or want anything to do with him.” Although, after everything he’d revealed to me tonight, I had to wonder if my feelings toward him were starting to shift.

Cress nodded, and I could see she believed me. At least she hadn’t jumped to the conclusion I’d been deliberately lying like Noah had.

“Isobel, I’m just trying to understand… Who is your father?” Cress continued.

My body tensed at her question. This was the moment of truth. The time when I would find out if I was about to lose both Noah and my friends all in one night.

“My father is Matthew LaFleur.”

After Noah’s reaction, I expected some kind of explosion from the two of them. To see looks of disgust or to see them shying away. Cress appeared thoughtful though, and Anna gave me a completely blank look.

“Who?” Anna shrugged. She seemed so blasé about the whole thing I might have laughed with relief if I wasn’t still terrified to hear Cress’s response.

Cress didn’t immediately react and took her time as she considered my revelation. “Matthew LaFleur as in The LaFleur Corporation?” she asked.

“That’s the one.”

She bit her lower lip and glanced at Anna who still looked clueless.

“What?” I asked. “What am I missing?”

“Don’t look at me,” Anna said. “Never heard of the guy.”

Cress slowly returned to meet my anxious gaze. “The LaFleur and the Hastings families are business rivals,” she said. “I remember my parents

used to talk about it a lot when I was younger. There was always some new drama between the companies as one tried to one-up, or screw over, the other. From what I understand, they've been at each other's throats for decades."

"This seemed like more than just a business rivalry," I said.

"You might be right," she agreed. "You know my family doesn't have much to do with the Hastings family anymore, so I don't know much about it. But I do remember overhearing one conversation…"

"What?" I felt myself edging slightly closer to Cress as she hesitated. She wasn't scowling at me like her cousin had, and there wasn't anger in her eyes. If anything, she just seemed thoughtful.

"Well, it was years ago, but I remember once when I heard my mom and dad talking about it all. My dad said that Mr. LaFleur would do anything he could to destroy William Hastings. Something about the way he said *anything* stuck with me, I guess." She paused again when she saw the look of concern in my eyes. "They were just gossiping though. And it was so long ago. I'm sure your father isn't like that."

She was trying to reassure me, but my stomach plunged. If her parents were gossiping about my family wanting to destroy Noah's, then surely there had to be some element of truth to that. I felt like I was going to be sick. Was my father the villain in all of this? And what did that make me?

"Seriously," Cress emphasized. "William Hastings is not a nice man. Even if your dad did want to destroy him, I don't think anyone would blame him..."

It still wasn't what I needed to hear, and it left me terrified my friends would want nothing to do with me. Even if they didn't hold a personal grudge against Matthew, maybe they would worry that I was just like him. That this apple hadn't fallen far from the proverbial tree.

It took me a moment to build up the courage before I asked, "Does this change anything for you guys?" My heart was in my throat as I looked at my friends. "Now that you know who my father is?"

Cress gathered me in a hug straightaway. "I would never think differently about you because of who your father is. Never."

Anna quickly joined in on the huddle. "Your dad could be the devil, and I'd still have no doubt about the fact you're the sweetest person ever. None of us are like our parents, and Noah's an idiot if he thinks different."

Tears gathered in my eyes as the two girls held me tight. I didn't know how much I needed this reassurance until now. I loved these girls so much.

"Uh, is this hug a girl-only thing, or are boys welcome to join the sandwich?" one of the twins called out to us from up ahead. Given the cheeky tone in his voice, it definitely had to be Sawyer. I'd thought he was too busy messing around with his brother to notice us, but the boy seemed to have a sixth sense that alerted him whenever there was an emotional moment that needed ruining.

Anna and Cress laughed as they drew back from the hug.

"Sawyer, learn to read the room!" Anna shouted at him.

He simply shrugged, his face lighting in a cheeky smile in reply. "Hey, you don't get what you want in life unless you ask."

"Oh, well, in that case. Sawyer, can you disappear?" Anna fired back.

Even I couldn't hold in my laughter.

Tonight might have been a disaster for my love life, but it only made me appreciate my friends more than ever. And I had a feeling I was going to need them if I wanted to survive the rest of the school year.

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CHAPTER THREE

"Wake up!"

I groaned as Anna chirped the words into my ear. My head was throbbing, my mouth felt furry and dry, and my stomach turned uneasily. I'd never had a hangover before, but I was pretty sure I was experiencing one now. It was enough to put me off alcohol for life.

As much as my body hurt though, the most visceral pain was the one in my heart. I didn't want to be that girl. You know the one—the girl that fell hard and fast and then struggled to get over a guy. That was exactly how I felt right now. Like I would never fill the void Noah had left in my chest when he broke up with me.

I wasn't ready to face reality just yet, and the thought of opening my eyes made me bury my head under my pillow.

Before I could smother myself, the pillow was unceremoniously ripped away from me.

"Anna," I groaned.

"Isobel," she replied, mimicking my tone.

I slowly blinked my eyes open so I could scowl up at her. She was already dressed for the day but not in her normal casual Sunday attire. Instead, she was wearing a floral summer dress. It wasn't low-cut, and it actually fell below her knees, so I had to wonder if I was still dreaming.

"What are you wearing?"

Her bright face turned stormy as she glanced down at her dress. "Ugh, don't remind me. Cress lent it to me. I didn't have anything appropriate to

wear, and she insisted I'd probably get detention if I wore my regular getup."

I stole my pillow back out of her hands and hugged it to my chest. "Appropriate for what?"

"Please tell me you know about the garden party today."

"Uh…"

"Seriously?" She shook her head. "Well, I guess you know now. Every year, the principal hosts a garden party the morning after the ball because a lot of the parents and alumni are still in town. It's always torture, but seniors are expected to go."

I let out a sigh and slowly eased myself up. My head spun at the subtle movement, and I knew I was in for a rough day. "We don't *have* to go though, right?" My head wanted nothing more than to return to the pillow it just left.

Anna shared an understanding smile with me. "Just show your face, and then you can come back here and bury yourself under the covers again. Cress has gone to get us coffees, so hopefully that will help."

I'd probably need a whole lot more than coffee to get through today, but it certainly wouldn't hurt.

Anna's expression softened slightly before she continued. "How do you feel today?"

I knew she was asking about Noah rather than my hangover, and my heart clenched painfully at the thought of him. My pounding head might be bad, but it didn't compare to how hard it was to think about last night.

"It feels like it didn't really happen," I said. "Like I experienced some terrible nightmare." I shook my head. "I don't want to think about it."

"Well, if there's one benefit to being dragged to an early-morning garden party, it's that you'll hopefully be distracted."

Unless, of course, Noah was there. Despite my warring feelings about whether I wanted to see him again, I'd decided it was a blessing I hadn't bumped into him at the after-party last night. The thought of seeing him again today caused all the same uncertainty to flow through me once again.

"So, jump in the shower," Anna said. "Cress will be back with coffee soon, and then we need to get going."

I understood why Cress had gone to get the coffees and left Anna to wake me up. Anna didn't look like she'd take no for an answer, and I didn't have it in me to try to convince her otherwise.

I let out a sigh and nodded. “Okay, fine. I’ll be quick.”

“That’s my girl.”

There were so many reasons for me not to go to the event, but as I got out of bed, I began to think of one that might make it worthwhile: Matthew might be there.

It was the first time I’d ever found myself actually wanting to see my father, but we had a lot to discuss. Before Noah had brought my entire evening crashing down, my father had opened up to me about his past relationship with my mom. After thinking he’d wanted nothing to do with me my whole life, I now knew he hadn’t known I even existed. His parents had prevented news of my birth from getting to him and tried to pay off my mom.

Despite the shock, I believed my father, and it left me unsure how to feel about him. That uncertainty had only escalated later in the night when Cress shared what she knew about the decades of rivalry between my father’s family and Noah’s. How my father would supposedly stop at nothing to destroy William.

I’d only just met my father, but he didn’t seem like the kind of person who would try to *destroy* another person. I had no idea if Matthew would be attending the garden party, but I had so many unanswered questions after last night I knew I needed to speak with him.

When I entered the bathroom, I was surprised by just how bad I looked. I knew I felt like crap, but my skin was pale, my eyes were puffy, and my curls looked limp and sad. Even my eyes were a duller shade of blue this morning. I had hoped a shower would help, but once I was done, I still looked like hell. I tamed my hair as best I could and even put a little makeup on, but it didn’t seem to make much difference.

I emerged from the bathroom to find Cress had returned and was waiting for me, coffee in hand. She was wearing a similar style of dress to Anna, but hers was cornflower blue, making her reddish-brown hair pop. She smiled as she offered a coffee to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Like death warmed up,” I replied. “Thanks for getting us coffee.”

“It’s no problem. I figured we could all use the caffeine boost after last night.”

“Definitely.” I took a deep swig of the drink, relishing the feeling of it warming me from the inside.

“Here, put this on,” Anna said, passing me a dress that looked similar to her own. “Of course, it came from your magical closet that has every outfit a girl could ever need.”

I took the dress, somewhat relieved I didn’t have to try to figure out an outfit for myself. I had no idea what to wear to a garden party, and with the way I felt right now, there was every chance, if I was allowed to dress myself, I’d be leaving the room in sweats.

I slipped into the closet to quickly change. If my closet had been stocked with a perfect dress for the party, then maybe Matthew did know about the event and would be attending.

“Perfect,” Cress said as I stepped back into the bedroom. She had to be lying because I felt far from perfect. I looked like a zombie dressed up in an unconvincing disguise.

“We should probably go,” Anna said. “We’re already running late.”

I clutched my coffee cup tightly and followed Anna and Cress from the room. We weren’t the only ones running late, and there were lots of other girls out in the halls and on the quad rushing to get to the event.

The garden party was held at the principal’s cottage on the school campus, but when I saw the gorgeous stone house the principal lived in, I thought cottage was a little bit of an understatement. It looked like something out of a fairy tale. Vines almost completely coated the façade, and a wide array of bright and perfumed flowers bloomed in the front garden as though the house had been stolen right out of a picture book.

The soft sound of a string ensemble could be heard as we made our way out to the lawn behind the cottage, but it was hard to hear the melody given the chatter and laughter that overpowered the music. It sounded like the party had drawn quite the crowd, and I wasn’t sure if I was mentally prepared to deal with so many people this morning. Hopefully, Anna and Cress would handle most of the socializing. I certainly didn’t feel up to small talk or putting on a happy face.

A marquee was set up on the lawn with round tables covered in white linen dotted beneath the canopy. The area was already packed with students, parents, and teachers. Everyone was dressed far more casually than they had been for the ball with the women mostly in bright, modest dresses, similar to the one I wore, while the men tended toward slacks and button-up shirts.

As waitstaff weaved their way around the area with trays of canapés and drinks held high above their heads, I scanned the scene closely for signs of my father. I couldn't see Matthew among the crowd, and I felt a wave of relief when there was no sign of Noah or his grandfather either.

I quietly followed the girls as we went to grab seats at one of the tables. They were all laid out beautifully with fine china teacups and towers of sandwiches and appetizers in the center of the table. I was glad my friends didn't want to walk about and socialize with the adults. I could think of nothing worse right now. I gratefully sank in my seat and started to nibble on the end of a sandwich.

Anna and Cress were chatting, but I wasn't really concentrating on what they said. I was too focused on trying to make sure I could stomach my sandwich. Even the small bites I was taking didn't seem to sit well and swirled uneasily inside me. I wasn't sure if it was my hangover, the chance of seeing Noah, or potentially confronting my dad for answers that had me so queasy. It was probably a combination of the three.

"Hey, Isobel."

I swallowed the small piece of sandwich I was chewing and glanced up as Lily came to sit next to me. "Hey, Lily. How was your night?"

"It was pretty uneventful," she said. "I only made a quick appearance at the ball before I went to bed. I'm really not a fan of this weekend. It's all about schmoozing, and I'm absolutely terrible at it."

"Me too," I agreed.

"How about you? How was your night?"

"I've had better," I quietly replied. "Noah and I broke up."

Lily's eyes went wide with surprise. "Seriously?"

I nodded.

"Shit, I'm really sorry, Isobel."

"Thanks." I shared a sad smile with her. "It sucks, but there's nothing I can do about it. It's not like we were dating long."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt," she replied. "I just can't believe he broke up with you. It was obvious how much he liked you."

"Not enough, apparently. He ended things because his family is business rivals of my dad."

Her mouth opened and closed several times like she was searching for something to say. Eventually, she settled on shaking her head. "I definitely

didn’t expect *that* to be the reason,” she said. “I swear, I’m never going to understand these people.”

I couldn’t have agreed with her more. Lily’s confusion mirrored my own so closely, and I wondered if it was because, like me, she wasn’t from this world of wealth and social climbing.

“Yeah, I don’t get it either. I didn’t have much choice in the matter though.”

Lily reached out and grasped my hand, giving it a firm squeeze. “Well, it’s his loss. He’s an idiot.”

“A complete idiot,” Anna said, chiming in. “It’s lucky I haven’t seen him here today. I swear, I’m going to tear into that boy so hard when I get the chance he’s going to wish he didn’t have ears.”

“Please don’t do that,” I said. I couldn’t imagine how embarrassing it would be.

“What? He deserves it. I know everyone at this school thinks he walks on water, but that doesn’t mean he can treat one of my besties like crap.” She suddenly glanced at Cress. “Sorry, Cress, I know he’s your cousin, so maybe pretend you’ve got earmuffs on.”

“No need, I’m annoyed too,” Cress said. “Noah completely messed up on this one. Screw the Hastings family. Isobel is worth a million of them.”

“A billion,” Anna added.

“A million billion,” Cress said, making us laugh.

My cheeks flushed as I looked at my friends. They always had my back, no matter what, and I felt like I didn’t deserve them.

Cress turned to me. “So, after all the drama last night, is your dad coming today?”

“He didn’t say.” I shrugged. “He always seems incredibly busy though, so it’s far more likely he’s already left town.” I considered sending him a text to find out, but I didn’t feel all that comfortable contacting him. The message would likely only get as far as Caldwell anyway.

“Did your parents end up coming last night?” I asked Cress. I’d bailed on the ball too early to know whether they’d shown up.

“No.” She sighed. “I would have liked to see them too. I suppose I’ll have to try and get them to come to the Halloween carnival next month.”

“There’s a carnival?” I sat up slightly straighter in my chair. I normally loved Halloween, but I was usually working at the café, so I wasn’t able to really enjoy it.

“Oh yeah, it’s the best,” Lily said. “The local town hosts Halloween Fest every year. It’s set up on this creepy farm, and people from all over the area come to it.”

“The money raised from the carnival goes to charity,” Anna added. “So, the school makes sure all the clubs get involved and help out. As you can imagine, the academy brings in some pretty hefty donations, so the town is always happy to have us.”

“It’s a blast,” Cress agreed. “*Way* better than some stuffy garden party.” She lowered her voice as she said the last part, like she didn’t want to be caught badmouthing the principal's event.

Someone cleared their voice behind us, and as we all looked back, we saw my English teacher, Mr. Wagner, standing all too close and frowning in our direction.

“Ladies,” he said before continuing on his way.

As soon as we were out of earshot, we all burst into laughter. I had a feeling Mr. Wagner agreed with Cress.

I’d been dreading the garden party this morning, but it wasn’t half as bad as I’d expected when I got to sit in the corner chatting with my friends in the sunshine. We relaxed and talked and drank plenty of water as an hour or two went by. No one seemed to care I was hungover, and I thankfully didn’t see Noah. I even sent a text message to my father. I decided to keep it light to give myself the best chance of getting a response, so I asked how the rest of his evening had been and whether he was coming this morning. Hopefully he, or Caldwell, would reply before the party ended. But either way, I actually found I was enjoying myself. It was just the kind of Sunday morning I needed after a traumatic Saturday night.

When Anna started trying to rank which of our teachers were the hottest, I decided it was a good time to excuse myself and find the bathroom. There was a long line for the one in the cottage, but I overheard one of the girls mention people were also using the bathrooms in a school building close by. I had to leave the party to reach them, but I wasn’t against the idea of a short walk to stretch my legs.

I cut around the side of the house and was walking alongside the hedge that followed the perimeter of the property when I heard voices on the other side of it.

“I expected better from you,” a woman said. “Your father and I have been here two days, and the boy has barely looked your way.”

“I can’t help it if he’s not interested in me, Mother.”

I froze as I recognized Veronica’s voice.

“Clearly, you’re not trying hard enough,” her mother replied. “Where is he this morning?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure he’s around. Noah tends to do as he pleases.”

“With that kind of attitude, you’ll never catch his attention.”

“I don’t know what you expect from me. He has a girlfriend.”

“*You* should be his girlfriend,” her mother scoffed. “And you will be. You just need to get this *other* girl out of the picture.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Now, we should get back to the party. There are still many people I need to speak with. I’m yet to see that intriguing man we met yesterday—Mr. LaFleur.”

Veronica’s mother practically purred Matthew’s name. Perhaps Wes was right. Maybe the news about my secret father would be a big deal at Weybridge.

“And you must introduce me to his daughter,” Veronica’s mother continued. “I’m sure she will be an excellent friend for you to have.”

Veronica didn’t answer, but I could practically hear the steam coming out of her ears. The irony of Mrs. Cordeaux unknowingly wanting her daughter to be friends with the so-called *other* girl probably wasn’t helping.

I heard movement on the other side of the hedge and quickly kept walking so I wouldn’t be caught eavesdropping. I certainly didn’t want to meet Veronica’s mother, especially seeing as I was the girl who had, in her mind, prevented her daughter from obtaining the prestigious boyfriend she apparently needed so urgently. Veronica was calculating and mean, but it seemed like she’d inherited the traits from her mom, and I was surprised by just how strongly Veronica was being pushed toward Noah. For a moment, *just a moment*, I almost felt sorry for her.

I quickly used the bathroom before returning to the party, but as I was following the path back down the side of the house toward the marquee, I saw Veronica standing with her mother at the end of the path. It seemed they hadn’t got far before Mrs. Cordeaux had bumped into someone she needed to chat with. She was laughing away with two other women while Veronica did her best to feign interest and force out smiles at the right moments. I hesitated as I watched them. I didn’t want to have to speak to either one of them, but they were standing right in the middle of the path. I

also didn’t want to overhear another conversation that might make me feel any more sympathy toward Weybridge’s evil queen.

Just as I was contemplating turning around and walking back the way I’d come, a hand wrapped around my arm, and I gasped as I was tugged from the path and into the bushes. My heart was racing from the shock, but it started to gallop like a bolted horse when I looked up into Noah’s eyes.

“Noah,” I gasped. “What are you doing?” He was still holding my arm, sending sparks flying across my skin, and I roughly shook him off. Despite everything he’d done last night, my body still yearned for him.

He was dressed smartly with a deep navy jacket over a crisp white shirt, but his blue tie hung loose around his neck as though he had been just as reluctant and rushed as I was this morning. His hair was a mess, like he’d only recently gotten out of bed, and there were dark bags drooping under his eyes. He looked as bad as I felt.

“I needed to talk to you.” Despite the drained look on his face, his green eyes still bore into mine. Their sparkle was missing, replaced by an emotion I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Pain, longing, anger. It could have been a mix of all three.

“So, you pulled me into the bushes?” The sounds of the party were muffled in the background, and we were completely shielded from view by the low-lying branches of the trees and shrubs surrounding us.

“I can’t be seen with you,” he said. “Especially when my grandfather’s here.”

“So, don’t be seen with me then,” I replied. “I’m going back to the party.”

He reached out and grasped my arm again. “Don’t.”

His voice was low and rough, and that one word sent a ripple of emotion pulsing through me. His word was a desperate tug, pulling me toward him with more power than if he’d yanked me with his hands. I closed my eyes for a second and breathed in as I tried to forget just how much I still wanted Noah. How even now, every part of my body hummed with energy, like his presence was the battery keeping me alive.

It felt impossible to deny my feelings for him. To pretend I wasn’t hurt. That I didn’t still care. My emotions were at war within me, but I couldn’t give in to any of them. Not if I didn’t want to completely fall to pieces. I tried to burrow my feelings away, but it felt a little like trying to squeeze

them into a box that was far too small. The lid wouldn't fit on properly, and the contents simply spilled out.

Somehow, I managed to calm myself enough, and when I opened my eyes, I had some hope my expression didn't display the turmoil that raged inside. I looked down at his hand, which still lightly gripped my arm, and he quickly let go as though he suddenly regretted touching me.

"Look," he stuttered. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

I let out a humorless laugh. "You pulled me into the bushes to apologize for breaking my heart?"

"You're not the only one whose heart was broken last night."

"I find that hard to believe. You chose to abandon our relationship the moment things got slightly difficult."

"*Slightly* difficult?" Anger flashed in his eyes, briefly overwhelming the other emotions I'd seen swirling there. "Things between us are more than slightly difficult. And I had no choice."

"Well, I seem to remember it differently. I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't do anything other than have the wrong family. And you *were* given a choice. I watched you decide, and you chose to cast me aside."

I'd been hurt and confused by our breakup, and the pain still radiated deep in my chest, but right now, my anguish and desire for answers was quashed by my overwhelming sense of anger. "Is this some kind of game you like to play? You reel girls in, make them fall for you, only to turn around and ditch them when you discover being with them might be more complicated than you anticipated?"

"I wasn't playing any game."

"You could have fooled me." I was breathing quickly, and my heart was racing. I hated this boy so much in this moment. I hated him for making me fall for him. I hated him for making me believe things could be different. But mostly, I hated him because, as he stared at me with those deep green eyes, I still wanted him.

It was so messed up.

"Look, just because we can't be together doesn't mean I don't still have feelings for you," Noah said. "That I'm not going to spend every second of this torturous year thinking about you." His eyes dipped to look at my lips, and I forgot how to breathe.

The space between us suddenly felt smaller as though we had unconsciously stepped closer together. We were too close now, and the air

between us felt electric, like every breath I took was charged with furious desire. How could you hate someone—despise them to the depths of your soul—and still want nothing more than to kiss them?

Noah seemed just as torn. He was scowling darkly at me, but there was a hunger in his gaze that struck me low in my stomach.

“If you want me that badly, then what’s stopping you?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then talk to me,” I pleaded. “Explain it to me, please.”

I paused for a moment, pushing my anger and frustration down just beneath the surface. Although it still bubbled there, I wanted to offer him a chance to give me the answers I needed. The answers I deserved. But he wasn’t looking me in the eyes, and he had the same hopeless expression he’d worn last night right before he turned his back on me.

“I have explained, Isobel,” he whispered. “We just can’t be together. It’s impossible.”

My heart sank. I’d thought it was already at rock bottom, but apparently it could still plummet further. He wasn’t even going to try to help me understand? He was refusing, just like he’d refused to fight for us last night.

“Okay then, why don’t I explain it to you, Noah,” I started. “I thought you were different. But I can see now you’re just like the rest of the rich assholes that go to this school—the ones you despise so much because all they see when they look at you is your last name.

“I would never judge someone based on the actions of their family. And I would never abandon someone I cared about because someone else asked me to. I might not know the intricate details of what happened between our families, but I sure as hell know I’m not to blame. And no matter what happened, it will never change the fact that you didn’t care enough about me to see beyond it.”

“Isobel…” His voice implored me. It was filled with anguish. “If I could be with you, I would.”

“You can’t say that to me.”

“I know.”

“You made it very clear we don’t have a future, Noah.”

“I know.”

He was still standing so close, and he was looking at me like he wanted to be closer still. He couldn’t tell me we’d never be together and still look at

me that way. It wasn’t fair. I needed to leave before I forgot the words coming out of his mouth didn’t match the raw emotion in his eyes.

“Maybe you’re right. There’s no way we can be together. Not after this.” I shoved him back and quickly escaped the bushes before he could befuddle my mind any further with his proximity. A cool breeze seemed to drive his scent from my nostrils as I stepped onto the path, and I was able to think more clearly again.

Screw this garden party. Screw waiting around to see if Matthew might show up. And screw Noah Hastings. I started walking away from the cottage in the direction of the dormitories. I hadn’t been given the answers I was looking for, but I might have just taken a big step toward finding that closure.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I woke early on Monday morning. I'd had a rough night, struggling to sleep as I'd been plagued by thoughts of Noah. I was still in so much pain after our breakup, but my body betrayed me because I still wanted him despite everything that had happened.

I was exhausted, and I considered rolling over to try to get back to sleep again. The thought was tempting, but given how active my mind was, I knew it would be useless. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw Noah and the way he had looked at my lips yesterday. I didn't want to lay here and torture myself thinking about him.

I groggily pushed myself up and smiled when I saw Anna and Cress both asleep in Cress's bed. They'd escaped from the garden party not long after me and taken it upon themselves to distract me from the breakup for the rest of the day. We spent all of Sunday afternoon watching movies and eating ice cream, and we'd stayed up late into the night painting our nails and applying face masks. Anna had ended up crashing here, and it warmed my heart to know that, despite everything that happened with Noah, I still had some pretty amazing friends at this school.

I reached over to my bedside table and picked up my phone. There was a notification splayed across the lock screen. I had a message, and although the contact name said Caldwell, it was from my father. Judging by the timestamp on the message, he had sent it the day before. I must have missed it while spending time with the girls.

Hello, Isobel, I hope you're well. Please accept my sincerest apologies for my absence at the principal's garden party today. I had to get back to New York for urgent business this morning, and I'm afraid it will keep me here for a couple of weeks. I know we still have a lot to catch up on, and I promise we will do just that as soon as I can get back to Weybridge.

In the meantime, if you need anything at all, please feel free to reach out. Matthew.

It was hard not to be disappointed. It felt like he was avoiding me just when I needed to talk to him most. I was completely in the dark about what had happened between him and the Hastings family. It must have been pretty bad considering Noah had to break up with me. I was also still wrestling with how to feel about my father after hearing the history of his relationship with my mom. Now was just about the worst time for him to disappear to New York for a couple of weeks.

I considered calling him right back but then thought better of it. It was too early in the morning, and I needed to try to clear my head as much as possible before I spoke to him. I slowly eased myself from bed, trying my best to be quiet, and changed into my running gear. I was tiptoeing to the door when I heard movement, and I glanced over to find Cress propped up in bed.

"Where are you going?" she whispered.

"For a run."

"Now?" She struggled to keep the disbelief from her eyes.

"You know I like to run in the mornings."

"But it's not even light out."

I rolled my eyes. "The sun will be rising any minute. I'll see you when I get back."

She shook her head, muttering something about how crazy I was before burrowing back under her blanket. I felt a twinge of jealousy but knew I wasn't going to feel any better if I went back to bed. I left the room before I could reconsider. The last thing I felt like doing was exercising, but I desperately needed the peace I always felt when jogging.

The morning was crisp, and my skin prickled from the cool air as I emerged from the dorm. The sky was overcast with darker clouds gathering across the horizon. I was somewhat grateful I couldn't see the sun rising to greet the new day. I didn't need its happy face mocking me today.

I set out at a brisk walk, hoping to warm up my limbs before I started jogging. I'd barely made it across the quad when my phone started to ring. The sound made me jump as it broke through the silent morning air and my chest tightened as I wondered whether it could be my father. I hadn't replied to his message from the day before so perhaps he had decided to reach out directly. My shoulders relaxed when I checked the screen and saw it was my mom.

"Hey, Mom," I answered, slowing my steps so I could focus on the call.

"Oh great, you're up," she said, sounding far more chipper than I felt. "I was hoping to catch you before school started for the day."

"You know it doesn't start for a couple more hours, right?" This was early, even for her.

"Yes, but I know you rarely sleep past sunrise, and I'm starting work early today because I've got to spend time later training the new waitress."

"Ah." I couldn't help feeling guilty when she mentioned my replacement at the café. The new girl had been working there for a little while now, but Norma had said she'd been struggling, so maybe she was in need of a little extra training. I felt bad because my mom had more than enough to worry about already. It should be me helping her with the café. But I was never going to convince her to let me ditch school and come home no matter how hard I tried.

"So, how was it?" Mom asked, her voice filled with anticipation.

I knew she was talking about the ball, and it took all of my self-control not to give in to the emotions battling their way to the surface as I recalled the evening's events once again.

"Noah and I broke up," I said.

"What?" Confusion colored my mom's tone. "I can't believe it. He was so clearly lovestruck by you."

"Well, whatever he felt for me mustn't have been strong enough because we're over.

"But why?"

"Apparently there's some bad blood between Matthew and Noah's families, and Noah's grandfather told him to break it off with me."

"And he did it?"

"Yeah." I was really struggling to keep from crying now. I'd managed not to shed a single tear yesterday, but speaking with my mom made it all suddenly feel real.

“What happened between their families?”

“They’re business rivals, I guess. I’ve been wanting to talk to Matthew about it, but I haven’t seen him since the ball. Whatever the issue, it was enough for Noah to just cast me aside. I guess you did warn me.”

“Oh, Isobel. I’m so sorry. I really thought he was different. I wish I could be there to give you a big hug.”

“Me too,” I said. “But I’m about to do the next best thing. I’m going to go for a run to clear my head.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Mom replied. “You always feel better about things after running.”

“Yeah.”

The other end of the line went silent for a few seconds before my mother spoke again. “Have you had a chance to talk to your dad about anything else?” I knew she was referring to Matthew’s side of the story about their past relationship.

“Yeah, we spoke at the ball.”

“And...”

“He told me that his parents stopped him from finding out about me. He only learned I existed after his dad died and he found your letter.”

We both fell silent again. No matter how many times I recalled what my father had told me at the ball, it always seemed to take a few moments to digest.

“How do you feel?” Mom finally broke the silence. “I know it’s a lot to take in.”

“Well, I believe him, if that’s what you mean,” I replied. “I feel like he really does want to get to know me.”

“He does.” My mom’s voice cracked as she spoke, and she took a couple of deep breaths.

“Mom, are you okay?”

“Yes, yes.” She sniffed, clearly holding back tears. “I just… I just feel so bad that you’re going through all this on your own. Everything with your father and now Noah. I should be there to help you through it.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” I reassured her. “I’m okay. You’ve got to look after the café. My replacement isn’t going to train herself.”

I heard her splutter out a laugh on the other end of the line. “I guess that’s true,” she said, though her voice was still rough with emotion. It had

been sounding a little scratchy the whole conversation, so I wondered if she was coming down with a cold.

“I just want you to know how proud I am of you,” she continued. “I know there’s a lot going on, but you’re going to come through all of this stronger than ever.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“And I’ll do my best to come and visit you as soon as I can.”

“Okay.” I smiled. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Silence fell over the phone call once again. Neither of us wanted to hang up, but I wasn’t sure what else there was to say. I needed to get running, and my mom needed to get to work

“I’ll let you get back to it, Mom.” I finally said. “Plus, it’s cold out here, so I better start running.

“Okay,” she agreed. “But call me anytime. I love you, Iz.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

I hung up the phone and took a moment to gather myself. Hearing my mom’s voice made me feel better, but the moment the phone call ended, I felt the gaping void of her absence. She’d been the one to get me through my last breakup, and I knew it was going to be a battle trying to get over Noah without her hugs, optimism, and pecan pie to keep me going.

I had no choice in the matter though. Mom was back in Rapid Bay and I was here at Weybridge. I was just going to have to muddle through this breakup on my own—as hard as that might be.

As I set out on my jog, I considered heading into the forest that surrounded the school. The idea of disappearing among the trees was quite appealing to me right now. But as I neared the worn dirt path that led into the trees, I decided not to take it. The woods reminded me too much of Noah. We’d had our first proper conversation there—yes, I’d wanted to kill him at the time, but looking back, I knew I’d misjudged him then.

It almost brought a smile to my face, thinking of how he’d gotten so thoroughly under my skin, but I started to scowl instead. Noah being under my skin was the whole problem. He was like a splinter I couldn’t get rid of, wedged so firm and deep within me that I suffered from an almost constant ache.

I turned from the forest, determined to leave thoughts of Noah back in the woods where we met. Instead of following the trail through the trees, I chose to follow the path that bordered the lake. The water was completely

still this morning and mirrored the dark clouds gathering above. The rumble of thunder thrummed across the horizon, and its soft growl whispered a promise of rain. I probably should have turned back, but I didn't care whether I got wet or not. Not when the alternative was sitting back in my room with my thoughts.

My runs were normally calming and therapeutic, but today I couldn't seem to find any rhythm. Every breath I took was painful, and my body felt far heavier than normal. I kept waiting to feel the peaceful bliss I usually experienced once my legs found a steady beat, but my mind refused to focus on the repetitive thud of my feet against the ground. All I could think about was how much everything hurt. Both my body and my heart were in agony. I pushed myself to run harder, hoping the physical strain might distract me from the pain I felt inside. It was no use though, and even once I was practically sprinting, it only seemed to be making everything worse.

I finally gave up, slowed my steps, and stared out at the lake. A cold breeze had started to pick up as the clouds above grew even more ominous, creating ripples that shattered the usually glassy surface of the water. My breath was ragged, and I put my hands on my knees, bowing my head as I tried to keep myself from heaving. I scrunched my eyes shut as I waited for my breaths to stop coming so quickly. No matter how fast I ran, I was never going to lessen the pain I felt inside.

I stood there for several minutes as my breathing slowly came under control. I was sweating like crazy, and my head was throbbing from exhaustion. This morning's run had to be one of the worst ideas I'd ever come up with.

When I finally caught my breath, I turned and slowly started jogging back the way I'd come. The chill in the air gave me goose bumps, and the increasing wind whipped across the lake. Just when I thought I might be finally finding a steady rhythm, my focus was broken by the sound of pounding footsteps coming up behind me.

I didn't look over my shoulder. Whoever was running behind me was moving fast, and I knew they would overtake me in a matter of moments. When they didn't come tearing past me and fell into step at my side instead, I glanced across the path to see who it was.

My racing heart tripped as I found Noah running alongside me. Of course, it was him. I couldn't escape him even when I tried. I'd followed this route to make certain I wouldn't see him, but fate had other ideas.

He didn’t look my way. He kept his focus straight ahead, and his feet slapped against the ground in perfect unison with my own. I had no idea what he was doing. Why didn’t he overtake me? Why didn’t he turn and run the other way? Why, oh why, did he have to run just inches from me? My body buzzed at his proximity, and I had to believe he was doing this to torment me.

I was so tempted to stop. Either to shout at him or to let him carry on without me. My legs refused to cease moving though. They appeared to have a mind of their own, as if they wanted to help give me the space I so desperately needed from him.

As my irritation at Noah’s presence grew, my speed increased and my breaths came in quicker. Before long, I was again sprinting as fast as my legs would carry me. Noah kept pace easily at my side, which only angered me more. He was tormenting me on purpose. He had to be. And I didn’t want any part of it.

Just when I felt my legs couldn’t move any quicker, I slammed to a halt. Noah stopped just after me. Thunder rumbled from somewhere in the distance, almost as if the sky was warning me to stay clear of him. Noah’s eyes were pained and heated, and I wondered if he was as tortured by my presence as I was by his. Did he enjoy the pain?

“I told you to stop messing with me,” I growled at him. “I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

“I’m not messing with you.”

“How is this”—I waved between us—“not messing with me? Is this some kind of payback for who my father is? Are you trying to torture me?”

“I’m not. I…” He huffed out a hard breath and paced away from me before he turned and quickly closed the distance between us once more. “Can’t you see how much I’m struggling with this? How hard it is to stay away from you? You may think I’m torturing you, but I can assure you I’m the one who’s tortured.”

Mere inches separated us, and those inches were only getting smaller with the rapid rise and fall of our puffing chests. We were both breathless from running so fast, but I thought maybe my emotions were just as much to blame for the way I was panting. Fire and lust surged through me as I stared into his green eyes. They were lit with so much desire, and I could see he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. That he wished for nothing more than to eviscerate the small gap between us.

It would be so easy to reach out to him. To pretend for just one moment he wasn't Noah and I wasn't Isobel and our families didn't exist. That we were simply two people who desperately wanted one another.

Would it really be so bad to give in to the temptation? To kiss him one more time, like my body so desperately wanted. Like I desperately needed. Noah must have been considering the same question because the longing in his eyes was mixed with obvious indecision.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be this way," he murmured.

"And how would it be?" I whispered.

He reached out to touch me, but his fingers stopped just before they caressed my face. They hovered there a moment before they dropped to his side, and his gaze turned more serious. "I can't go against my grandfather, but what if he didn't know..."

I swallowed a heavy lump that had formed in my throat. I thought I knew what he was suggesting, but I needed him to be clear. "What are you saying, Noah?"

"I'm saying what if we stayed together, but in secret?"

"Noah—

"It could work," he said. "No one would have to know. We might not be able to sit together in class or in the cafeteria, but we could go for morning runs and watch the sun rise before anyone wakes up. We'll spend our weekends down at the old boathouse or disappear completely and fly to Rapid Bay so we can lay together on the beach."

I clenched my eyes shut as the images he was conjuring up overwhelmed me. It sounded like bliss. Just Noah and me, shutting out the world so we could be together, just the two of us. I wanted to be with Noah so badly, but was I willing to have him no matter the cost? Deep down, I knew his dream would actually be a nightmare. My life would turn into a lie, just so I could be with him. I'd already made the mistake of hiding parts of myself, as though I was ashamed of who I was, and I couldn't do that again. The stupid part was, even if I did what he was asking, I wouldn't have all of him. I'd only get the fragments of a relationship he threw my way behind closed doors. I deserved so much better than that.

"It could work," he repeated. "As long as my grandfather doesn't find out."

I opened my eyes to look at him again. "You want me to be your dirty little secret?"

“I just want you.” He moved closer to me as he spoke. His hands gripped my waist, and he pulled me against him. I pressed my hands on his firm chest to stop us from colliding, but we were just a hairbreadth from each other as he looked down at me. “I know this isn’t fair, but I can’t imagine my future without you.”

I shook my head and lowered my gaze from his. “Can you really see a future with someone you have to hide?”

“Yes.” He sounded so sure of himself as he gripped me tighter, but I didn’t share an ounce of his certainty. “It wouldn’t be forever. I—”

“I’m not going to be with you that way,” I said, lifting my head to lock eyes with him once more.

“Isobel...” His gaze pleaded with me to reconsider.

“No. We’re either together or we’re not. I deserve better than some half-assed secret relationship.”

He suddenly loosened his grip on my waist, and the distance between us seemed to grow, like the conviction in my words had struck him in the chest and forced him to take a step back. Ever so slowly, his shoulders sagged and his arms fell back at his side.

“Please, Isobel,” he murmured. “I’ll do anything to make this work.”

“Anything?” I challenged him. “Can you tell me what happened between your grandfather and my father?”

His lips tensed into a firm line as he glanced away. I guessed that was all the answer I was going to get.

“Is it really so bad my father is Matthew LaFleur? Can’t you get your grandfather to reconsider?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s that bad.” He sounded completely defeated. “And no, I can’t do that.”

“I can’t try to fix things if I don’t know the problem...”

“It doesn’t matter what happened. There’s no fixing things.” His reply was abrupt. He seemed to be pulling further away now, and a look of hopelessness had fallen over him. The desire and longing I’d thought we’d shared was nowhere to be seen. He’d finally found his restraint.

“Right.” I took another step back. “Then you won’t do anything to make this work, will you?”

"Isobel...”

I shook my head. He clearly didn’t want to talk about why his family despised my father so much, but he couldn’t just expect me to accept that.

To just let it lie when he continued to tease me with his presence. I certainly wasn't going to give him a free pass to keep that up by agreeing to a secret relationship.

"Just stop messing with me, and leave me alone, Noah."

I took off running again, and this time he didn't come after me. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look back. I wasn't sure what game Noah was trying to play, but I wanted no part of it.

There was still so much pain in my heart from our breakup, but the more I saw Noah, the angrier I was becoming. Every time he got close to me, he played with my emotions, reminding me how much I wanted him but also how what we had was gone forever. And now he had offered to have a relationship with me in secret. He wanted me enough to keep seeing me on the side but not enough to stand up to his grandfather and fight for me.

I was starting to prefer the anger over the sadness. Sadness only made me feel helpless, but my anger gave me a sense of power. It urged me to keep moving. To run harder and faster and put Noah so far behind me he became nothing more than a distant memory.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Anna was gone by the time I returned to my room, but Cress was still in bed lightly snoring. She was absolutely terrible at getting up in the mornings. I knew if I didn't try to wake her there was a chance she'd snooze her alarm past breakfast, so I went over and gave her a nudge.

"Cress," I whispered, gently shaking her arm. "You have to get up."

"No," she groaned into her pillow. She was generally a pretty positive person, but only after her morning coffee.

"We've got to go to breakfast soon," I said. "And I need to jump in the shower."

"But it's so warm and cozy in here." Her voice was muffled by her pillow. "Please tell me it's hot outside."

"It's hot outside."

"Really?" She sounded surprised, and one of her eyes finally opened to glance up at me.

"No, not really."

Her eye scrunched shut again. "You're supposed to lie about the weather until I'm out of bed."

"I'll remember for next time."

She groaned but finally started to push herself upright.

Happy to see she seemed awake, I made my way into the bathroom and jumped in the shower. I was sweaty and gross from my run, and I worried about the fact Noah had just been so close to me when I looked like this. I threw my head under the cascading water and ran my hands through my hair trying to wash away any further thoughts of him.

Again, I'd failed to get any explanation out of him. I wasn't sure if understanding the feud between our families would change anything, but I felt like I had a right to some answers. My life had been upended. My heart broken. Telling me the reason why seemed the least Noah could do.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Cress was thankfully still awake.

"Something came for you while you were in the shower," she said, nodding at my bed.

I looked where she was indicating and found a small package waiting there for me. "What is it?"

"Beats me." She shrugged and walked past me into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I slowly approached the box, completely uncertain what could be inside or who it could be from. It was small and square, and the packaging was simple and white, giving no clue what it contained. I hoped it wasn't some sort of apology gift from Noah. If it was, it might be about to get thrown from the window.

There was a short note on top of the box that read: "I believe you will find this useful. Matthew."

Although it wasn't from Noah, my confusion didn't ease. My father was sending me gifts now? After everything he'd revealed on the weekend, I wasn't sure how to feel about it. A week ago, I might have felt the urge to throw his gift out the window too, but now I wasn't so sure.

I slowly opened the lid on the box and gasped when I saw a set of car keys inside. He bought me a car. *A car?* What on earth was he thinking? Cars were expensive, and given the Mercedes logo on the keyring, I had to assume this one was no exception. I knew it was probably pocket change to my father, but I didn't want to accept something so lavish from him.

I immediately took my phone out and did the one thing I thought I'd never voluntarily do: I called Matthew.

His butler, Caldwell, answered after several rings. "LaFleur residence." He sounded like even more of a pompous ass on the phone. The guy really needed to loosen up a little.

"Hey, Caldwell, it's Isobel. Isobel Grace. Uh, is my father around?" I wasn't sure why I sounded so awkward. It was probably because I'd never called this number before. I still couldn't believe I was actively seeking my father out.

“Hello, Miss Isobel. I’ll see if he’s available to talk. One moment, please.”

The line went quiet as I was put on hold. A jittery kind of nervousness pulsed through my veins, and I paced back and forth in my room as I waited for him to answer. I barely knew my father, and I didn’t know the first thing about how to have a conversation with the guy—especially when we had so much more to talk about than just the new car.

Just as I was starting to think about hanging up, my father’s voice sounded on the other end of the line. “Isobel, this is a nice surprise.” Matthew sounded genuinely happy I’d called, but I wasn’t planning for pleasant small talk.

“You bought me a car?”

“Ah, it finally came,” he replied. “It was supposed to be with you on your first day at school, but there was a delay. I’m glad it arrived.”

He’d obviously missed the unimpressed tone to my voice. “You shouldn’t have done that. I don’t want you buying me expensive things.”

“But you don’t have a driver at school, so it’s necessary to have you own form of transportation.” He responded calmly, as though it was the most normal thing in the world

“We clearly have different definitions of what constitutes a necessity,” I said. “I have friends who can drive me around. I really don’t need one.”

“I understand,” he said. “The vehicle is bought and paid for now though, and it’s in your name. It’s up to you what you do with the car, but I would feel comfortable knowing you have it if you ever need it.”

I let out a sigh. I had a feeling there was no way I was going to win this fight with Matthew. “It really is too much,” I murmured.

“It’s not even a fraction of the things I’d give you if you’d let me,” he said. “I know I can’t make up for lost time with expensive gifts, but it makes me feel slightly less useless if I can help provide for you now. Especially when I can see a need of yours I can fulfill.”

I knew he was trying. That he wanted to build a relationship between us. Material things really didn’t matter to me, but the fact he’d got me a car because he thought I might need it did make me feel slightly less annoyed. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I could barely drive. He clearly had no idea I’d refused to get behind the wheel of any car since I’d crashed my mom’s one day after getting my license. I’d almost hit a dog that had darted across the road, and I swerved into a fire hydrant. By some miracle, I hadn’t

been hurt, but my mom's car never looked quite the same, and I'd completely lost all confidence in driving. Matthew's car was probably going to sit in the parking lot all year, but he didn't need to know that.

"Well, thank you for thinking of me," I said. "It was unnecessary but very kind."

"You're welcome," he replied.

I drew in a breath as I tried to gather the courage I needed for the next part of our conversation. I still had so many questions about why Noah's grandfather had reacted the way he did at the ball. What had happened between our families? I didn't think I was going to get the answers I needed from Noah, so Matthew was my only hope of getting any closure.

"There was something else I wanted to ask you," I said. "About Noah Hastings. You and his grandfather wanted us to end our relationship. You said that we could never work. What happened with you and the Hastings family?"

The other end of the line went silent, and I wondered if the call had somehow dropped out. "Matthew?"

"Sorry," he said. "I was just trying to gather my thoughts."

He went quiet again.

"And?"

"This isn't an easy conversation," he said. "Our family shares a troubled past with the Hastings. They are terrible people."

"Funny, that's what Noah said about your family."

Matthew let out a long sigh. "We're not without our flaws. But there are some things that can't be looked past."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"I can tell you. But it's complicated. This is a conversation best had in person."

"Oh." My shoulders slumped in response. "Well, will you be back in town anytime soon?" His text this morning had indicated he wouldn't, but I hoped he'd relent and give me the explanation I wanted when he realized how long I'd have to wait.

"Not for a while," he said. "I've got a busy time with work at the moment, and I'm going to be in New York for the next couple of weeks."

I let out a sigh. "Surely you can tell me something?"

He went quiet for a moment, taking his time as he considered his response. "Only that the more distance you have from that family the better.

They’re dangerous, and I don’t want you getting caught up with them.”

“Dangerous how?”

“Just... Dangerous. I promise I’ll explain in more detail as soon as I can.”

“But I know Noah’s not like that.”

Matthew slowly exhaled, and I could tell he didn’t agree with me.

“He’s not,” I insisted.

“I’d still like you to keep your distance,” my father said. His voice was calm, but I felt like he was holding back. Maybe if he wasn’t wary of my feelings, he would have given a more damning response. I got the impression he was struggling to stop himself from ordering me to never even look at Noah ever again. Matthew clearly had a very poor opinion of him.

A part of me wanted to argue with him. To try to convince him Noah wasn’t anything like his grandfather. But what would be the point? Noah had made it clear he was done with me.

“Well, that won’t be hard,” I said. “He did what his grandfather asked and broke up with me.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting,” Matthew replied. “But I think once we’ve had a proper talk you’ll understand why it has to be this way.”

That proper talk was weeks away. Did he really expect me to sit here clueless for all that time? There had to be another way I could get the answers I needed. Clearly it wasn’t going to happen on this phone call right now.

“Have you thought any more about the other things we talked about on Saturday night?” Matthew asked.

He must have been talking about the revelations he’d made as we’d danced at the ball. About how he’d never known I existed and how he wanted to build a relationship with me.

“A little,” I admitted.

“Do you have any questions?” I could have sworn he sounded nervous.

“Not that I can think of right now, but we can talk some more about it all when you’re back in town.” If I was being honest, there were too many questions rolling around inside my head; I didn’t know where to start. He was probably right about it being easier in person.

“I’d like that,” he replied.

It felt strange to talk to Matthew like this. When I'd first met him, all he'd done was order me about. He still spoke with the same formality and rigidness, but I could clearly see he was making an effort to connect with me. Even though he hadn't told me what I needed to know, it still felt like we were communicating better. Mom had told me to give him a chance. Perhaps I needed to listen to her advice and give him the benefit of the doubt.

Cress emerged from the bathroom, and I knew I needed to bring the conversation to an end. "Well, I should probably go and get ready for school."

"Yes, and I have work to get back to." He paused. "Isobel?"

"Yeah?"

"Feel free to call at any time."

As I hung up the phone, I felt an unusual warm feeling in my chest. I hadn't totally hated that conversation with my father. He was always going to be far too posh for my liking, and I doubted he was ever going to be the kind of dad I went to whenever I needed a heart-to-heart, but despite the fact I was still in the dark about so much, it felt something like progress.

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CHAPTER SIX

There was way too much attention on me as I made my way into the dining hall for breakfast. I'd caught a few people glancing in my direction and whispering about me in the quad on the way here. But that was nothing compared to the obvious curiosity I received as I walked by people's tables and they turned in their seats to watch me pass.

I kept my head down and tried to ignore the strange looks. Word must have finally got out about my breakup with Noah. The kids at Weybridge Academy were all obsessed with him and loved nothing more than to gossip, so I guessed I was the day's big news.

I should have thought about that before coming to breakfast on my own. Cress was running late today, but I really wished I'd waited for her. I did my best to ignore the attention as I headed for the buffet and began to load my plate with whatever I could find. I was hoping that the sooner I got my food and sat down the sooner people would find someone else to gossip about. At least I could be grateful Noah wasn't in the dining hall too.

"Hey, you're Isobel, right?"

I glanced up from my plate to look at the girl standing next to me in the line for the buffet. I recognized her from my chemistry class, but she'd never bothered to speak with me before. She was always too busy flirting with her lab mate or complaining loudly about whatever homework was set. I didn't think she even knew I existed.

"Uh, yeah..."

"I'm Mandy, and this is Trish." She nodded to the girl beside her who gave me a smile. "It's so crazy we haven't run into each other yet. How are

you liking Weybridge?”

It seemed like a strange thing for her to say considering we’d been in the same class for weeks already.

“We should hang out some time,” she continued.

“Definitely,” Trish agreed.

“Uh...”

I was saved from having to answer as Anna appeared at my side.

“Everything okay here, Isobel?” she asked, linking her arm through mine.

“Oh, hey, Anna.” Mandy didn’t wait for me to reply. “We were just introducing ourselves to Isobel and welcoming her to Weybridge.”

“How nice.” Anna’s voice was thick with sarcasm. “But you know she’s been here for over a month now, right? What could possibly have sparked such a random act of kindness from you girls?”

The girls shared a look, and Trish scoffed. “What are you talking about?”

Anna didn’t answer. She just raised her eyebrows and cocked her head at the pair as though she was waiting for Trish to answer her own question.

“Whatever, Anna.” Mandy shrugged before focusing back on me. “Seriously, Isobel, if you ever want to hang out with me and my friends, you’re always welcome. We have a lot of fun, and it would be nice to have someone like you in our group.”

“Someone like me?”

She tittered a laugh and waved a hand at me. “Oh, you know what I mean.”

I was about to tell her I actually didn’t, but she kept talking before I had a chance. “It was nice to finally meet you, Isobel” she said, before turning and walking away with Trish close behind.

I glanced at Anna. “What was that all about?”

“Ugh.” Anna rolled her eyes as she reached past me to grab an apple. “I think word about your dad finally got out. I heard some girls talking about it on the way here.”

“They were only talking to me because of my *dad*?”

Anna nodded. “I’d say there’s probably a ninety percent chance that’s the reason. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I thought it was weird they were talking to me.”

“They probably won’t be the only ones,” Anna said. “I'm sure you’ll have plenty of ‘networking opportunities’ today.”

“Sounds fun,” I groaned.

“Oh yeah.” Anna matched my lack of enthusiasm. “There’s nothing better than people only talking to you because they want to use you.”

“And I thought my biggest problem today was going to be people gossiping about me and Noah,” I said as we made our way to our usual table.

“Actually, I haven’t heard anyone talking about it.” Anna shrugged.

“But I thought that was why I've been getting so much attention this morning.”

“No, I’d say that’s all thanks to Daddy Dearest,” she explained. “A secret LaFleur heir in our midst is quite the scandal.”

“Great,” I muttered. I wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than people gossiping about Noah and me. It was probably worse since apparently it also meant people like Trish and Mandy thought they needed to try to befriend me because of it. Was this what it was like for Noah? He was used to people talking to him with the sole objective of getting more closely connected to his family. I could see why he was so shut off because of it. I didn’t want any fake offers of friendship either.

Cress arrived just as Anna and I sat down at our table. She looked a little winded and was still scooping her hair back in a ponytail. She’d clearly rushed to get here this morning.

“Sorry I’m running so late,” she said.

“You’re always running late.” I smiled at her.

“Yeah, but I wanted to be here in case you saw Noah again for the first time. To support you.” She landed in the seat beside me and stole a hashbrown off my plate.

My cheeks flushed because I knew it wouldn’t be the first time I’d seen Noah since the ball. It wouldn’t even be the second. I hadn’t told Anna or Cress about either of those encounters though.

“Actually, you already missed the first time,” I said.

“What?” Cress sat up a little straighter. “Did you see him already this morning?”

“And yesterday...”

“Wait you’ve seen him *twice*?”

I nodded.

“And...” Anna prompted.

“And it was a disaster. I ran into him at the garden party yesterday and then again on my run this morning. He refused to give me a proper explanation and said we needed to stay away from each other. But then he kept looking at me like he wanted to kiss me and suggested we stay together but keep it a secret.”

“Seriously?” Cress asked.

“What did you do?” Anna added, her eyes wide.

“I walked away. I still have feelings for him, but I’m not going to kiss someone who broke my heart, and I’m definitely not agreeing to a secret relationship.” Although, a part of me still wondered if that was the right choice. Maybe I’d acted too hastily. Surely getting some of Noah was better than nothing?

“That’s good,” Cress said. “I know how hard it must have been, but I think you made the right choice.”

“Yeah, well, I hope he’s going to keep his distance now. I’m not sure I can handle another one of these encounters.”

“He needs to leave you alone,” Anna huffed. “Why does he think he can try and kiss you? And I can’t believe he asked you to be with him in secret. That’s so unfair. He should be shouting his love for you from the roof of the school.” She was getting so agitated I was worried she was about to jump up on the table and do some shouting of her own.

“Agreed,” Cress nodded. “What was he thinking?”

“I’m not really sure he *is* thinking clearly right now,” I murmured. “And, I mean, he didn’t actually *try* to kiss me, but I felt like that was what he wanted.” I shook my head. “You’re right, though. He’s not being fair, and it makes me so mad. I guess the small blessing is that when he makes me angry, I feel like I might one day be able to get over him.”

“Yes, you should definitely focus on moving on,” Cress agreed.

“What you need is a rebound,” Anna said.

“Anna…” Cress hissed.

“What? Isobel needs to get over Noah, and rebounding is the quickest way. Not to mention it’s fun too.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“I’m not sure that’s such a great idea.” I was completely with Cress on this one. I couldn’t even picture kissing another guy, and the last thing I wanted at school this year was any more emotional entanglements.

“It’s a great idea,” Anna said. “I can start brainstorming candidates in class this morning.”

“Please don’t make a list for me,” I groaned.

Anna waved my complaint away “You’ll thank me later. Trust me.”

I lowered my head onto the table and groaned again. Not only did I have to handle a broken heart, but now I had to deal with Anna throwing boys at me.

The sound of scraping chairs made me sit up again. The twins were taking a seat at our table and throwing curious looks in my direction.

“Don’t tell me you’ve already given up on the day, Grace,” Sawyer said.

“The day, the week, and maybe the year,” I replied.

He looked sympathetic as he shook his head at me. “Don’t let Noah get you down.”

I shared a smile with him and nodded though following his advice was easier said than done.

“She won’t be down for too long,” Anna piped in. “I’m going to find her a rebound.”

Sawyer started to grin and sat up a little straighter in his chair. “I know this is a very important assignment, so I volunteer as tribute.”

Wes slapped a hand across the back of his brother’s head. “Dude!”

“What?” Sawyer looked baffled. “I’m just being a good friend, and if making out with Isobel will make her feel better, I’m all in.”

Wes cuffed him across the back of the head again and gave me an apologetic smile on behalf of his brother

“Thanks for the offer, Sawyer, but I’m not looking for a rebound—no matter what Anna thinks.”

Sawyer let out a long dramatic sigh and shrugged. “Okay, well, the offer is always there if you need it.”

“Uh, thanks.” I thought he was joking, but he seemed completely serious. It was totally weird to offer to be my rebound, but I actually believed him when he said he was doing it because he wanted to be a good friend. Also, he seemed to have no problem kissing girls and it meaning nothing. He was probably a good rebound option if I wanted one—*and I didn’t*.

“So, can we talk about something other than my miserable love life?” I said, hoping to change the topic before anyone else could make unhelpful suggestions for boys I should kiss.

“Uh, how about the new car you got?” Cress squealed. With everything that had happened this morning, I’d almost forgotten about the car.

“You got a new car?”

“What’d you get?”

“Can I drive it?”

Wes, Anna, and Sawyer all seemed to be talking at once. They were far more excited than I was about the car, and I worried I was going to sound ungrateful if I didn’t match their enthusiasm.

“Yes, I got a new car. No idea what kind it is. And no, Sawyer, you can’t drive it,” I answered everyone in turn.

“You’re no fun,” Sawyer grumbled.

“How do you not know what it is?” Anna asked.

“My dad just got it for me, and I haven’t seen it yet.” I wasn’t in a rush to go looking for it out in the parking lot. It wasn’t like I planned to drive it.

They all started guessing what type of car it might be, but I stopped listening because Noah entered the cafeteria.

My heart leaped to my throat and lodged itself there, making it impossible to breathe. He usually looked so impossibly handsome, but this morning, he looked like hell—worse even than when I’d seen him on our run. The circles ringing his eyes seemed to have grown darker, and it made me wonder if he was suffering as much as I was with our breakup—not that I should be concerned by that. He’d made this decision for us. This was what he wanted. He shouldn’t get an ounce of sympathy from me.

He didn’t look my way as he walked over to his usual table. He didn’t even try to sneak a glance. He seemed resolute to pretend I didn’t exist, and as much as I didn’t want that to hurt, it did. I’d gotten used to him sending me subtle smiles, to seeing his face light up whenever we were in the same room, and it was painful to know those stolen moments were gone forever.

As if it wasn’t hard enough to see him again, I had to watch as Veronica went bounding over to him. Her whole face brightened as she started chatting to Noah, but he’d turned away so I couldn’t see his response. He’d told me plenty of times he wasn’t interested in Veronica, but it was hard to see him with her after they’d attended the ball together on Saturday night.

I felt a hand at my shoulder. Wes was waiting at my side. “Hey, I was wondering if you could help me with one of our econ problems before classes started for the day?”

“Oh, ah, sure.” I shot him a grateful smile before turning to the others. “I’ll catch you guys later.”

I happily hurried from the dining hall and followed Wes outside. Although it hadn’t rained on my run, there were still dark clouds overheard and the air was heavy with moisture. Wes sat down at one of the benches, and I took in a deep breath of the fresh morning air as I went to join him.

“Just so you know, I don’t actually want you to help with the homework,” he said. “It just looked like you really wanted to get out of there.”

“Thanks,” I murmured. “Seeing Noah was harder than I was expecting. I wasn’t prepared for what it would feel like to be ignored by him.”

“Noah’s an idiot,” he murmured.

“I know. It doesn’t make it any easier though.” I let out a long sigh. “I’m going to have to get used to seeing him every day, aren’t I?”

“Probably,” Wes agreed. “It will get easier though.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I hoped he was right. At least when Levi and I had broken up, I’d had the summer without him, and I didn’t have to see him every day at school. I’d been devastated when we’d broken up, and yet, despite the fact Noah and I had barely dated, this felt so much worse. People always said time healed all wounds—but that didn’t mean you weren’t left with a deep scar.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Classes that morning were strange. Several students I'd never spoken to before came up to me to say hi, and even one of the teachers I passed greeted me as Miss LaFleur. He wasn't even my teacher. Wes had predicted this on Saturday night. He said people were going to view me differently now they knew who my father was. I couldn't understand why it made a difference. I was still the same person I'd been last week. It was crazy to think who your parents were could change people's whole perception of you.

The increased attention was only made harder when I still felt broken over Noah. I wanted to be curled up in a corner somewhere—not trading fake smiles with people I had no interest in getting to know.

While students I didn't know were suddenly interested in me, I assumed Noah's friends would start to ignore me now we were no longer together. But when I walked into math class, Luther didn't give me the opportunity to avoid them. I made my way toward a free desk at the front of the classroom, but Luther grabbed my arm and dragged me to the back of the room before I had a chance to pull out the chair.

"Sit, newbie," Luther said, nodding at the free chair and returning to his desk right by it.

I slowly lowered myself into the seat. "I thought you wouldn't want me to sit with you now Noah and I aren't together"

"You kidding, newbie? Math with you is practically the highlight of my week."

I glanced at Kaden, trying to determine if Luther was joking. Kaden just gave an easy shrug.

“So, you get your kicks out of disrupting my learning?” I asked, focusing on Luther once more. He tended to talk throughout every lesson, and it was a miracle I was managing to keep up with my math homework.

He gave me a bright smile. “I happen to think I make your learning more enjoyable. We all know you’re top of the class.”

“Except, I’m not. Even if I was, it would only be because I have to study my butt off outside of class.”

“See?” he replied. “I’m a great influence.”

I rolled my eyes at him but laughed. Luther was absolutely terrible to sit by in class, but I was secretly glad he still wanted to be friends.

As I sat with him and Kaden, I itched to ask them about how Noah was doing. Perhaps they had some small insight into the inner workings of his mind. I couldn’t bring myself to ask though. Not when I was trying to put the past behind me. If my interaction with Noah this morning was anything to go by, he was struggling to cope as much as I was.

“There’s going to be a party this Friday night at the boathouse,” Luther said. “You should come.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I immediately replied. Surely Noah would object to me being there. Plus, I wasn’t stupid enough to willingly go to a small, intimate party where I’d have no choice but to see him.

“It’s a great idea,” Luther replied. “Kaden and I both want to challenge you to a beer pong rematch.”

I looked between the two of them. “So, you want to get me drunk?”

“I intend no such thing.” Given the way Luther’s eyes sparkled though, he was totally lying.

“I still think it’s a bad idea.”

Luther’s expression dimmed, and he let out a sigh. “Look, Noah’s got issues. I’m one of his best friends, but even I know he can be a total stubborn idiot sometimes.”

“Whatever happened between you two, he’ll come round,” Kaden added.

I frowned as I looked between the two of them. “That’s why you’re still talking to me? Because you think he’ll change his mind? Did he even tell you guys why he broke up with me?”

Luther shrugged. “He just said the two of you could never work because of your families, but I’m a firm believer that love always finds a way.”

“And we’re still talking to you because we like you,” Kaden added with a soft smile.

“Yeah, you can’t get rid of us that easily even if you are *a LaFleur*.” Luther ruffled my hair with his hand, and I swatted it away with a smile.

It was kind of awkward talking about Noah with his friends, but I was somewhat glad we’d cleared the air, and that the boys still wanted to be friends with me despite my father’s surname.

I didn’t believe Noah would ever come around like the boys suggested. And I refused to devote even the smallest crumb of hope to the idea. Hope like that was dangerous, and I’d wasted far too much time hoping Levi would realize his mistake during my last breakup. No, my time was far better served focusing on moving on—no matter what Luther or Kaden said.

NOAH DIDN’T corner me again that week at school. Not like he had at the garden party or on our run. That didn’t mean it was easy when I saw him. He didn’t speak to me, and yet he was always around. Every meal he was in the dining hall, and it felt like I was constantly passing him in the corridors. Even in the class we shared, he continued to sit behind me. He made every minute of that class a living hell because all I could concentrate on was the feel of his eyes against the back of my neck.

I wanted to pretend he didn’t exist. But Noah was almost impossible to ignore even when he didn’t say a word. It was hardly surprising. Noah had always been difficult to turn a blind eye to even when we hadn’t been dating.

Despite the obvious distance between us, no one else mentioned our breakup to me after I spoke with Luther and Kaden. I’d been so caught up in all the attention I’d received because of my father that it took me a while to realize that no one seemed to be gossiping about the fact Noah and I were over.

I'd told my friends and Noah had told his, but it seemed that was as far as the news had travelled. I did overhear a couple of girls speculating about it in the locker room after PE on Tuesday though.

“Do you think something’s up with Noah and Isobel?” one girl said, drawing my attention.

“Yeah, Noah’s always sending her those dreamy little smiles of his,” another girl replied. “He didn’t even talk to her in class today though, and no one’s seen them together since the ball on Saturday night.”

The girls were standing on the other side of the lockers, so I couldn’t see who was speaking, and their voices weren’t familiar.

“You’d think the fact she’s a LaFleur would only cement the relationship,” the first girl said.

“Really? I heard their families are like total rivals...”

I’d heard enough and quickly grabbed my bag and rushed from the room. It was one thing to know people were gossiping about you, but another thing entirely to have to overhear it.

Cress and Anna were waiting outside the locker room for me, and they frowned when they caught my expression.

“Everything okay?” Cress asked.

I shrugged. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

My friends had been so supportive of me since the breakup, and I really didn’t want to off-load my problems on them again. I should have known people would start to theorize about Noah and I when we weren’t being seen together. And it’s not like the girls had said anything malicious. If anything, they’d simply stated the facts.

“You sure?” Anna asked.

“Positive.”

Those two girls were just the beginning, and as the week wore on, I overheard more and more whispers from people wondering if Noah and I were still together. One girl was even brazen enough to ask me outright.

“What’s the deal with you and Noah?” she said as I made my way to English on Thursday morning.

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me?”

“You and Noah. What’s happening with you two?”

Her friends standing behind her started to giggle, and I folded my arms, clutching my laptop to my chest. The girl looked too young to be in my year, and I got the impression she was asking me just to impress her friends.

“Look, I don’t know you, and my relationship is really none of your business.” I wasn’t trying to avoid the fact Noah and I were over; I just didn’t particularly want to have to talk about it with some kid who was trying to be a smart-ass.

“So, does that mean you’re broken up?” She continued to pry.

“It means I’m late to English.” I walked off before the girl could hound me any further because she looked ready to fire more questions at me. Thankfully, I was right by the classroom, and I escaped inside before she could respond.

I was more than ready for this school week to be over, and I collapsed into the free chair beside Cress. “I swear, some people have zero boundaries in this place,” I complained.

“Mmm.” Cress murmured a sound of agreement though she didn’t look up from her phone, so I wasn’t sure she’d actually heard me. It looked like she was trying to draft a message, but whenever she wrote something, she deleted it right away.

“What’s up?” I asked.

She let out a sigh and placed her phone down on the desk as she looked up at me. “I was supposed to go to a social committee meeting about the Halloween carnival this morning, but it was so damn early, and I arrived late. I swear, no one should ever have to arrive anywhere at 7:00 A.M. It’s so uncivilized.”

I frowned because it didn’t explain why she seemed so bothered. It wasn't exactly unusual for Cress to arrive late to something. “Are you in trouble about it or something?”

“No.” She sighed. “If only.”

“So, why do you look so down?”

“Because they were assigning booths for each club to run at the carnival, and because I was late, all the good ones were taken.”

“Shit.”

“I know.” She nodded. “Not only that, but the cheerleaders got the booth we wanted. The girls on my dance squad are going to be so disappointed.”

“Surely, it’s not that bad. What did you get stuck with?”

“The kissing booth.” She gave such an exaggerated shudder I couldn’t help but laugh.

“That sounds okay.” I tried my best to sound convincing.

“Not when you realize that *anyone* can buy a token for a kiss. It’s the worst booth in the fair...”

“Oh, yeah, that does suck.” I was suddenly grateful I hadn’t joined any clubs at school.

“Tell me about it,” she said. “Quite a few of the girls on the squad have boyfriends too, so I think I’m going to struggle to find volunteers to man the booth.”

“Well, there’s always Anna. I’m sure she’d be more than happy to help you out.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she will.” Cress laughed, but her expression dimmed as she glanced down at her phone once more. “I’m trying to figure out how to break the news to the squad. Everyone is asking in the group chat what happened at the meeting.”

I shrugged. “I’d just be honest. Tell them the cheerleaders stole your booth and that they’re going to need to pucker up.”

“I don’t think that’s going to make them feel any better about it.”

I smiled as an idea came to me. “*Or*, you could tell them you got stuck with the stand but you’re going to change it to a kiss *or scare* booth. When people come up for their turn, they don’t know if they’re getting a kiss or a scare from the girls.”

“Oh, I like that,” Cress said. “Definitely more fitting for Halloween. Maybe I’ll create some kind of coin that can be flipped with kiss on one side and scare on the other so it’s a game of chance.”

“That would be so fun,” I agreed. “You could also get some cute guys to volunteer so the girls wouldn’t have to do all the kissing.”

“Like who?”

“Well, a certain twin who loves kissing comes to mind.”

Cress looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I’m sure I can rope Sawyer into it.”

“I think it would be harder trying to keep him away.”

Cress giggled, her familiar bright smile fully restored. “Okay, I think this might go down better with the team. I guess we’ll just have to convince a few other guys to help us out.”

She grew quiet as Veronica entered the room and took her usual seat in front of me. Veronica slowly turned to Cress and flashed her a fake smile. “Sorry the dance team missed out on the photo booth this morning. I know you girls were thinking about doing it, but I’m sure you can understand that I didn’t have a choice. I was just doing what the cheer team wanted. They have all these ideas for different backdrops, and I’d hate to disappoint them.”

Cress returned Veronica’s smile with one that was just as empty. “Oh, I understand,” she said. “But you don’t need to worry, we’re pretty excited to

be doing the kissing booth."

"Seriously?" Veronica scoffed. "You can't actually want to kiss all the losers who are going to be lining up."

Cress shrugged. "We have a few ideas that might make it more fun."

Veronica lifted one eyebrow, as though she was having a hard time believing Cress, but she didn't respond. Instead, she turned her attention to me. "I haven't seen you and Noah together this week. Of course, everyone's wondering is there trouble in paradise already?"

I swallowed a heavy lump that rose in my throat. I'd heard the whispers, and to be honest, I had no idea how everyone at school hadn't already confirmed the truth. I didn't want to have to admit it to Veronica though. The gloating look in her eyes might just kill me.

"Because I heard a rumor you two were over, and since you've been looking so..." She paused as she considered her next word. "So *tired*, I had to wonder if it's true," Veronica continued. "Did Noah already get bored of slumming it with the help?"

"She's not the help," Cress growled.

Veronica's eyes flashed with vile pleasure. "Oh, so you'll deny she's a charity case but not that their relationship is over. Interesting…"

"I'm not sure why you'd even take interest in their relationship," Cress replied. "It's not like my cousin will ever be interested in you."

Veronica shrugged. "That's not what he was saying at the ball on Saturday night."

The teacher started the class, and Veronica gave us one last smug smile before she returned her attention to the front of the room. I felt frozen to the spot. I hadn't been able to utter a single word in my defense, and I hated that Cress had felt the need to fight my battle for me. I didn't want to give Veronica the pleasure of knowing Noah and I were finished, but pretending we weren't made me feel even worse. Was I really so pathetic I couldn't admit to people the relationship was over?

I must have been completely tuned out to what the teacher was saying because the class erupted into excited murmurs and I had no idea why. My eyes darted to Cress. "What did I miss?"

She was grinning widely as she faced me. "Were you really not listening?"

"I was distracted." I shot an annoyed look at the back of Veronica's head.

Cress gave me an understanding smile. “Mr. Wagner just announced we’re going on a field trip for English.”

“We are?”

“Yep.” She punctuated the word with an enthused nod. “All the senior English classes are going to New York to see *Romeo and Juliet* next week.”

“Seriously?” It was hard to contain my excitement. I’d always wanted to go to New York, and even my conversation with Veronica couldn’t dampen the delight I felt that I was finally going to visit the city. Seeing the play would be fun too, but it was New York that had my heart racing with anticipation.

“Quiet down, everyone,” Mr. Wagner said in a weak attempt to wrangle back control of the class. No one wanted to listen. He let out a heavy breath like he knew it was a lost cause and started scribbling on the whiteboard.

“This is going to be so much fun,” Cress said as I faced her again. “I’m sure we’ll get free time so I can show you all of my favorite haunts.”

“That sounds great.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Oh,” she gasped. “We should make a weekend of it and stay at my place.”

“Do you think the school will let us do that?”

“I’m sure they’d be fine with it. Plenty of other kids are from the city and will probably do the same. So, what do you think?”

“I’ll have to check with my mom first, but if she says yes, then obviously I’m in.”

“Excellent.” She grinned brightly and continued chatting happily as she came up with ideas for all the fun things we could do. It all sounded amazing and exactly what I needed to create some space away from Noah. This school felt too suffocating at the moment. His presence was near impossible to ignore. I often felt like I could feel him even when he wasn’t in the room.

As Cress started planning out our time in the city, another thought came to mind. She wasn’t the only person based in New York. Matthew was there for the next couple of weeks too. He was supposed to be too busy with work to come to Weybridge and answer all my questions, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t go to him.

The more I thought about it, the more I started to like the idea. I was never going to get over Noah when my thoughts were still so tangled and

confused about the reason behind our breakup. Matthew could give me answers. Perhaps with this trip. I could also get some much-needed closure.

But, first, there was something else I was going to have to do if I wanted to get over Noah. I was never going to move on when everyone still thought we were together and constantly gossiping as they tried to figure out what was going on.

It was time I grew more proactive about our breakup, which meant I needed to put an end to the constant cycles of rumors. So, when class ended and everyone started to file out of the classroom, I touched Veronica's arm, stopping her before she walked through the door.

She rolled her eyes as she turned to me. "If it's taken you all lesson to find your tongue and come up with a retort for me, I don't want to hear it."

"No." I shook my head. "That's not it. I just thought you should know that you were right. Noah and I are over."

Veronica looked too stunned by my revelation to make fun of me. And even Cress, who knew the truth, appeared surprised I'd just admitted it to Veronica.

"So, he's all yours," I said before I pushed past her and left the room.

I didn't see the point in fighting over a guy when he wasn't mine anymore. I knew Veronica would tell the whole school the news. I just hoped any extra attention I received would be short-lived. Once everyone knew the truth, I'm sure they'd soon grow tired of the rumors and gossip.

As much as it hurt, it felt like a small weight had lifted from my shoulders. Saying the words out loud, that Noah and I were over, felt like a step in the right direction. I just had to hope I didn't stray from the path.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Word about my breakup with Noah got around quickly once Veronica found out. She hadn't wasted any time informing the whole school, and by Thursday lunchtime, it was all anyone could talk about.

I found I was actually relieved by the gossip. All week, it had felt like I was waiting for a bomb to detonate, and now that it had, I just needed to lie low until the initial shockwave blew over. Once the dust began to settle, I could slowly begin to pick up the pieces.

I decided it was best to skip Noah's soccer game on Thursday night. I wanted to keep my head down while everyone worked the news about Noah and I through their systems, and the last thing I felt like doing was watching Noah lead his team to glory while the whole school cheered him on.

Cress was bummed because missing the game meant I also missed her dance at halftime. I hated that I wasn't there to support her, especially when she'd been there for me all week, so I promised to make it up to her. I probably should have considered the offer more carefully because, as soon as Friday night rolled around, she insisted I went with her to the boathouse party.

I knew it was a terrible idea, but there was no way I could let Cress down again. And so, as soon as it grew dark, I found myself trailing after her and Anna to the old boatshed by the lake. As I stepped through the wide-open wooden doors, I took a deep breath in. Tonight, I had a chance to show I really was putting Noah behind me.

Still, I couldn't help doing a quick scan of the room for him as soon as I arrived. The place was packed with people, and I was all too relieved I

didn’t see him. I wasn’t sure how he’d react to me being at the party. His friends had invited me, but I was almost certain they wouldn’t have run it by him first.

“Come on, let’s get drinks,” Anna said, grabbing me by the hand and tugging me toward the fridge at the back of the room.

I’d vowed after last weekend that I never wanted to drink again, but I found myself reaching for the beer Anna offered. I was way too tense, and perhaps the drink might help me get through the party.

Anna and Cress seemed to have the same idea because they were both knocking back their drinks too.

“I still can’t believe your dad bought you a new car and you’re not going to drive it,” Cress said.

“What do you mean you’re not going to drive it!” Anna practically shouted.

“Don’t listen to her,” Cress said. “Anna likes cars more than she likes most people.”

Anna ignored her. “You’re really not going to drive it?”

“I’m not a very confident driver,” I murmured.

“So, you’re going to let your poor car rot in the parking lot all year?” Anna made it sound like I was committing some kind of cardinal sin.

“I crashed trying to avoid a dog that ran in the road the day after I passed my test,” I said. “I’ve been too nervous to drive ever since.”

“Accidents happen.” Anna tried to reassure me. "I’m sure you’re a great driver when dogs aren’t running in front of the car. You just need to get your confidence back.”

“And how do I do that?”

“I’ll go with you. Like a driving lesson. I’m a great teacher.” Anna waved a hand and flicked back her hair like she had already solved the problem.

“Uh, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Well, we’d be driving, so a lot.”

“Our school is in the middle of nowhere, and the chances we’ll encounter a stray dog are minuscule,” Anna argued. “Come on, please. If it’s that bad, you can go back to ignoring your car for the rest of the year, and I won’t mention it again.”

I hesitated.

“Come on, *please*?”

“Okay, fine, but only because I know you’ll keep bugging me all night if I don’t agree.”

“Yes!” She clapped her hands together excitedly. “This is going to be fun.”

I didn’t see how driving lessons could be fun for anyone, but she seemed genuinely excited about it.

Cress hadn’t spoken since we’d started talking about driving lessons. She’d been staring off into the distance for most of our conversation, and as I followed her gaze, I could see why. Her eyes were fixed on Kaden who was chatting with a group of girls.

Anna also noticed where Cress’s attention was because she started to squeal. “*Ohmygosh, Cress*! You’re totally checking out Kaden!”

Cress blushed and glanced away. “I am not.”

“You definitely are,” Anna replied. “And I don’t blame you. He’s looking superhot tonight.”

“I’m not checking him out.”

“He does look pretty good,” I agreed with a knowing smile.

Cress’s cheeks only grew pinker.

“You’ve crushed on him forever,” Anna said. “You should go for it. You are both single, after all.”

“I don’t think so.” Cress was normally so bubbly and enthusiastic, but she lacked Anna’s confidence when it came to chasing after guys. I hoped she wasn’t waiting for Kaden to make the first move because he wasn’t very forward either. They might spend their entire senior year sending each other furtive glances and nothing more.

“You don’t have to make a move on him, but why don’t you just go chat with him?” I asked her.

Cress lifted her drink and finished the bottle in one long swig. “Maybe later. I just saw some of the dance squad arrive so I should probably go say hey.” She placed her empty bottle down on the table before rushing away from us.

Anna shook her head. “She’s being a chicken.”

“Not all of us have your confidence with guys, Anna.”

“*Pshh*, I’m not confident. It’s all about faking it till you make it. I’ve been faking it for such a long time now I forget my confidence isn’t real.”

I shook my head but smiled. I had to disagree with her. I thought Anna was one of the most confident people I'd ever met. If she was pretending, then I was very impressed because I was thoroughly convinced.

"Newbie, you came!" I turned to find Luther walking up behind me. "You ready for our beer pong rematch?"

I snorted. "Do I look like an idiot?"

He squinted as he looked me up and down. "Not particularly."

"Then the answer is no."

Luther shrugged and turned to Anna. "How about you, London?"

Anna folded her arms and glared at him. "How many times do I have to tell you I'm not from London? I'm from Oxford."

"Maybe one more time."

Anna rolled her eyes at him. "Go bother someone else, Luther. I'm not playing your little game with you either."

"Suit yourselves," he said before sauntering off to find another victim to play against.

"Is it just me, or does he get more annoying every time you see him?" Anna asked as she watched him leave.

I laughed. "No, it's not just you. His ability to annoy people is a true talent."

She shook her head before focusing on me again. "Speaking of talent, have you considered any of the guys on the rebound list I gave you?"

Anna had actually provided me with a full list of names earlier in the week. I hadn't looked at it because there was no way I was going to kiss a guy just to get over another one.

"A few of those guys are here tonight…" Anna raised her eyebrows and nudged me with her shoulder.

"I might need a few more drinks before I can seriously talk about rebounds." I hoped that would be enough to end the conversation. I was never going to consider that list. Not anytime soon, at least. I couldn't even look at other guys right now.

Someone loudly cleared their throat behind me, and I turned to find Noah standing there. When I realized how close he was, my stomach dropped, and the glare in his eyes did nothing to ease my nerves. He'd clearly heard us talking about rebounds, and he wasn't happy.

It felt like a thunderstorm had just entered the room and I was standing directly in its path. Noah was practically crackling with irritation, and his

hands clenched at his sides. It was like he was having to restrain himself from throwing me over his shoulder and stealing me away from the party to stop any more talk of rebounds.

“Oh, hey, Noah,” Anna said. Usually, her playful personality could defuse the tension in any situation, but now her tone was cold as she glared at Noah. He didn’t respond. It was almost like he hadn’t heard her at all.

“So, how many drinks will it take?” he asked. “You know, before you start working your way down Anna’s list.”

My cheeks heated in anger. “That’s not your concern, Noah.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. You made that perfectly clear when you broke up with me.” He had no right to question me. He wouldn’t even answer my questions about what happened between our families. He just made it plain and clear, time and again, that we would never be together—unless, of course, we kept it a secret from the whole world.

I met his glare with one of my own. I wanted nothing more than to be done with this conversation. Be done with him. I swallowed the remainder of my drink and shoved the empty bottle into his chest. “I guess that’s one drink less now,” I said before stalking past him.

Anna quickly rushed after me, her eyes filled with concern as we pushed through people and made our way to the other end of the room—as far from Noah as possible.

“Wow,” she murmured.

“What?”

“I can’t believe that just happened. You are my breakup idol,” she said. “That was badass.”

I shook my head. “It really wasn’t. He just got to me. He keeps getting to me.”

“Yeah, because he’s clearly jealous. He doesn’t want anyone else to have you.”

“Well, that’s not up to him.”

“Totally.” Anna shrugged. “But no one ever said boys were sane.”

“Yeah, well, he’s acting like an ass...”

Anna gave me a sad smile. “I’m sure he’s just upset. Your breakup was hardly normal. It’s not like you stopped liking each other, and it’s never easy to see someone you care about moving on.”

“You’re sounding far too reasonable,” I said. “I prefer to think he’s an ass.”

Anna laughed. “Well, he’s that too, obviously.” Anna’s gaze flicked past me, and she started to frown. “Speaking of... It looks like one of the twins is already making a drunken ass of himself.”

I turned to see one of the boys stumbling into a table. He had his back to us, so it was impossible to tell if it was Wes or Sawyer. It had to be Sawyer though. Wes was always very sensible when it came to alcohol, and messy drinking seemed to be one of Sawyer’s favorite pastimes.

“Sawyer must have gone a little hard on his pregame,” Anna said. She had come to the same conclusion as I had about which twin it was.

“One of us should really go help him.”

“I guess.” Anna didn’t seem the least bit keen to deal with a drunken Sawyer. I didn’t really blame her. He was a handful enough when sober.

“I’ll go,” I quickly offered. I was only too eager for a distraction after my run-in with Noah. “It’s probably the least I can do after he so gallantly offered to be my rebound.”

Anna laughed. “Yeah, he was totally selfless in that offer too.”

“Totally,” I agreed. “Wish me luck.”

I grabbed a bottle of water and headed over to Sawyer. He was trying to chat with a girl I recognized from my English class, but I didn’t know her name. His words were slurred, and he was swaying on his feet. He kept bumping into the table at his side, causing the glasses and bottles on it to shake dangerously. The party had barely started, so Anna was probably right in suggesting he’d had too much to drink before he arrived.

“Hey, Sawyer,” I said as I approached. “Can you come outside with me for a sec?”

The girl shot me a grateful smile, and I got the distinct impression I’d come to her rescue. She darted away as he turned to me, and as soon as his sad eyes landed on mine, I realized my mistake.

“You’re not Sawyer,” I murmured.

“Not Sawyer,” Wes slurred in reply.

His eyes were ringed red, and he looked like he’d been crying.

“Wes, you look like hell.”

“I feel like hell,” he agreed. “Sarah broke up with me.”

“Oh no.”

He nodded and let out a sigh as he stared down into the red cup he was holding. He went to take another sip out of it, but I gently removed it from his hand and placed it on the table. I could smell the vodka from here.

“I’m not sure you need to drink any more.”

“You’re probably right. I think I’d rather sleep.” He started to stumble toward one of the sofas, but I grabbed hold of his arm and steered him in the direction of the exit.

“It might be a better idea if we find you an actual bed,” I said.

He nodded and let me guide him out of the boathouse. Cress caught sight of us as we were about to leave and hurried over.

“What’s wrong with Sawyer?” His reputation clearly preceded him as Cress made the same mistake.

“Not Sawyer. Wes,” I confirmed, and her eyes widened with surprise. “Sarah broke up with him. I’m going to get him back to his dorm room. He just needs to sleep it off.”

“Do you want a hand?”

I shook my head. “Nah, he seems pretty steady on his feet. I think I should be able to get him back in one piece. You stay and have fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” I was somewhat relieved to leave the party. I hadn’t wanted to go in the first place, and I didn’t feel much like staying after seeing Noah. Every time he came close to me, I felt my resolve to get over him slowly breaking.

“Well, call me if you need some extra help.”

“I will.”

There was a chill in the air as we stepped out into the night, and I hoped it would help sober Wes up. I passed him the bottle of water I was holding. “Here, drink this.”

He happily took the bottle and guzzled it down. Wes might have been slightly sloppy and sad, but at least he wasn’t a difficult drunk. He stumbled along the path as we walked, and I was grateful he was able to stay on his feet without much support from me. He was way too big for me to carry him on my own.

“So, what happened with Sarah?” I asked as we followed the darkened path that wound around the lake back to school, leaving the soft lights of the boatshed behind us.

“Things haven’t been great between us recently,” he started. “We rarely see each other. She wants someone who’s *there*. And I’m *here.* So, she dumped me.”

The ache in my chest echoed the confused and anguished tone in his voice. I was far too familiar with the hurt he was enduring.

“Long distance must be hard,” I murmured.

He nodded sadly, but was distracted as he stumbled over a divot in the path. I quickly reached out to steady him, and he grasped tightly onto my arms. As he looked up and into my eyes, his pain was so visceral and clear to see.

“Why wasn’t I enough?” His voice was raw and filled with emotion.

“For the right girl, you will be,” I replied. “No matter what hurdles or distance are put in your way.”

He let out a hard breath and nodded. He slowly let go of my arms, and we continued back to school in silence.

My words to Wes played on repeat in my mind. If Noah was the right guy for me, then nothing would have stopped us from being together.

Nothing.

By the time Wes and I reached the school buildings, he was struggling to walk straight, and I had to prop him up to stop him from stumbling into walls. We only had a short way to go before we arrived at the boys’ dorm, but Wes was starting to lean on me more and more. He was big and heavy, and as I tried to keep him upright, I was worried we might not make it much farther.

When we somehow made it to the dorm, I had to keep shushing him as we made our way through the entrance, up the stairs, and along the hallways. He’d been so quiet for most of our walk back, but he suddenly seemed to have a lot to say. He was still slurring and had no control over the volume of his voice. He was obviously drunk.

“Sarah had the most beautiful hair,” he mumbled. “It was like the night’s sky.”

“I know. You told me just before—”

“And her eyes. Did I tell you about her eyes?”

“Yes.”

“They were so big and beautiful. I don’t know if you know this about me, Isobel, but I’m an eyes guy. It’s all about the eyes.” His words were

tumbling into one another, and it was difficult to make sense of most of what he said. “I wish I could have seen them one last time.”

“Wes, you have to speak quietly, or you’ll wake everyone up,” I said. The last thing I wanted was to draw attention to us. If we were caught, there was no way Wes would be able to act sober enough to avoid getting in trouble.

He ignored me. “Do you think she’s found someone else?”

“I’m sure she hasn’t. From what you’ve told me about her, she doesn’t sound like the kind of girl to cheat.”

“I bet she has,” he said. “She’s so damn beautiful.”

“You can’t torture yourself with guessing,” I replied. “You need to focus on mending your own heart.”

“I wish it were that easy.”

I wished the same thing too.

Somehow, Wes managed to direct me to his room without causing a scene. He’d done little to keep his voice down, so we’d gotten a few funny looks from other guys who were wandering the halls, but thankfully most just ignored us.

Wes fiddled with his swipe card, dropping it on the ground twice before he finally got the door to his room open. I helped him inside, turning on the light as I went.

There were two beds in the room. I knew Wes shared with Sawyer, but his brother was nowhere to be seen. I hadn’t noticed him at the boathouse earlier, but he must have been there somewhere.

The two halves of the room were so different. One side was a total mess. The bed was unmade, and clothes were strewn across the floor. The other side was so neat it barely looked lived in. Of course, Wes stumbled over to the clean side of the room. It didn’t take a genius to realize Sawyer was the slovenly one of the twins.

He collapsed down onto the bed in a heap and groaned as his head hit the pillow. I went into the bathroom and grabbed him a glass of water.

“I feel like crap,” he moaned as I returned.

I sat on the bed next to him and gently rubbed his back. “I know. And you’ll probably feel even worse tomorrow.”

He turned his head and peered up at me. “That doesn’t make me feel better.”

I shrugged and gave him a smile. “I’m not here to baby you. But I am here to help. Drink this.” He propped himself up, and I handed him the glass.

He only took a couple of sips before he lowered it from his lips. “I think I prefer the vodka better. At least it helps me forget.”

“It’s not exactly a healthy way to move on though, is it?”

Wes shrugged. “It’s probably not much worse than the rebound list Anna gave you.”

I let out a sigh. “No, probably not. I’m not planning to use it though.”

“Why not? There’s nothing wrong with using unhealthy methods for moving on if it works. Do you think Anna would make me a list too?”

“You don’t want a rebound list.”

“Sure, I do. If it helps me forget Sarah ever existed, it sounds like a great idea.”

“It sounds like a terrible idea.”

“No, a terrible idea would be if we were each other’s rebound…”

My heart leaped, and I swallowed to stop myself from reacting too obviously. I didn’t think he was joking.

“You’re right. That’s a terrible idea.”

He smiled. “Okay, so I better not ask to be on your list then?”

“Wes, you don’t want that. You’ve just had too much to drink. Besides, we’re already breakup buddies. We help each other get through breakups, which is a far more important job than a rebound.”

“Breakup buddies,” he repeated. “I like it.” He smiled before his eyes became a little hazier. “I should probably get some sleep.”

“That’s a good idea. Do you need me to get you anything else before I go?”

He shook his head and started to melt back into his bed as his eyes slowly shut. “No, I’m good.” He blinked his eyes open one last time as I stood to leave. “Thanks, Isobel. You’re a really good friend.”

I gave him a warm smile in response. “Have a good sleep, Wes.”

I flicked the light off as I left the room. Poor Wes was going to feel absolutely terrible come tomorrow. I knew what it was like to wake up with a broken heart and a hangover, and I didn’t envy him one bit.

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CHAPTER NINE

When I woke in the morning, it was to a stream of text messages from Wes.

Wes: Thank you for helping me back last night.

Wes: I feel like total crap today, but I think I'd feel worse if you hadn't been there.

Wes: I have a bad feeling I was a terrible drunk. I'm sorry if I offended you at all!!! Forgive me?

I smiled and responded right away.

Me: Nothing to forgive. You were fine.

Me: You did offer to be my rebound though...

He didn't reply immediately, and I hopped in the shower while I waited. Cress was completely passed out in bed. She hadn't come home until late, so I didn't expect her to wake up any time soon. As soon as I was dressed, I checked my phone again and found a new message from Wes.

Wes: Wow, drunk me has game. Who would have thought?

I chuckled under my breath and started to type a reply, but another message from him arrived before I could hit send.

Wes: Seriously though, I'm sorry.

Me: You can stop apologizing. You were in pain and had too many drinks. I'm sure I was in a far worse state last weekend.

Wes: Yes, you did voluntarily dance.

Me: Please don’t remind me.

Wes: I’ll never speak of it again.

I smiled down at my phone, glad Wes was in good enough spirits that he could still joke around with me. I let out a sigh as I remembered why he was hurting. Why we both were. My encounter with Noah last night hadn’t made me feel any better about our breakup. It was clear he was in pain over it—perhaps as much as I was. That only made me want answers more. Answers I was hoping to get from Matthew when I visited New York next week.

At least, that was the plan. First, I had to figure out if I could get my father to spare some time to meet with me while I was there. It was after 9 A.M., so it wasn’t too early to give him a call. Now was as good a time as any.

I went into the bathroom and closed the door so I wouldn’t wake Cress up before I dialed his number. It rang three times before there was an answer.

“LaFleur residence.”

It was hard not to be disappointed. I’d been hoping to get straight through to my father, but apparently that wasn’t possible, even on a Saturday.

“Hey, Caldwell, it’s Isobel.”.

“Good morning, Miss Grace.”

“Is my father around?”

“I’m afraid not. He’s at the lab and will be unavailable all day.”

I let out a sigh.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

I was about to tell him no and hang up, but then I wondered if maybe he could be of some help. Caldwell probably knew my dad’s schedule better than Matthew himself.

“Actually, yeah. I was wondering if my father has plans on Friday next week? I’m going to be in New York for a school field trip and was hoping to see him.”

“I’m afraid Mr. LaFleur has meetings scheduled at his office all day on that Friday,” Caldwell replied.

“Well, I was thinking of staying the weekend too. Has he got any time then...”

“While he’s in New York, he plans to work every day, even the weekends,” Caldwell replied. “His schedule is extremely tight at the moment, but I believe he’s allotted some time to come to Weybridge the following weekend. Is that suitable for you?”

I let out another sigh. “Yeah, that’s fine.” Apparently, seeing my father was like trying to schedule an appointment with the doctor. You had to book it weeks in advance, and even then, it was near impossible to get in.

“I will inform Mr. LaFleur that you’ll be in the city. If any time opens up, I’ll be in contact.”

I didn’t hold out much hope. “Thanks, Caldwell.”

I hung up the phone feeling defeated. I knew it was just one extra week of waiting to see my father, but the questions churning inside my gut were killing me. I wanted answers now. Not weeks from now. There wasn’t even any guarantee my father would come back to Weybridge when he planned. He was always so busy, and there was every chance he’d get caught up with work and stay in New York.

A light knock sounded at the door as I exited the bathroom, and I turned to see Anna barreling into the room. She was all dressed for the day and looking wide-awake. It was like witnessing a miracle. I’d never seen Anna look so peppy first thing in the morning. Let alone on a weekend when she’d been out drinking the night before.

“Are you ready?” she asked me.

“For…”

“Your driving lesson, obviously.”

I’d forgotten she’d offered to help me drive my new car. A part of me had hoped she’d been joking and would forget all about it.

“You’re here first thing in the morning to teach me how to drive?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t sleep. I have serious regrets over the guy I kissed last night, and I keep visualizing it every time I close my eyes.”

“You kissed Angus again?”

“Ugh, I wish. Angus I could stomach.”

I shook my head. “Who did you kiss then?”

“Please don’t make me repeat their name. It only makes it more real.” She scrunched up her face in disgust.

“Okay. We won’t talk about the mystery kisser from last night.” I didn’t particularly want to talk about my night either. I’d practically fled the boathouse party after Noah confronted me about the rebound list, and then Wes had actually offered to be my rebound. Last night was certainly best forgotten.

“The mystery kisser. Ugh, now he has a villain nickname too.” Anna shook her head. “But enough about him. Do you have your keys?”

I nodded and went to grab them off my desk. A nervous flutter took flight in my stomach as I grasped them in my hand. Was I really ready to get behind the wheel of a car again? Probably not. The fact I was allowing a seventeen-year-old to guide me wasn’t helping the nerves. Was this really a good idea? I didn’t have a chance to answer the question. Anna grabbed my arm and dragged me from the room.

“Don’t look so nervous,” she said. “You’ll be a racecar driver by the afternoon.”

She sounded confident, but I didn’t share her faith. I had a feeling I was destined to be more of a slow, steady, and super-cautious driver rather than one who tested the speed limits.

When we got to the parking lot, Anna looked at me in expectation. “So...” she prompted. “Which baby’s yours?”

I pointed my keys at the vehicle, and it lit up when I hit the unlock button.

“*Nice*,” Anna gushed as she started toward my new car. “You have good taste.”

“Thanks, but I didn’t choose it. My dad did.”

“Well, he did really well. I’ve always wanted to drive a G-Class.” She was still admiring it and nodding her approval.

I spent some time considering the car—if you could call it that. It wasn’t what I'd been expecting at all when I’d first come to the parking lot to take a look at it. Unlike the other vehicles in the parking lot, it wasn’t sleek and sporty. It was more like a Jeep or a truck that looked like it could seat about eight people. It had beefy tires, including a spare hanging off the back, and a huge shiny grill on the front that looked a little like bared teeth. It was made more for trips off-road rather than urban driving, which was kind of perfect for the hidden tracks that led to remote beaches back home in Rapid Bay. However, it still looked expensive with a smooth matte black finish

and, of course, the Mercedes logo sparkling proudly on the hood. It was most definitely far too excessive for me, but I couldn't deny I liked it.

"What are you girls doing?"

I glanced over my shoulder as Sawyer jogged toward us. He was dressed casually in jeans and a large sweatshirt. I bet he looked a sight better than his brother this morning.

"Giving Isobel a driving lesson," Anna said. "Her dad just bought her a new car, but she doesn't think she can drive it. I'm going to help her make sure she doesn't let her poor, beautiful G-Class sit all lonely in the parking lot this year."

"You can't drive?" Sawyer gave me a questioning look.

"I can, but historically it doesn't end well."

"Huh." Sawyer looked intrigued "Sounds fun. Can I come?"

"No," I groaned, but Anna quickly replied with an exuberant "Of course!"

I scowled in her direction. "I really don't think I need an audience for this."

Sawyer waved away my concern. "I'm hardly an audience. Think of me as an extra dose of driving wisdom."

"If you're my driving wisdom, then I'm screwed."

Sawyer laughed and shrugged. "So, is this your ride?" Before I could respond, he had already stepped forward and opened one of the back doors.

"This is a bad idea," I murmured to Anna.

She didn't seem the least bit concerned. "It'll be fine. Sawyer loves cars almost as much as I do. He'll be a great addition."

"Will you girls stop chatting and get driving?" Sawyer called out from where he now sat inside the car. "I need to get to town to pick up breakfast burgers to fix my brother's hangover."

"Guess I can't put this off any longer then," I murmured.

"Nope. You really can't." Anna grinned and walked around the car to get into the passenger seat while I slowly made my way toward the driver's side door. There was no way this ended well; I felt sure of it.

I was only more convinced our little adventure was doomed to fail once I sat behind the wheel. All the buttons, switches and dials on the dashboard were enough to overwhelm me before we even got started. Anna spent a while making sure my seat was in the right position and I knew where the lights, wipers, air-conditioner and radio controls were. If she thought I was

going to be able to think about all of those things while also watching the road for stray dogs, she was sadly mistaken.

When she thought I was ready, Anna told me to start the car but then laughed at the blank look on my face as I searched for the ignition.

“It’s push to start,” she chuckled, pointing at one of the buttons on the dash. “Put your foot on the brake.”

I did as she instructed, and when I pushed the button, the car rumbled to life. I jumped slightly at the sudden noise of the engine. As if I didn’t already seem pathetic enough.

“Okay, let’s go,” Anna said.

I lifted my hands and cautiously placed them on the wheel. It had been so long since I’d driven a car, so it wasn’t a familiar feeling. I wondered if my hands were in the right place, and as I stretched my feet out to touch the pedals, I worried they were too far away. The car was much bigger than any other I’d driven before. Through the front window, the clean black hood of the car seemed to reach out so far in front I wasn’t sure I’d even be able to see the road ahead.

I took a deep breath and gently pressed my foot down on the accelerator. The engine hummed, but the car didn’t move. Perhaps I was being too gentle. I tried again, pushing a little harder this time, but still the car refused to move. What was I doing wrong?

“Isobel...” Anna’s voice was calm next to me. “You forgot to take the handbrake off.”

“Ah, right.” I shook my head, trying to shake the fog clouding my thoughts and the redness I could feel rushing to my cheeks. I took another breath and released the handbrake. This time, when I tapped the accelerator, the car rolled forward out of the parking space.

“That’s it.” Anna sounded like she was smiling. “Now, let’s head for the exit.”

I was too focused to speak, so I just nodded.

“You’ve got this, Isobel,” she added.

It took us an age to get to the school entrance. I drove at a snail’s pace as we left the parking lot. The car was so big I felt like there was barely space to move it between the rows of cars, and I was terrified of brushing up against one of them. They were all so shiny and expensive looking. When we finally got to the exit, I was relieved to find the main road outside the school was empty of cars and, with Anna encouraging me, I pulled out.

Once we finally got going on the open road, I felt a little more comfortable. I made sure to keep well below the speed limit so I'd have plenty of time to react should something untoward happen. Much to Sawyer's amusement, cars slowly began to pile up in a line behind me, but I did my best to ignore them.

"See, it's not so bad, is it?" Anna asked, as we came to a stop at a set of traffic lights.

"Yeah, nothing bad can happen when you're moving at ten miles per hour." Sawyer laughed from the back seat.

"Quiet back there, Sawyer," Anna snapped before turning to me. "Don't listen to him. You're doing great."

"Thanks." I nodded. "Maybe I just needed a bit of practice."

I jumped as the car behind us beeped its horn, and I realized the light had turned green. I quickly tried to gather my thoughts and get moving again, but the driver behind was still blasting their horn. I glanced up at the rearview mirror and saw a sports car waiting behind me. The driver was waving his arms through the window in frustration as he banged on the horn again.

"Isobel," Anna said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry, I just got distracted."

"Ignore the jackass behind us. Just pull forward and we'll get going before the light changes."

I nodded, took another deep breath and pressed down on the accelerator. As the car started to move into the intersection though, the sound of the car horn filled my ears once again, and the sports car flashed past my window. The guy was overtaking me at the lights, and as he swerved back into the lane right in front of me, I had to slam on the brakes to avoid a collision.

"What the hell!?" Anna shouted after him, as the car sped off into the distance.

"Yeah, that was not cool," Sawyer added. "He was so close to hitting us."

I was shaking as Anna reached out and touched my arm. "Are you okay?"

"I knew this was a bad idea," I replied. "I'm done."

"But you were doing so well." She protested, but I was already getting out of the car. I hurried around to the passenger side, barely noticing the other cars that were now overtaking us like nothing had happened.

“Isobel, we’re right in the middle of the intersection.” Anna gasped, as I opened her door.

“Then get in the driver’s seat, quick. I’m not driving another inch.”

She nodded and clambered across to the driver’s seat before I climbed into the car next to her. My heart was still racing as she pulled away. I was never driving again.

Unlike me, Anna had absolutely no fear on the road. Her eyes practically lit up when she got behind the wheel, and I wasn’t sure if I felt more traumatized by my driving or hers after she’d raced to the burger joint and back to school in record time.

“I’m shaken. Totally shaken,” I said as I jumped out of the car when we finally arrived back at the school parking lot. I couldn’t get clear of the vehicle fast enough.

“You weren’t that bad,” Anna said as she climbed from the front seat.

“She’s probably talking about your driving, Anna.” Sawyer looked a little shaken himself as he got out of the car. “Are you sure you’re not the one who needs a lesson?”

“What? I can’t help that I get my left and my right mixed up sometimes,” Anna replied.

“I was thinking more about the way you accelerated toward that yellow light,” I recalled. “We nearly took out that old lady.”

“I mean, I thought it was a universal rule that everyone went faster when the lights were about to go red.”

I shook my head and glanced at Sawyer. “Remind me to never, ever, ever get in a car with Anna again.”

Normally I would have expected him to laugh and join in with the joke, but Sawyer looked as pale as I did, and he nodded emphatically. “I’d rather have you driving me, Isobel, and that’s saying something.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “You’re both overreacting.”

“Anna, you kept trying to drive on the wrong side of the road!”

“Well, I can’t help that we drive on the other side of the road in England.”

“But you learned to drive in America.”

Anna simply shrugged, and we shook our heads at her. I had no idea why she thought helping me drive was a good idea. She barely knew the road rules herself.

“Maybe get an actual instructor next time, Isobel,” Sawyer said. Although I agreed with him, I wasn’t sure I’d be brave enough to try again.

Anna let out a long, defeated sigh. “Sorry, Isobel. I thought it would be easy to teach you.”

“It’s not your fault.” I gave her a tight smile and patted her arm. “I told you I’m a terrible driver. But maybe hold off on committing to that career as a driving instructor.”

“And maybe question if you should get behind the wheel yourself,” Sawyer added. “Seriously, do you always drive that fast?”

Anna lifted her hands in the air. “I said I’m sorry.”

“And we forgive you.” I shot Sawyer a warning look. “Now, our burgers are probably getting cold. We should go find Wes so we can eat them.”

“He’ll still be in our room,” Sawyer said. “I’ll text him and tell him to meet us down by the lake. The sun’s finally out, and I want to enjoy it while we can. Who knows how long it will stick around for.”

“I’ll text Cress,” Anna said. “She should be awake by now.”

We slowly wandered down to the large lake behind the dormitories, and I relished the feeling of soft earth beneath my feet instead of the pedals of my car. There was a wide-open grass area on this side of the water, and we found a spot to sit close to the water’s edge.

My heart was still struggling to return to its normal rhythm after the terror of my driving experience, and I took deep breaths in and out as I tried to relax. The sun was soothing, and it didn’t take long before I felt more like myself.

“I can’t believe you guys went to get breakfast without me,” Cress said as she joined us. Her hair was still damp from her shower, and she wasn’t wearing any makeup. It was almost unfair how pretty she looked in the mornings without trying at all.

“You were still snoring when I came by your room,” Anna said.

“I don’t snore!”

“Don’t you?” Anna gave her a wink.

“I don’t!”

“I mean, it’s really cute, but a snore is still a snore,” I joked.

Cress scowled at the two of us. “You guys suck.”

I laughed and offered her one of the breakfast burgers. “We’re just kidding. You were sound asleep, making no noises at all when we left. And don’t stress, we got food for you too.”

“I still would have liked to come,” Cress grumbled.

I shook my head. “You really didn’t miss anything.”

“Other than all of our lives flashing before our eyes,” Sawyer added.

Cress gave us all a confused look.

“Anna took me for a drive,” I explained. “It didn’t go well.”

Cress groaned. “Oh, man, I could have told you that was a bad idea. Anna always mixes up what side of the road you need to drive on.”

Anna flushed. “I really thought it would be fine.”

“It wasn’t,” Sawyer said. “It wasn’t even close to fine. I’m going to have nightmares for weeks.”

“You’re not going to have nightmares,” Anna protested.

Sawyer pointed his burger in her direction. “I happen to have a very nervous disposition, and just the slightest thing can set off my nightmares.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Such a drama queen,” she muttered.

A low groaning noise came from behind us, and we all turned as Wes finally made an appearance. He looked even worse than he had last night, and he was wearing a heavy set of sunglasses to shade his eyes. He collapsed onto the ground next to me. “Did you guys really have to sit in the seventh circle of hell for breakfast?”

Sawyer grinned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, brother.”

“I’m talking about the fact you decided this morning was the perfect time for a trip to the sun. It’s so damn bright out here.”

“Feeling a little hungover, Wes?” Anna asked.

He lowered his glasses for one moment to scowl at her. “Don’t revel in my pain, Grant.”

She grinned. “I’m just glad it’s not me for once.”

“It should be,” Sawyer said. “We all saw you playing beer pong with Luther and Kaden last night. No one plays them and remembers the rest of the night.”

Anna’s expression dimmed slightly, and she glanced away. “Well, I guess I’m a first then.” I wondered if she was thinking about her mystery kisser. It seemed like she regretted kissing the guy when she’d mentioned it this morning. Perhaps she was wishing she could have forgotten the night altogether. The others continued talking about last night, but I turned to Wes. He hadn’t touched his burger yet and was looking a little green in the face. He probably didn’t feel much like eating.

“How are you feeling about Sarah this morning?” I said, keeping my voice low so the others wouldn’t hear.

He sighed and slowly lowered his sunglasses from his face as he glanced my way. His eyes were red-rimmed and filled with pain. “I feel like she ran me over with a truck last night. When I woke this morning, I hoped it wasn’t real, but it is. We’re over.”

I reached out and gave his hand a squeeze, and he smiled down at the gesture.

“I’m sorry I was such a mess last night,” he said.

“I don’t blame you. You were hurting.”

“That doesn’t really excuse how I behaved. Did I really offer to be your rebound?”

I nervously glanced at the others, but they were all too busy chatting to hear what he was saying.

“Uh, sort of.” I laughed awkwardly. “But it’s okay. I knew it was only because you were drunk. Besides, we also agreed we were better as breakup buddies.”

“Breakup buddies?”

“Buddies who help each other through breakups.”

He smiled. “We are pretty good at that, aren’t we?”

“The best,” I agreed.

He exhaled loudly as he leaned back and put his glasses on. “It really is too bright out here.”

I laughed and nodded at his burger. “Maybe if you eat something, you’ll feel better.”

“You think this burger has the power to dial down the sun?”

“Well, it is a pretty good burger.”

“True.” He took a bite and chewed it cautiously. He normally devoured his food like it was going to disappear if he didn’t eat it quickly enough. Today, he was taking it awfully slowly. He must have been in a world of pain.

I considered taking a bite of my burger, but a laugh drew my attention, and I glanced up. A group of people were walking around the edge of the lake, coming back from the direction of the old boathouse. It was a mix of girls and guys. Luther and Kaden were in the group, but Noah held my gaze.

It felt like he was always around. Always there when I wanted nothing more than to escape him. It would make it so much easier to move on if I could. Instead, my heart lurched out of my chest whenever I saw him.

“Isobel?”

I turned to Wes. He hadn’t noticed Noah. I doubted he could see anything beyond his burger right now. “Yeah?”

“Promise to remind me to never to fall in love again.”

I felt an echoing twinge of pain at his words. I still wasn’t over Noah. Not even close. “I will, but you’ve got to promise me too.”

“Done.”

“Thanks, breakup buddy.” He lifted his burger as though to cheers mine, and I knocked my food against his. “Here’s to never falling in love again.”

I nodded but couldn’t help glancing in Noah’s direction once more. As I felt the ache in my chest return, I knew I was more than happy to live by those words.

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CHAPTER TEN

On Sunday morning, we woke to a knock at our door from Lisa, our dorm mom, letting us know she'd called an early house meeting. Everyone in our hall was expected to go—no exceptions.

Cress had been slow to get ready, so most girls were already there when we arrived. They were perched on sofas and sitting on the floor. The one benefit of the meeting was that Lisa had ordered in food, and the smell of fresh coffee and croissants had me salivating.

"This has to be some kind of cruel joke," Cress murmured as we both grabbed a coffee. She took a deep drink and let out a happy sigh before she continued. "No one should be expected to get up before ten on a Sunday."

"Lisa's probably pissed no one listens to curfew," Anna said as she joined us. She picked a croissant off the table and took a quick bite. "What better punishment is there when we've been out too late than making us all get up early?"

Funnily enough, Cress, Anna, and I had stayed in watching movies in the common room last night. We hadn't even been close to breaking curfew. Not that the girls were ever all that worried about breaking the rules. They were both far too skilled at talking their way out of trouble with Lisa.

We took a seat at the back of the room and waited for the meeting to start. Lisa walked in moments later, her usual smile and warm expression completely missing.

She let out a sigh as she went to stand at the front of the room. "Good morning, everyone," she said. "Sorry to drag you out of bed so early on a

Sunday morning, but if people can't respect the rules around here, I can't be expected to respect your sleep."

"Told you," Anna whispered with a smile.

"I wanted to bring you all in here to remind you that, with no exceptions, boys are not allowed in your rooms after curfew."

The girls all broke into titters of laughter, and Anna and Cress snorted at my side.

"I wonder who got caught?" Cress murmured.

"Probably Tiffany," Anna replied, nodding at a girl whose cheeks were bright red with embarrassment. "Her boyfriend practically lives in her room."

Lisa cleared her throat and raised her voice as she tried to regain everyone's attention. "If this rule is broken again, I will assign every single one of you to cleaning the bathrooms in the boys' dormitory for a week." The laughter quickly died. "And *I mean* each and every one of you, whether you broke the rules or not. I can't imagine you'll be very interested in sneaking boys into your rooms after that." A small smile curved Lisa's lips like she knew exactly how cruel and effective her threat was.

"So, that's all I wanted to talk about this morning," Lisa continued, her voice suddenly bright like she hadn't just been threatening us. "Please enjoy your coffees and croissants. I look forward to seeing you all together again for family night on Tuesday."

The room broke out into chatter the moment Lisa stopped speaking.

"That's evil, especially for Lisa," Cress murmured. "She's normally so nice."

"Evil but effective," Anna added. "I'll happily chase away any boys who so much as glance at our dorms at the wrong time of night. I am not cleaning the boys' toilets."

"Me neither," I agreed with a shudder. "I think I'd be traumatized for life."

One of the girls standing next to me scoffed, and she rolled her eyes as she caught my gaze. She'd clearly taken issue with something I'd said.

"What?" I asked her as she went to turn away.

"Oh, nothing," she replied, but given the slight smile on her lips and the tone in her voice, it was clear she was hiding something

"Obviously, it's not nothing."

She lifted one eyebrow and folded her arms across her chest as she faced me. “I think we all know there’s no way *you* would have to clean the boys’ toilets.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that we can’t all be a LaFleur, can we?” She turned and walked off before I could respond, and I stood there gaping after her.

“Did you guys hear that?” I turned to Cress and Anna. They were both glaring at the girl’s retreating figure.

“Don’t listen to Nat,” Anna said. “She’s always snarky like that.”

“What does that even mean? We can’t all be a LaFleur? It’s not like I get special treatment...”

“No…” Cress started. “But I’d say that’s only because you don’t ask for it. Nat’s probably right. With your dad being who he is, I’m sure they wouldn’t make you clean the boys’ toilets if you kicked up a fuss about it.”

I frowned at my friends, but Anna was nodding alongside Cress. “Yeah, we all know the rules are different for certain people in this school.”

“Really? Because nothing’s changed for me since people found out who my dad is.”

“Hasn’t it?” Anna asked.

“I mean, I’ve had a few people try to talk to me who would probably have ignored me completely a week ago, but it’s not like I’ve been treated any differently by the teachers. I definitely haven’t had a different set of rules than everyone else.”

“I guess we won’t know until a teacher tries to make you clean a boy’s bathroom,” Cress said.

I grimaced at the thought. “Here’s hoping that never happens.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Anna said. She downed the rest of her coffee and placed the cup in the bin. We each took another croissant before we started back up the stairs to our rooms.

I wondered how much truth there was to what the girls said. Were the rules here different for me because now people knew who my father was? I didn’t want any special treatment, and I hoped they were wrong.

“I’m going straight back to bed,” Anna said, munching on the end of her croissant as she spoke.

“Same,” Cress agreed. “Lisa could have simply threatened another early Sunday morning wake up, and I would have complied.”

“I’ll say.” Anna nodded. “Not that any of us are sneaking boys into our rooms. *I wish* my dating life was that exciting.”

Cress snorted. “Can you imagine Kat’s reaction if you tried to bring a boy into your room? She’d avoid you even more than she already does.”

“Oh my gosh, she would kill me,” Anna replied. “I’d have to sleep with one eye open for the rest of the year.”

“One eye?” Cress said. “I think you’d need both.”

Anna nodded, and a shudder seemed to go down her back. It was safe to say the wrath of Anna’s roommate was a bigger deterrent for her than cleaning a boy’s bathroom ever could be.

We wandered back to our floor before parting ways with Anna as we went back to our separate rooms. Cress immediately threw herself back into bed and cuddled up under the covers while I went to the closet to fish out my running gear. I’d been avoiding running all week for fear of bumping into Noah, but I couldn’t give up jogging entirely just because I didn’t want to see my ex.

“You’re not going back to bed?” Cress asked.

“No, I think I’ll go for a run. My coffee has me buzzed.”

“Really? I must drink far too much because it barely gives me a kick anymore.”

“You practically have a cup glued to your hand twenty-four seven, so you’re probably right.” I laughed.

“There are worse vices.” She let out a big yawn and snuggled farther under her sheets. She looked so cozy I was almost tempted to return to bed myself. But I knew I needed to clear my head, so I changed into my running gear and rushed out the door before I could reconsider.

Thunder rumbled as I emerged outside. It had been storming on and off all week, but it wasn’t raining yet, so I was hoping it would hold off a little longer so I wouldn’t get drenched on my run. The clouds overhead didn’t look promising and were so dark and gloomy I half considered turning back inside and trying again later. I knew I’d only go crazy if I went another day without running to clear my mind, so I started out into the blustering wind.

I headed into the woods. If it was going to rain, at least there might be some protection beneath the trees. On Monday, I’d made the mistake of choosing the path around the lake in an attempt to avoid Noah and had ended up seeing him anyway, so I knew there was little point in choosing

my route simply to avoid him. Fate apparently had a twisted sense of humor when it came to the two of us, so it seemed pointless to try to fight it.

Still, I hoped the grim weather would put Noah off running today. I didn't want to see him this morning, especially not after our encounter on Friday night. Hopefully, he was still tucked up in bed like most sane people.

My limbs took a while to warm up, but eventually I fell into a good rhythm as I ran along the winding path. I could feel the breath of winter on the early-morning air, and I knew it wouldn't be long now until the days turned short and cold and any hint of summer was gone for good. I hated the cold and wasn't looking forward to it one bit.

I was glad I'd chosen the woods. Thunder still rumbled across the horizon, and the wind howled as it whipped through the canopy overhead. The weather was turning slightly more apocalyptic than I'd predicted, and I considered heading back. I must have been crazy to head out on a run when a storm was rolling in. What if a tree branch fell on me? Or what if I was struck by lightning? I knew the chances of that happening were practically zero, but it didn't stop the thought from crossing my mind.

The sound of a twig snapping made me glance over my shoulder as a figure appeared on the path behind me. I nearly stumbled over a rock as my gaze collided with Noah's. His green eyes widened with obvious surprise, but I had to wonder if it was faked. Had he followed me here, or was I simply destined to bump into him every time I went for a run? Surely fate wouldn't be so cruel as to throw him into my path once again.

It felt like he was plaguing my existence. When he wasn't physically there, he was in my thoughts. I'd risked life and limb coming out in this storm, simply so I could clear my mind of him, but apparently that wasn't enough to escape him. I couldn't help but feel pissed he'd shown up again, so I slammed to a stop and turned on him.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

Noah halted and scowled as he folded his arms across his broad chest. "I'm running. Am I not allowed to run?"

I stalked toward him, anger carrying my feet forward. "No, you're following me." I poked him in his stupid chest, but he captured my hand, holding it there.

My breaths had been coming in hard and fast until that moment, but as soon as his skin made contact with mine, I struggled to breathe at all. God,

how I hated my reaction to him. How just one touch made me lose control. How my body so easily forgot that he was completely off limits.

“I didn’t follow you here,” he growled.

I shook my head, unsure if I believed him. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

He stared at me, confusion and hurt swirling in the bright-green depths of his eyes. Finally, he released a humorless laugh and let go of my hand. “I want nothing to do with you...” He glanced away from me, his mouth forming a hard line as he continued. “And yet I still want everything.” He shook his head. “I need to get you out of my head.”

“Maybe start by leaving me alone.”

“I didn’t follow you here,” he repeated.

“Fine, fate just has a screwed-up sense of humor then. But you *did* choose to confront me at the party on Friday night.”

“Am I supposed to just ignore the fact you already want to move on?”

Now I was the one to laugh, but there was absolutely nothing about this situation that was remotely funny. “You broke up with me, Noah. You dumped me because your grandfather asked you to and because you can’t handle who my dad is. What I do now is none of your concern.”

I turned to leave, but he grabbed my hand once more, pulling me toward him. I slammed into his chest, and he trapped me in his arms. A million tingles erupted across my skin at the contact. Being this close to him was dangerous. It was heady and addictive. It was not helping me with moving on.

Thunder rumbled overhead, but the sound felt like a mere echo as I stared into Noah’s eyes.

“What are you doing?” It took every bit of willpower I possessed to make sure the words didn’t come out as a whisper.

I could see Noah was just as tortured as me. “I don’t want you rebounding onto somebody else.”

“That’s not up to you. You dumped me, remember?”

“I know.”

“So, let me go, Noah.”

“I can’t.” His arms gripped me tightly, but he seemed to be talking about so much more than just holding me close to him. “I can’t let you go,” he said. “But I can’t be with you either.”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“I know.”

“You made your choice.”

“*I know.”* Each word from his lips was pained, and there was a panicked look in his eyes I’d never seen before. “It doesn’t stop me from missing you. From wanting you with every breath that I take.”

“You can’t say that stuff to me, Noah. It’s not fair.”

“But it’s true,” he replied. “I just keep thinking that perhaps if I could taste your lips one last time that would be enough. I could stop thinking about them. I could stop thinking about you. Maybe it would take the pain away, even if just for a moment. Maybe I could find some closure.”

“You want to kiss me to help you move on?”

“Yes.” His voice was rough.

It took a moment to process. “That’s really messed up, Noah.”

His jaw tightened like he knew it was insane, and yet it didn’t change how he felt. “Will you let me kiss you?”

As much as I wanted to pretend I wasn’t tempted, I was. I despised this boy for dumping me. I hated him for being an ass to me on Friday night. And yet, my body was acting like it had completely forgotten we were no longer together. I liked to believe I had enough self-respect to refuse him, but all sense went out the window when I was standing in his arms. It took me far longer to respond than it should have, and I stared at him as desire warred with the wiser part of my brain.

“No.” I somehow choked out the smart response. My heart clenched tightly in objection. I wanted him just as badly as he seemed to want me, but I couldn’t give in. I *shouldn’t*.

Somehow, *somehow,* I found the strength to step away from him. To release myself from his grasp. I needed space so I could think. But as soon as I had created it, I knew I didn’t want there to be any distance between us at all.

One last kiss. That was all Noah was asking for. And what if he was right? What if one final kiss would help me move on? What if I could finally put him in my past? I was already hurting so much. Would it really be so bad if I took just one moment to forget the pain?

Before I could reconsider, I strode toward him, and he didn’t hesitate as he reached for me, dragging me in and crushing me to him. Our lips clashed together as thunder cracked, the storm swirling around us just as violent and passionate as our kiss.

I wasn’t even sure if you could call what we were doing a kiss. It was raw and carnal. It was something so much fiercer than any kisses I’d experienced before. It was all heat and need with none of the gentle kindness of Noah’s other kisses.

I hated it.

I loved it.

I wanted it to end.

I needed it to last forever.

We kissed with such passion it felt like the whole world quaked in response. His hands were everywhere. His kiss was lips and tongue and teeth. I didn’t think he could erase any more of the space between us, but then he lifted me into his arms. My legs wrapped around him, never wanting to let him go. I couldn’t think straight. I couldn’t think at all. In that moment, all I knew was Noah, and I never wanted to know anything else.

It didn’t matter that the thunder was growing louder. That the wind was picking up, tugging at my hair and swirling the leaves around our feet. And when the skies opened and thick rain started to fall upon us, I thought perhaps that didn’t matter either. The world could drown, for all I cared.

We were both soaked through in moments and Noah pulled back from our kiss, staring at me through the sheeting rain that fell between us. I didn’t need to ask what he was thinking. I already knew. That kiss was it, and we were finished.

I jerked out of his hold and swiped a hand across my lips as I glared at him. That kiss wasn’t one that made you forget someone. It was the kind that imprinted on your soul and left its brand there forever.

“You done?” I growled.

Noah’s eyes were wild, his focus still on my lips as he stared at me. I felt like he was trying to control himself. Like he was on edge and could attack me with his lips again at any moment.

“Well?” I prompted, hugging my arms around the drenched clothes that clung to my waist.

He refused to meet my gaze. “I’m done.”

“Good.” I turned and started running back to school before I could give in to the emotions whirring within me. This was what he wanted. What I wanted. For this thing between us to be over. But if this was what I wanted, then why did I feel like I was going to cry?

Noah would forget me now.

But I was never going to forget that kiss.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Even the next day, my lips seemed to burn from Noah's kisses. It was like he'd marked himself on them. Like he'd seared his name across every inch of them. They belonged to him, and they ached to return to their owner.

Noah's kiss had done absolutely nothing to help me get over him. If anything, he had only made being apart from him worse. I needed something to help me take my mind off him. And for once, schoolwork just wasn't doing the trick. It certainly didn't help when I had to sit right in front of him during class.

I could feel his presence behind me. The air between us radiated with tension, and I struggled to retain a single thing the teacher said during the business management lesson we shared together.

Lily sat at the desk beside me, and she kept sending strange looks in Noah's direction. I couldn't see why she was looking at him so weirdly, but it didn't make sitting so close to him any easier. I was desperate to turn and look at him, but somehow, I managed to hold myself back.

When the torturous class was finally over and I was out in the corridor, I pulled Lily aside.

"Why did you keep looking at Noah during class?" I asked her.

"He couldn't take his eyes off you." She murmured the words and glanced around nervously like she was wary of being overheard. "He seemed upset."

"Really?"

“If I had to guess, I’d say he’s not over your breakup.” She readjusted her bag on her shoulder and looked back at the classroom as Noah emerged. He didn’t look our way and strode off in the other direction, so I had no chance to see his expression.

“He should be,” I murmured. Especially after demanding one last kiss from me yesterday to help us both move on.

“It’s only been a week. I’d be surprised if he was.”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

We started to slowly move off down the corridor. It was the end of the day, so it was crowded with students rushing to get out of school.

“How are you feeling about the breakup?” Lily asked.

“I’m getting there.” It was a total lie. I wasn’t getting anywhere, especially after that kiss. I hadn’t been able to get it out of my mind, and even now my heart raced a little faster at the thought of it.

Stupid Noah with his stupid unforgettable lips.

She gave me a small smile. “It’s okay if you’re not over it too.”

“I’m that obvious, huh?”

“Just a little.” She laughed. “But I can understand that you don’t want to dwell on it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “The sooner I’m over him, the better.”

We emerged from the building and out into the afternoon sunshine. As we walked across the courtyard, my phone started buzzing in my pocket.

I pulled it out and saw my mom was calling. “I better take this.”

Lily nodded. “Okay, I’ll see you later.”

I walked over to the nearest bench and sat down as I answered the call. “Mom, how do you get over a boy?”

She chuckled in response. “Hello to you too.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled. “Hi, Mom.”

“You’re still hung up on Noah, huh?”

I’d been doing my best not to burn my mom’s ears off complaining about Noah when we’d talked over the last week. I hated the thought of worrying her. I’d been a total mess when my last boyfriend had cheated on me, and I didn’t want Mom afraid I was in the same dark place I’d been after Levi. Not when she was so far away. I also didn’t want to burden her with my problems when I knew she had issues of her own. She seemed to be dealing with a lot of stress at the café at the moment, and even now she sounded exhausted. She told me she had it all under control, but I wasn’t

sure I believed her. She tended to change the subject whenever I brought it up.

I exhaled and sank a little lower in the seat. “Yeah, he’s kind of hard to forget.” Especially when he was staring at me in class and demanding kisses from me in the rain.

“I only spent a short time with him, but I could tell he was special,” she agreed. I kind of hated her for saying it, but I wasn’t sure I could stomach her despising him either. My feelings for him weren’t exactly rational at this point.

“So, any idea how to get over *special*?”

“The best cure for a broken heart is to give it time,” she said. “Time usually makes even the worst wounds a little easier to live with.”

Sitting and waiting to feel better didn’t seem like a very proactive way to get over a guy. The idea of being in pain for any longer also wasn’t appealing.

“I don’t really have time. I want to get over him now.”

Mom chuckled. “Sometimes you sound far older than your years, but then you say something like that, and I remember just how young you are.”

“I’m not that young.”

“You are to me.”

I knew I would never win this argument. I would always be her baby to her. “So, any other ideas for mending a broken heart?”

I heard a sound on the other end of the line, and Mom’s voice became muffled like she was covering the end of the phone to talk with someone. I could hear the clatter of pans in the background, so she must have been at work.

“Iz, I have a customer that’s asking for me,” she said, the line now crystal clear again. “I’ll be back in a moment, but Norma will keep you company while I’m gone.”

“Okay.” I waited as the line went quiet, and then I heard rustling as Norma picked up the phone.

“Isobel, sweetie, how are you?”

I smiled at the sound of her husky voice. She was the person I missed the most from back home—after my mom, of course.

“I’m okay. Working hard at school.”

“Your mom says you and that boy you brought home broke up.”

I should have known Noah would be the one thing Norma wanted to chat about. When she wasn't making outlandish predictions about the future, she loved nothing more than talking about boys and the heart.

"Yeah, it happened last week."

"I can hardly believe it. He looked totally smitten with you when you were here."

I shrugged. "Guess he wasn't *that* smitten."

"No, he definitely was. But, not to worry, he'll come back to you. Any psychic worth their salt could tell you that."

"I think your psychic powers might be wrong on this one. Besides, I'm trying to get over him."

"Well, if that's what you want, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else."

"Norma!"

"What?" She sounded genuinely confused by my reaction. "It's true."

"I'm seventeen. I'm not getting under anyone!" My cheeks were so hot right now I felt like I'd walked into a furnace.

"Well, it's still the best advice I have."

"That's terrible advice to give a teenager." I laughed.

"I'm just trying to keep it real."

I shook my head. "Well, any other real breakup advice that is somewhat more age appropriate?"

"Well, my momma always said that you can't heal a heart by dwelling on the past. The only way to make things better is to focus on the present. The heart will take care of the rest."

"So, I need to stop thinking about Noah and the breakup?"

"Yes, and distractions will help. Distractions like finding a cute new boy to get—"

"*Norma*!" She was officially worse than Anna.

She chuckled. "Your mom's back, sweetie, and I better get back to work. I'll talk to you soon."

She was off the phone before I could reprimand her again.

"Why did Norma have a devious grin on her lips when she handed over the phone?" Mom asked as she came back.

"She was giving me breakup advice."

"And…"

“And it wasn’t very helpful. I think I’ll stick with your advice of giving things time.”

“That sounds wise,” Mom agreed.

It wasn’t exactly easy. Giving things time wasn’t the quick fix I was after, but I trusted my mom knew what she was talking about.

A big clatter of plates sounded in the background and Mom swore under her breath. “Our new waitress has butter fingers today,” she said. “I better go.”

“Okay, talk to you soon.”

“Love you.”

“Love you more.”

I ended the call feeling both better and worse. Speaking with my mom always made me happier, but it was hard not to feel a little disheartened as I was no closer to getting over Noah and her advice was to just wait. It sounded simple enough in theory, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t be nearly so easy in practice. Especially not when I constantly saw him at school and time seemed to warp to a standstill whenever I was in his presence. It also didn’t help that whenever we were close I felt so drawn to him. No time more so than yesterday in the woods. What we needed were better boundaries—any boundaries at all, really.

The thought gave me clarity and resolve, and my feet moved of their own accord in the direction of the boys’ dormitory. I was supposed to be meeting Wes in the library soon so we could work on our economics homework from last week, but I could spare a few minutes. I was probably crazy to think going to see Noah was a good idea, but if I was ever going to get over him, we needed to set some ground rules. I was thinking no kissing and no longing looks would be at the top of the list.

When I got to his room, I banged hard on the door. Noah answered on the second knock, pure surprise lighting his eyes when he found me standing on the other side of the door.

“Can we talk?” I asked before he could say anything.

For a moment, it looked like he was going to refuse me. He glanced past me and looked up and down the corridor. When he saw I was alone, he nodded. Was he that worried about being seen with me?

He stepped back, gesturing for me to enter his room. I clenched my hands as I walked past him, trying my best to ignore the fresh scent of his aftershave. Even now, I still melted a little at the scent of it. He was dressed

in his soccer gear, his gym bag slung over his shoulder. He looked like he was on his way out.

“I have to get to practice,” he said.

“This won’t take long.”

He closed the door behind me and indicated for me to continue.

I drew in a deep breath before I spoke, mentally gearing up to put Noah in his place. He interrupted before I got a chance.

“That last class with you was torture,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“Because you were sitting right in front of me. I could smell the scent of your vanilla shampoo.”

It was the last thing I expected him to say. “You can sit somewhere else, you know.”

He shook his head slowly, as though my suggestion was impossible to imagine.

“It’s not just your scent that’s driving me crazy,” he continued. “It’s seeing you every day and knowing I can’t touch you, knowing I can’t smile with you or talk to you. I can’t stop thinking about the forest...” His eyes dropped to my lips, and he stepped closer like he was thinking about kissing me again.

“Noah, you said that kiss was it. That we would kiss one last time and move on...”

“One kiss wasn’t enough,” he murmured, moving closer still.

I backed away from him, jolting as I accidentally knocked into his desk. I’d come here to tell Noah I needed more space, and he was doing the exact opposite. I was already struggling with self-control when it came to him, and the closer he got to me, the more he erased any ability I had to resist. Coming to his room was stupid enough, but giving in to any desire I felt for him could be fatal to my slim hopes of moving on.

“Noah...” I murmured his name in warning. “I came here to tell you that we need to stop this. We need boundaries. The looks you keep giving me, *that kiss* yesterday. You’ve made it perfectly clear we can’t be together, and I can’t get over you if you won’t let me go.”

“Tell me I can kiss you again.”

I swallowed, my heart racing as I tried to summon the strength to deny him. His last kiss had shattered me, but another one might destroy me entirely.

“That would be a bad idea.” It was all I could manage to say.

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not…”

He lowered his lips to mine, and I melted into his arms as he kissed me. His kiss yesterday had been raw and filled with hunger, but today’s kiss was different. I could almost taste his desperation and sadness on his lips. I could feel he was aching as much as I was in the way he grasped my body tightly in his hands, holding me to him like I might disappear if he let me go.

Everything about this felt so right. But it also felt so, so wrong.

I pulled back from him and gasped for air. “You can’t keep kissing me.”

“I can’t help it,” he gritted out. “The only thing stopping us is my grandfather. In the woods, in my room, where no one can see, we can do whatever we want.”

His words were so alluring and his lips still so close to mine I almost moved toward them again. But then I saw sense. He was talking about a secret relationship again.

“I’m never going to agree to that, Noah. I’m surprised you keep asking. You hate secrets as much as I do.”

“It would be worth it to be with you.”

Looking into his eyes, I found it hard to believe he didn’t care for me enough to tell his grandfather to go to hell. He was looking at me like he would burn the world down around us just so we could be together. Apparently, those feelings weren’t enough.

“Couldn’t we just talk with your grandfather?” I whispered. “Maybe if we explained our feelings to him, he’d understand...”

My question seemed to break the moment we’d been sharing, shattering it so thoroughly I had to wonder if I’d perhaps dreamed it. Noah loosened his grip on me and stepped back, his expression turning to ice as he looked away. “He won’t understand. His hatred runs too deep.”

“If you could just tell me what happened…”

“There’s no point.” Noah felt so distant now even though he was only a few steps from me. “You think the truth will help. You think if you understand what happened you might be able to find a way around it so we can be together. But this isn’t a fairy tale, and there is no happy ending for us.”

“I know this isn’t fairy tale,” I growled.

“Do you? The poor girl who works at a café finds out she’s truly a princess and is whisked away to a castle. Sounds like a fairy tale to me. But how are you going to feel when you find out your father is the villain in the story? That you may be a princess, but you’re the heir to a throne built on lies and betrayal.”

“What are you talking about, Noah? I deserve to know the truth.”

“Perhaps.” He nodded. “But I won’t be the one to shatter your fairy tale.”

I was shaking as I stood there. Noah was deliberately keeping things from me, and his excuse was that he didn’t want to shatter my fairy tale? He had no right to decide what was best for me. Especially after deciding we couldn’t even be in each other’s lives.

“This isn’t some fairy tale to me,” I repeated. “This is my life.”

“I’m sorry, Isobel. I shouldn’t have kissed you yesterday, and I shouldn’t have kissed you just now.” My heart felt like it was imploding all over again as he spoke. “You’re right; we need boundaries. This won’t happen again.” I could see from the resolution in his eyes that he meant it.

Seeing him so certain only angered me. He’d been the one demanding more kisses from me. He was the one making things so messy. I’d done nothing wrong, and yet he was acting like this was all my fault.

“You’re right. It won’t.” My eyes were cold as I stared at him, and anger drove my feet toward the door. It had been a mistake coming here. One I wouldn’t be making again.

“Isobel...” he called after me, but I walked through the door without looking back, closing it firmly behind me. I didn’t want to hear any more of what Noah had to say. I knew he wasn’t changing his mind about us.

I was certain there was no way I’d be able to follow my mom’s advice. I couldn’t wait for things between Noah and I to blow over because my self-control around him was feeble. More time only meant more opportunities to make mistakes. I kept messing up with him, and I hated to think what might transpire if he asked me to kiss him again. I liked to think I’d turn him down, but I clearly had no restraint when it came to his lips. My attempt at setting boundaries had ended disastrously too.

I felt a desperate need to be proactive. To do something, *anything*, to get over him. To give me the strength I needed so I wouldn’t be stupid enough to kiss him again. There was only one way I could think to do it, and I was

probably going to regret it. But desperate times called for desperate measures. So, I was going to have to give Anna and Norma's advice a go.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

I was still riled with anger as I marched from Noah's room and started down the corridor. What I had planned next was the worst kind of idea. But right now, I didn't care. All I wanted was to erase Noah's lips from my own, and no amount of scrubbing them was going to do the trick. No, I needed something stronger. Something drastic. Just like Anna and Norma kept saying, I needed a rebound. And I knew just where to find one.

Within a few moments, I found myself standing at Wes and Sawyer's room. Without a second thought, I knocked on the door. My hands were shaking as I waited for a response, but I couldn't tell if it was because of nerves, irritation, adrenaline, or a combination of all three. This was a terrible idea. Probably the worst I'd ever come up with. I really wasn't sure what I was thinking. Maybe I wasn't thinking at all. There was no way I'd be standing here if I was in the right mind. But maybe that was what I needed. I'd been dwelling on my breakup with Noah for too long, leaving myself vulnerable to falling for him all over again. It was time to stop thinking and start doing something about it.

I sucked in a breath as the door opened to reveal Wes standing on the other side. He was still dressed in his school uniform, but he'd removed his tie, and the top few buttons of his shirt were undone. His brow creased with confusion as he laid eyes on me. "Isobel? I thought we were meeting in the library."

I pushed past him and into the room. "Is Sawyer here?"

Wes shook his head. "He's at soccer practice."

I swore under my breath and started pacing the room. “When do you think he’ll be back?”

“He only just left so not for at least another hour.”

“Damn,” I muttered. I doubted I’d be this riled up in an hour’s time, and there was no way I’d have the guts to go through with my crazy plan then. I’d be right back where I started.

I was still pacing around the room as Wes came up and grabbed hold of my arms, forcing me to a standstill. “What’s wrong? Why do you need to see my brother so bad?”

I slowly released my breath, a little of my annoyance dissipating as I looked up and into his calming brown eyes. “You’re going to think I’m a terrible person.”

“Try me.”

I let out another slow exhale. “I need to do something to get over Noah. It’s too much, and nothing is working. I thought I might take Sawyer up on his offer...”

My voice trailed off and Wes’ frown grew deeper.

“What offer?

“His offer to help me.”

“Help...how?

“By being.... By being my rebound.” As I stuttered out my explanation, I felt my cheeks burning with embarrassment. It sounded so silly when I spoke the words out loud.

Wes’s eyebrows shot toward the ceiling, and he let out an uncomfortable cough. “You came here to make out with my brother?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” I stumbled over the words. “I told you you’d think I was a terrible person.”

“Well, it’s just...”

“A terrible idea?” I finished his thought for him.

“The worst,” he agreed.

I sighed again, and my shoulders slumped. Wes was still gripping my arms, and it felt like he was stopping me from collapsing in an ashamed heap on the floor.

“I just can’t keep doing this,” I moaned. “My mind needs something else to think about. My heart needs something else to beat for. Everyone seems to think that kissing someone else will help.”

“Do *you* think it will help?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“And do you *really* want to kiss Sawyer?”

“Gosh no. I’d probably pick up some kind of disease.”

Wes chuckled under his breath.

“He’s the only guy who’s offered though,” I said. “And I know he won’t think it’s something that it’s not.”

“He’s not the only guy who’s offered...”

My gaze darted up to meet Wes’s once again. Was he talking about himself? Was he offering to kiss me? His eyes were serious as he looked at me, and my mouth turned dry. I was suddenly more aware of his strong hands wrapped around my arms, and the feeling sent tingles to my stomach.

“You were drunk, and you didn’t mean it,” I whispered. He was standing so close to me, and the room seemed so much warmer.

“Was I...” he whispered.

Wes was incredibly handsome. I’d noticed, of course—you’d be stupid not to. He and his brother looked like they’d stepped out of an Abercrombie campaign. But I’d never thought beyond their good looks before. Sawyer was Sawyer, and Wes had become such a good friend in such a short time I’d never even considered him in a different way. But when he was focused on me so intensely, I didn’t know where to look and I couldn’t quite remember how to breathe.

The thought of kissing him was tempting. Especially when I was hurting. When I wanted nothing more than to forget. Wes was offering me exactly the distraction I needed and wanted. It was exactly why I’d come to this room in the first place.

I shook my head and gave him a sad smile. “Well, even if you weren’t drunk, I’d have to refuse. You’re too important to me as a friend, Wes.”

He nodded and smiled. “Yeah, your friendship is important to me too. Besides, we’re breakup buddies. Not rebound buddies.”

I laughed. “And I think breakup buddies is enough responsibility already.” I stepped out of his grasp, but my body tensed slightly when I did, as though it was resisting the decision. His arms fell to his side, and the warm smile he’d shown me just a moment ago dropped for a second, but it returned so quickly I wondered if I’d been mistaken.

“A responsibility I take very seriously.” He winked at me.

“I feel like an idiot,” I replied. “Do you think we can pretend I never came storming in here searching for a rebound?”

“I think I can agree to that.” He smiled. “So, it might not be as exciting as making out with your hot friend, but did you still want to go to the library and work on our econ homework?”

I smirked at him. “Definitely not as exciting, but econ homework sounds like a healthier coping mechanism.”

“Much healthier,” he agreed.

Wes grabbed his bag, and we started toward the door. He stopped me before we left the room though. “Isobel?”

“Yeah.”

His expression was serious again, and he looked nervous. “If you ever get desperate for another *coping mechanism* again, please don’t make out with Sawyer.”

He scratched the back of his neck when he saw the questioning look in my eyes. “This is going to sound weird, but he’s my twin, and we’re kind of a package deal. Like I said, you’re important to me, and Sawyer doesn’t have the best track record with girls. If anything bad happened, I wouldn’t know whose breakup buddy I was supposed to be.”

He looked genuinely worried, and I felt like even more of an idiot. My mind was clear enough now to know just how ridiculous coming here looking for Sawyer had been. There was no way I was going to kiss Sawyer, let alone start and then end a relationship with him. I gave Wes a small nod of understanding.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” I said. “This little brain fade is well and truly in the past. As long as Sawyer doesn’t find out about this, I don’t think we’ll ever have to talk about it again.”

“Well, he certainly won’t hear it from me.” Wes winked at me again, as we left the room and headed for the library.



IT WAS late by the time I finally made it back to my dorm. I’d missed Cress and Anna at dinner but found them both laid out on Cress’s bed doing their nails when I arrived.

“Where have you been all night?” Cress asked as I ditched my bag by the door. “You totally missed girls' night.”

I groaned and threw myself onto my bed. “I think I would have preferred girls' night. My life is a disaster.”

They both exchanged a look before they focused back on me.

“Spill,” Anna demanded.

I hadn’t told either of them about the kiss I shared with Noah yesterday or the one we had today. I couldn’t keep it to myself any longer, and the words tumbled out as I told them everything that had happened in the last two days.

“You made out with Noah in the woods?” Cress gasped.

“And again today?” Anna’s voice was filled with a mixture of disbelief and joy.

“That’s not even the most surprising part,” I groaned. “I did something even more stupid than that.”

“What did you do?” They were both sitting on the edge of Cress’s bed desperately waiting for my answer.

“I was so mad at Noah I went straight to the twins’ room so I could take Sawyer up on his offer to be my rebound.”

“You didn’t!” they both cried.

“I did.”

“And what happened?” They were going to fall off the bed if they leaned forward any more.

“Well, thankfully, Sawyer wasn’t there.” I grimaced before I continued. “But Wes was, and he offered to kiss me instead.”

“Oh. My. God.” I couldn’t tell which of them squealed the loudest.

Cress practically leaped off the bed and looked ready to explode as she waited for me to continue. “Did you do it? Did you kiss him?”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t. He’s my friend, and I really want to keep it that way.” Anna and Cress deflated like popped balloons. “I think he felt the same way though,” I explained. "We both kind of laughed about it after. Still, he nearly gave me a heart attack when he offered.”

“Wow, you really know how to bring the drama to a boring old Monday night.” After the initial disappointment at hearing I hadn’t kissed Wes, Anna now had an impressed look on her face.

“I feel like I’ve made a total idiot of myself.”

Cress sat down next to me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “You’re not an idiot at all. You’ve been having a hard time with the breakup. We all understand that.”

“And Noah shouldn’t keep kissing you,” Anna said. “That’s like the worst breakup etiquette ever.”

“It’s really messing with my head,” I agreed. “I swear, the logical part of my brain seems to be on holiday. I can’t believe I thought if I started kissing someone else I’d be able to regain some self-control.”

“I mean, it’s what I would do,” Anna agreed.

“But not necessarily the right advice for you, Isobel,” Cress added, shooting a look at Anna. “I can chat with Noah, tell him to back off, if you want?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I need to be stronger. I need to learn to deal with breakups myself.”

“What you need is to not see Noah every day,” Anna said. “If only we could bail on school and go on vacation.”

I sat up a little straighter. “Well, it’s not a vacation, but we’ve got that English trip to New York coming up, and my mom said I can stay with you, Cress.”

“Yes!” She started clapping her hands together with excitement. “I’ve already started making a list of everywhere we’ve got to go. Anna, you’re coming, right?”

“Obviously,” she said with a wide smile. “It’s about time we had a girls’ weekend. I’m in desperate need of some new clothes, so this couldn’t come at a better time.”

For the first time in days, I began to feel a little more hopeful, and I smiled at my two friends. I wasn’t all that into shopping, but I’d be happy to do just about anything so long as it took my mind off Noah.

“This is perfect,” Anna said. “By the time the weekend’s over, you’ll have had such a good time you won’t even remember Noah’s name.”

I hoped that meant I’d forget his lips too.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Noah seemed determined to keep his word the rest of the week. He didn't bother me once. He didn't so much as look my way. He acted as though I didn't exist at all, and as much as that hurt, it was also somewhat of a relief not having to deal with him constantly staring at me. I was still looking forward to the escape I hoped our field trip would offer though.

"What's this I hear about you girls staying in New York for the weekend after the English trip ends?" Sawyer asked as he and Wes joined us at breakfast on Thursday morning.

The bus was leaving after breakfast, so we were eating quickly to make sure we didn't miss it. The twins were in Anna's English class, so they were coming to watch the play too. We'd been keeping our weekend plans quiet from the boys because Anna was convinced they would try to gate-crash. I had no idea how they'd found out.

"We're having a girls' weekend," Anna replied. "You're not invited."

Sawyer placed a hand against his chest. "Not invited?"

"Here we go," Cress muttered.

"Not invited?" Sawyer's voice had taken on an overly dramatic tone. "How could you girls hurt me so? I happen to be a great addition to girls' trips."

Anna folded her arms. "No, you're a boy. You're not welcome on girls' trips."

"But I love to do all the fluff you girls do."

She shook her head. "The fact you call it fluff shows exactly why you shouldn't come."

Sawyer sank into his chair, a despondent look in his eyes. “I just thought we were all friends,” he said. “I thought you’d seen how tough Wes has taken his breakup with Sarah.”

“Don’t bring me into this,” Wes said.

Sawyer wasn’t listening though. “I thought you could see how much my poor brother needs cheering up. A weekend in New York would have done wonders for him. Instead, you’ve all broken his heart even further.”

Wes rolled his eyes. “You really haven’t.”

Sawyer looked at him with pity in his eyes. “See? Poor guy can’t even admit when he’s in pain.”

Anna huffed. “You’re not going to let this go, are you, Sawyer?”

He gave her a sly grin. “No, I’ll be milking this one for a while.”

Anna groaned and then glanced in my direction. “I’ll let you decide, Isobel. This is your weekend. We can either invite the twins or listen to Sawyer grumble about it until Christmas. Either way, he’ll probably just stay in the city and end up bothering us anyway…”

“Looks like we don’t have much choice then.” I laughed at Sawyer who was now batting his eyelids at me. “Okay, fine, you guys can come. But no calling girl stuff *fluff*.”

“And you’re going to have to stay at your own place,” Cress added. “I don't want to get stuck explaining to my parents why their front window is broken again.”

“That was an accident,” Sawyer grumbled. “I blame your window for not being strong enough to withstand a gentle hit with a soccer ball.”

“I’m not willing to take that chance.”

“But we wanted to be part of the slumber party…”

“Too bad,” Anna said. “Oh, and under absolutely no circumstances are you allowed to moan about the things we have planned. This is a girls’ weekend, and you’re gate-crashing, so we’re in charge.”

Sawyer looked between the three of us before he finally grinned and slapped Wes on the back. “Dude, we’re going to have the best weekend in New York.”

Wes laughed and shook his head at his brother. As annoying as Sawyer was, it was hard not to get caught up in his exuberance sometimes.

The others started chatting about their plans for the weekend, but Wes turned his attention to me. “You really didn’t have to let us impose on your plans,” he said. “I was going to stay the weekend anyway to spend time

with my parents, but I understand if you only want to hang out with Cress and Anna."

"Don't be silly, it will be even better with you guys there too." I shared a smile with him. "I can't wait. I haven't been to New York before."

"You'll love it," Wes said. "What are you looking forward to the most?"

I paused before I answered. Although I was excited about my first trip to New York and all the sights and sounds it had to offer, there was one part of the trip I had been thinking about all week. The way Noah had spoken about my father the last time we talked had left me desperate to speak to Matthew, to question him about everything. He was too busy to see me while I was in New York, so I was considering taking matters into my own hands.

Wes was still waiting for my answer. I hadn't told the girls about my plans, and I didn't want to dampen their excitement for our trip, so I kept my voice low as I spoke to Wes.

"Well, it's not exactly sightseeing," I whispered.

"It's not?" Wes looked intrigued.

"My dad's staying in New York," I explained. "I'm not sure if he's been avoiding me or if he's just too busy with work, but I'm sick of waiting around for him. I have so many questions for him about Noah, the Hastings family, my mother—all of it."

"I can imagine."

"So, I'm planning to track him down and finally get some answers out of him. I just don't know where he lives, and apparently, he's too busy with work to see me."

"Why don't you just go to his office instead?" Wes asked. "He'll surely be there at some point, and The LaFleur Corp's offices are right in the center of town. I could take you there, if you like?"

"Really?"

He smiled. "Yeah, it wouldn't be any problem."

"That would be great. Thanks, Wes."

I felt calmer about the prospect of seeing my father. It felt like I could have the answers I'd been waiting for before the weekend was through.

"Like I said, not a problem," Wes continued. "So, once you've finished tracking down your father and interrogating him, what's next on your list of New York attractions?"

I rolled my eyes as he smirked at me.

“Well, the girls are keen to do some shopping.” I sighed. “Lots and lots of shopping actually.”

“You don’t sound that excited.”

“I am. I kind of want to see at least one of the sights while I’m there though.”

“I guess we’ll have to make that happen then. Anything in particular?”

My cheeks turned red. “You’re going to think it’s silly.”

He leaned in close across the table, and the corner of his mouth kicked up in a smirk. “Well, if it’s anything like our mission to infiltrate The LaFleur Corp, I’m in.”

“See, you’re already making fun of me.” I pouted at him

“Okay, sorry,” he laughed. “Seriously, I’m sure it’s not silly. I’m intrigued...”

He looked so curious, but I knew he wouldn’t push me for an answer if I didn’t want to give one. He was the least likely of my friends to think I was a loser though. “Okay, I’ll tell you, but no laughing and no making fun of me.”

“I promise.”

I let out a breath. “Okay, well, I googled things to do in New York, and everything looked incredible, but I saw there’s this gorgeous library in the city, and I’ve started to develop a bit of a thing for beautiful libraries…”

“You must be talking about the New York Public Library,” Wes said with a glint in his eye.

“Is it sad that of all the things I want to see in New York a library is the top of my list?”

“It’s not even close to sad. It’s cute,” he said.

I rolled my eyes again. “I said you couldn’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not, I swear. I mean, I am a little surprised. Most people want to go to the top of the Empire State Building or see the Statue of Liberty…”

“I do want to see those things. It’s just, the library looks kind of magical.”

“Like I said, it’s cute,” he replied.

I shook my head and turned to look at the others. They were chatting excitedly and didn’t seem the least bit interested in listening to what Wes and I had been discussing. Sawyer was in the middle of an animated argument with Anna about where we should party on Saturday night. There was a buzz in the air, and I was looking forward to the weekend more than

ever. This trip was exactly what I needed, and hopefully by the time I returned, I'd have both the space and answers I needed to finally put Noah behind me.



THE ONE THING I hadn't really considered about going to New York was that Noah was also going to be on the English trip. He might not be staying for the weekend, but he was going to be there for the rest of it. It was just my luck too that we both sat in an aisle seat on the bus, and he somehow ended up sitting diagonally in front of me. I was going to have to look at him the whole way to New York.

He was sitting next to Kaden, who had his head buried in a book. Noah remained focused on his phone and thankfully didn't seem interested in looking my way. A part of me hoped he hadn't realized I was sitting so close, but I knew he must have spotted me when he got on the bus. Besides, if he was anything like me, he had a radar that went off whenever I was near. I knew my senses certainly alerted me to his presence whenever he was around.

"Sawyer knows a guy who can get us into this new nightclub on Saturday night," Anna said. She was sitting next to me while Cress was hanging over the seat in front of us to listen in. "It's supposed to be amazing."

I swore Noah's head tilted in our direction, like he was trying to overhear our conversation.

"Can we get into a club?" I asked. "We're not even close to twenty-one."

Anna shrugged. "Sawyer seems confident. So, what do you guys think?"

Cress had a big grin on her face as she nodded. "You know me. Any excuse to go dancing."

I had to withhold a shudder at the thought. If they wanted to entice me into a club, then telling me it would involve dancing was not the right approach. Anna seemed to realize this and quickly continued.

"Sawyer says there's a great VIP section too. We can just chill on couches, listen to music, and flirt with cute boys."

A loud cough spluttered from farther up the aisle, and I glanced up to see Noah clearing his throat. He was still facing the front of the bus, but he was definitely listening in.

“That sounds great,” I replied, shooting a glare at the side of his head—not that he noticed. “Count me in.” I said it more for Noah’s benefit than my own. I didn’t really want to go to a club, but if Noah thought I was taking steps to move on, then hopefully he would too.

New York was several hours away by bus, but the trip went relatively quickly. Anna and Cress chatted constantly, so it was easy to lose myself in conversation with them. I never quite managed to forget Noah was sitting so close to me. He was like a mosquito bite, a dull itch on my skin that wouldn’t go away no matter how much I tried to ignore it.

As we drew closer to the city, Anna swapped seats with me so I could stare out the window. I’d never visited a big city before, and I knew I was really exposing my small-town upbringing as I gaped and gasped at the bustling streets and towering skyscrapers that flashed past.

“You’re so funny.” Anna chuckled, when I started bouncing up and down on my seat. I’d just spotted the Empire State Building for the first time.

“I can’t help it. I’m excited!”

The girls laughed. “We know,” they said in unison.

“I don’t think we’ve got much choice but to ditch some of the shopping for sightseeing,” Cress added. “Seeing you experience New York for the first time is like watching a small kid open presents at Christmas. It’s adorable.”

I scowled in her direction. “I’m not like a small kid.”

“You totally are,” Anna agreed with a smile.

“I’d probably be offended if I wasn’t so excited by the idea of sightseeing.”

The girls laughed again.

Eventually, the bus pulled up outside our hotel. It was an impressive and imposing stately building right across from Central Park. Tall columns flanked the gorgeous stone entrance, and a plush carpet ran down the marble steps leading up to the front doors. Just one look at the hotel made me realize this little excursion must have been costing my father a fortune. There was no way my mom and I could have ever afforded such luxury, and I knew the type of place in our budget would have looked very different.

When we entered the hotel, I was shocked by the grand foyer. A beautiful fountain trickled in the middle of the space, and it was surrounded by large leafy trees that looked like they'd been plucked straight from the park across the street. The soft smell of roses floated across from the floral arrangements that lined the walls, and above it all was a high ceiling with an elaborate golden design. I couldn't help but imagine the many floors that were stacked on top of it, reaching up toward the sky. We were all crowded to one side of the entrance hall as one of the teachers arranged the keys and began calling out our room arrangements. They assigned the girls to share rooms alphabetically, and by some miracle, that meant I'd be sharing with Anna.

"Yes!" she squealed as our names were announced. She darted forward to grab the room key from the teacher and grinned brightly as she came back to me. "This is going to be the best trip ever," she gushed. Cress didn't seem to agree. Her roommate had been revealed just before our names were called. She was rooming with one of Veronica's cronies for the night. Cress was normally able to see the positive side of most things in life, but even she appeared pretty bummed about it.

The teacher finished assigning our rooms before he explained our itinerary for the rest of the day. We were going to spend the rest of the afternoon on a literary walking tour of Central Park. Dinner was going to be at a restaurant close to the theater, and then we'd finish the day by seeing the play.

I was excited about catching a play on Broadway, but I also loved the idea of wandering away the afternoon in Central Park. My friends didn't seem anywhere near as excited as me, but it was a bright and sunny day, so there were no complaints.

The others kept chatting about the day ahead, but I wasn't listening too closely as Noah caught my eye. He was looking at me through the crowd of other students milling around the foyer, but he glanced away the moment our eyes met. I blew out a breath and forced my focus away from him and back on my friends.

This trip to New York was all about getting the closure I needed and the space I wanted so I could finally get over Noah. So far, I hadn't been doing too well with the space part, but now the bus ride was over, I was hoping we could keep our distance for the rest of the trip. I just had to hope fate

didn’t have other plans for us because it was about time it started working in my favor.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The walk through Central Park was wonderful. We applauded the street performers, snapped selfies on picture-perfect bridges, and enjoyed some of the best people-watching you could imagine. We even sort of paid attention when the group stopped to look at a few statues and landmarks and Mr. Wagner tried to lecture us about them. The best part was that it was easy to stay clear of Noah, and I barely noticed him. I was too busy having fun with my friends and admiring the sights.

I didn't see him at dinner either. There were so many students on the trip we sat at a few different tables, and he was nowhere near me. We went to an amazing Asian fusion restaurant Cress told me was one of the best in the city. The servers brought out a wide array of incredible dishes, most of which I'd never even heard of, let alone tried before. Even so, I found myself sampling every dish and wolfing down anything that hit my plate. I loved my mom's cooking at the café, but this was a different world of food altogether.

I was growing tired by the time we made it to the theater. Between the drive to New York and the afternoon exploring Central Park, I was exhausted. I'd also gotten a bit overexcited at dinner, and I was feeling very full. It was a short walk to the theater from the restaurant, but Cress, Anna, and I lagged at the back of the group. When we got to the theater, students were already lining up in front of the entrance where Mr. Wagner was handing out tickets.

We joined the back of the queue and shuffled forward as students filed into the theater and went to find their seats. Anna grinned when she glanced

down at her ticket and saw where she was sitting. “Wow, they got us good seats,” she said. “We’re so close to the front we’ll practically be able to feel Romeo spitting his lines.”

I looked at her ticket and saw she was in row C. But when I looked at my own, I appeared to be nowhere near her. “You’ll have to tell me all about his spit,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll be getting sprayed by it in row MM.”

Anna glanced over at my ticket and frowned. “What? Are we really not sitting together?”

“It must be random,” Cress said. “I’m in row F.”

“Sorry, girls.” Mr. Wagner’s low voice interrupted our complaints. “Most of the group are in the front rows, but there’s too many of us, so some of you will be sitting elsewhere. Don’t worry, you won’t be the only ones.”

“Damn, I can’t believe they don’t have us sitting together,” Anna said as we left Mr. Wagner in the foyer. “I don’t want to be sprayed in spit without you guys.”

I laughed. “Why do I feel like that’s not something people often say?”

“Ha, you may think that, but I bet it is,” Anna replied with a smile. She started to frown though as she looked at me. “Shit, and it’s your first performance in New York, Isobel. Do you want to swap seats with me?”

I quickly shook my head. “No, I’m fine. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of Romeo’s spit.”

“I’m sure I can live without it. Seriously, let’s swap.”

“I’m happy to swap too if you like,” Cress added. “Though my seat isn’t as good as Anna’s.”

I pulled my ticket in close to my chest. “Nope, like I said, I’m fine.” I started toward the stairs that led up to my seat before they could argue. There was a look in Anna’s eyes that made me feel like she might try to wrestle the ticket from my hands if I hung around. “I’ll catch you guys after the show.”

I wandered up the stairs until I found the door I was supposed to enter through. As I entered the auditorium, I could see I was right at the back of the theater. I wasn’t just a few rows from my friends. I was a whole other level away from them. The place was packed, but I saw a few other students scattered throughout the seats, so at least I wasn’t the only one back here.

I climbed the stairs until I reached my row, which was the very last one in the entire theater. While Anna was being covered in spit from the performers, I'd be lucky to hear them at all. I looked down the row and could just make out an empty seat over the sea of heads. Every seat between me and my destination was taken, so I slowly began to edge my way past the other patrons, keeping my eyes down so I didn't trip and whispering my apologies as I went. I was just about to reach my seat when I looked up and saw who I would be sitting next to. I froze. My blood turned to ice as I locked eyes with Noah. His look of shock must have mirrored mine. I imagined the universe was having a good old laugh right now.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered under my breath.

The man I'd stopped in front of cleared his throat, and I quickly jolted back into action. "Sorry." I gave him an empty smile before I slowly continued onward. Every second I delayed was one second less I had to spend at Noah's side.

When I finally reached him, he stood to let me pass. My body buzzed as I lightly brushed past him. He was too big for such a small space, and it was impossible to get by him without touching. I looked at the number on the empty seat next to him, and my heart sank as it was confirmed. I was sitting next to Noah.

I dropped into my seat and pulled out my program, hoping it might distract me from the boy I could feel at my side. There was only so much time you could spend reading about the actors in the play before it became painfully monotonous.

Noah let out a soft laugh, and I couldn't stop myself from glancing up at him. He was watching me, and though he'd laughed, there wasn't a trace of humor on his face.

"What?" I hissed at him.

"It's nothing."

"You laughed. Do you find something funny about this situation?"

He let out a sigh. "Only that no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get away from you. It seems somewhat ironic given we're seeing a play about fate."

I folded my arms over my chest. "Yes, well, I'm sure the universe will find some other people to mess with once it realizes no matter how many times it tries to throw us together it'll make no difference."

"Perhaps," he agreed.

His response sliced through me. A part of me still wanted him to fight for us. To fight against his grandfather and choose me even though it was the wrong decision. The way he just seemed to surrender to it all only twisted the broken shards of my heart.

I just wished I didn't feel such a strong connection to him. That I could ignore how my body urged me toward him even now.

"How was your afternoon?" he asked, somewhat taking me by surprise.

Apparently, we were making small talk now. It was unusual seeing as he hadn't spoken two words to me all week. "I thought you weren't talking to me."

"I never said I wasn't talking to you."

I kept my arms crossed and stayed as small as I could in my seat. There was barely any space between the seats, and I felt too close to Noah. "Well, you *haven't* been talking to me, and you've been acting as though I don't exist."

He let out a hard breath. "How could I be acting as though you don't exist when you're the only person I can see?"

This boy was more confusing than most of my chemistry lessons—and those were damn near impossible these days. Thankfully, the lights in the theater started to dim, stopping our sad attempts at conversation. I blew out a breath of relief. At least now I wouldn't have to talk with Noah. I could sit here and simply pretend he wasn't there.

It was far easier said than done, and as soon as it grew dark, my body only seemed to become more aware of Noah's presence beside me. His arm was on the armrest between us, only inches away from my own. His legs were close enough that I only had to shuffle slightly to brush against him. The worst part was how clearly I could smell him. His scent wrapped around me, beckoning me to him and tormenting my every breath.

I wondered if he was as plagued by me as I was by him. It practically made me feel sick, and each passing moment only turned my stomach more. I'd always found his presence impossible to ignore, but it had never made me feel quite so nauseated before. Perhaps this was progress. Perhaps I'd gotten to the point in our breakup where he made me feel physically ill.

My stomach clenched, and I lifted a hand to my mouth. Nope. This couldn't be because of Noah. I wasn't just slightly queasy; I was ten days spent on the high seas kind of queasy.

“I’m going to be sick.” I jumped from my seat and darted back down the row toward the aisle as quickly as I could. People grumbled as I passed, but I ignored them as I climbed over their outstretched legs and rushed back down the steps and out into the foyer.

Thankfully, there was a women’s bathroom just outside the door, and I ran straight for it. I only just made it to the toilet before I vomited. My eyes watered, and my stomach turned. I hadn’t been sick this way in a long time.

I vaguely heard the bathroom door opening and the scuff of feet as someone entered. Whoever it was had a real treat in store because I wasn’t sure I could keep quiet. I was too sick to care though.

“Isobel, are you okay?”

Oh, God. *Anyone but him*. Noah had followed me in here, and I officially wanted to die.

I answered him by hurling my guts up again. I heard him swear, and moments later, his hands were brushing against the sides of my face as he pulled my hair back for me. If I wanted to get him to leave me alone by completely repulsing him, I was doing a great job.

When I’d gotten most of the contents of my stomach up, I grabbed some toilet paper from the dispenser and wiped my mouth. I wanted nothing more than to disappear, but that was impossible when I was stuck in a small cubicle with Noah. I slowly turned to him. I felt like hell and probably looked even worse. There wasn’t nearly enough space in the small stall for the two of us, and we were both far too close.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” I said.

Noah ignored my comment. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel like the food at that restaurant isn’t nearly as nice the second time tasting it.” Especially not the calamari. I was never going to eat seafood again.

“Do you think you’re going to throw up again?”

I slowly shook my head.

“Here, let me help you up.” He gently took my arm. I felt weak as a kitten as I tried to stand, but Noah did most of the lifting.

“You’re missing the play,” I said. “And you’re in the women’s bathroom.” Thankfully the play was in full swing, so there was no one else here.

“I’m aware.” He didn’t seem the least bit bothered by either of those facts. “We should get you back to the hotel.”

I groaned and shook my head. “No, we need to see the play.”

“You can barely stand, and you’re as white as a sheet. I’m taking you back to your room.”

“We can’t leave the theater. We’ll get in trouble.”

“Don’t worry about the teachers. I’ll text Mr. Wagner and let him know you’re unwell and I’m taking you back.”

“But…”

Noah’s eyes turned serious, and I could see there would be no arguing with him. I wanted to protest but felt too exhausted to go through with it.

“Fine,” I grumbled. I didn’t particularly feel like seeing a play about Romeo and Juliet anyway. Not when things between Noah and me felt like they’d been ripped from its very pages.

Noah went to help me, but I stepped out of his grasp. “I can walk.”

He slowly nodded, but he looked like he wanted to object. Instead, he hovered close to me as we left the bathroom. He was acting like he thought I might faint or collapse. If I were honest with myself, I didn’t feel that far from it. I couldn’t handle the thought of him touching me though.

We were silent as we left the theater, and I tried to keep as much distance between us as possible as we took a cab back to the hotel.

“You really didn’t have to escort me back here,” I said, as we made our way down the corridor to my room. I still felt really unwell and was grateful Noah had brought me back. I felt terrible he had missed the play though. We had an assignment on *Romeo and Juliet* due in a couple of weeks. And while we didn’t need to see the play to complete the work, it definitely would have helped.

“It’s no problem.” Noah shrugged. “I’ve seen the play before.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I like watching stage productions. My mom and dad used to take me to the theater a lot when I was a kid.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know that about Noah. I didn’t want to know it about him either. I didn’t like knowing anything that might endear him more to me when things between us would never work.

“Well, this is me,” I said, gesturing to the door when we reached my room.

Noah crossed his arms over his large chest. “You think I’m just going to ditch you at the door and leave you in there alone?”

“I was kind of hoping so, yeah…” My stomach was still rolling uncomfortably, and the last thing I needed was for Noah to see me being sick again.

“That’s not going to happen,” he said. “I’ll stay with you until Anna gets back.”

“How did you know I was rooming with…” Noah had always been observant, so of course, he knew I was rooming with Anna. Instead, I nodded. “Fine. But no barging in on me in the bathroom if I’m sick again. I’ve suffered enough humiliation for one night.”

“Deal.”

I swiped my key card to open the door to my room. It was a gorgeous space with two large beds and a huge window at the far end that overlooked Central Park. It was dark outside, and the curtains were pulled open so I could see the twinkling lights of the city beyond. I felt far too unwell to really appreciate the view, and I collapsed onto the end of my bed.

Noah disappeared into the bathroom and came out with a glass of water for me. I took the glass but didn’t drink from it straightaway. At this point, I wasn’t sure if the water was going to help or make me throw up again.

“You need to rehydrate,” he said, nodding at the glass.

I let out a sigh and did as I was told, taking small, cautious sips as I waited to see how it went down. Thankfully, I didn’t start heaving again.

“I’m going to change,” I said. The dress I’d worn to the theater was tight, and it felt like it was suffocating me. I probably would have had a shower too if Noah wasn’t here, but the thought of trying to shower with him in the room felt far too intimate.

I quickly rifled through my bag and pulled out my pajamas before disappearing into the bathroom. When I caught a look at myself in the mirror I cringed. My skin was sickly pale, my hair was lank, and my eyes were bloodshot. I would have been mortified by Noah seeing me this way if I felt well enough to care.

I brushed my teeth, washed my face. and pulled my hair back, which all helped me feel slightly more human. When I returned to the room, Noah was sitting on Anna’s bed, and he smiled as he caught a look at my pajamas.

“Winnie the Pooh?” he asked, nodding at the print.

I hadn’t really thought about the state of my pajamas when I’d put them on, but as Noah’s eyes slowly trailed over them, I realized just how short the shorts were and how the top was so old it was almost see-through.

They were the only pajamas I'd brought though. They also happened to be the comfiest thing I owned. I'd snuck into my room and grabbed them when Noah and I had visited my mom a few weeks ago. Of course, Matthew's stylist, who had filled my closet at school, had provided a pair of luxurious silk PJs. But they never felt quite right on me, and I was able to sleep so much more soundly when I was tucked up in something from home. "He was my favorite growing up," I explained.

"Me too," he murmured, but his voice was so quiet I wondered if perhaps I'd imagined him saying it.

His eyes tracked me as I made my way across the room. Under any other circumstance I might have been embarrassed to have him in here with me. To let him see me in my old Winnie the Pooh PJs while I looked like something that had just crawled out of the Upside Down. But I didn't have it in me to care. I pulled back the sheets of my bed and slipped under the covers.

My stomach was still clenching as I curled up under the duvet, and I really hoped it wasn't gearing up for a second date with the toilet bowl. I turned to look at Noah. He was still watching me from the edge of Anna's bed.

"Do you want me to call down to see if the front desk has anything for the nausea?" he asked. "Even some dry crackers might help."

"No, I'll be okay. I just need to rest."

He didn't seem happy with my answer. I got the feeling Noah hated sitting by and doing nothing. He didn't complain and gave me a brief nod before he glanced away. His gaze roamed the rest of the room as though he wasn't sure what to do or where to look.

I rolled over in bed and tried to get comfortable but then immediately rolled back. I squirmed around trying to find a relaxing position, but no matter how I arranged myself, I felt restless. I closed my eyes, hoping it would help, but with my eyes shut, I only noticed more clearly how my head pounded and my mouth tasted like acid.

I let out a sigh and focused on Noah. He was staring at the wall across from him, deep in thought. He seemed different tonight. Less bitter than our recent encounters, and I almost sensed that he was resigned to our fate. He was probably just being nicer to me because I was sick and he felt the need to look after me. I had to admit it was so much easier to be around him when we weren't focused on the painful aftermath of our breakup.

For a moment, I considered pressing him for answers about what happened between our families. I'd had little luck pulling an explanation out of him so far, but something about his attitude tonight made me feel like he might be more open to talking. We certainly had the time if he was going to insist on staying with me. Still, I was nervous to ask. What if he rejected me again?

"Noah?" I asked.

"Mm?"

"Tell me what happened."

His eyes snapped to me.

"Between our families. What happened?"

He sat up a little straighter, and his eyes darkened in response. "We shouldn't be talking about this," he said. "You need to rest."

"I *am* resting," I replied. "And I know you're worried about how I'll react, but that's my decision to make. I want an explanation. I deserve it."

Noah let out a long sigh, and from the way he watched me, I could see he was trying to figure out the best way to put me off.

"Is it really that bad?" I asked.

"It's...complicated."

"You won't tell me because it's complicated?"

"I won't tell you because I don't want to be the one who ruins the relationship you're trying to build with your dad."

I propped myself up on my pillow. "Well, that's only more reason to tell me," I said. "If my father isn't a good person, I don't want to build a relationship with him. But I can't do that if I don't have all the information..."

He still looked hesitant, and I had a feeling my attempt at getting answers out of him was going to be futile yet again.

"Please, Noah…"

I wondered if he could see the desperation in my eyes because he surprised me by nodding. "Fine, I'll tell you what happened," he said. "But it won't change anything. And you can't get angry if you don't like what I have to say."

"I won't," I promised. "So…"

He put his arms on his knees and leaned forward, his head low as he began. "Our families have been business rivals for years. It started back when both our grandfathers set up their pharmaceutical companies. The

LaFleurs have always taken issue with us. They would poach our employees or sabotage our research. If they knew my grandfather intended to buy a warehouse, they would buy it before him, or if they knew my grandfather was making a deal with a third party, they'd swoop in and steal the contract. It was constant and petty. They did anything they could to make his life difficult. For years, they buried my grandfather in litigation just to be a pain."

I shook my head, trying to understand. "Why would they do all of that?"

"They're just not good people." He glanced down at his hands, like he couldn't stand to look me in the eyes. "Our grandfathers were once colleagues, but William said your grandfather was always jealous of his success and that's why he targeted us."

My brow scrunched in response. I didn't know how to react to what he'd just said. I'd never met my grandfather, so I could hardly defend him. But Noah still hadn't explained why he thought Matthew was such a villain.

"But you said this was both our grandfathers, right?" I asked. "So, why are you so angry with Matthew?"

"Matthew is just like your grandfather, if not worse," Noah said. There was little emotion in his voice, and I got the feeling he was trying his best to sound calm, so as not to upset me.

"What did Matthew do?"

"A couple of years ago, the patent ended on the main drug my family's company makes. Matthew immediately started manufacturing a generic version of it and practically gave it away. Our sales tanked, and Hastings Laboratories has barely been able to stay afloat since. He knew exactly what he was doing and how it would impact us."

"Oh," I murmured. I'd only just met Matthew, and I didn't know him all that well, but I was surprised he would be so malicious.

"My family's company is in pieces, and my grandfather has sunk his entire personal fortune into trying to buoy it back to life," Noah continued. "No one knows just how much trouble we're in…"

"That's terrible."

He nodded, but he was still struggling to look at me. Talking about this had to be hard for him, especially if his grandfather's company was struggling as much as it was. I still wasn't sure I understood why my family hated his so much. Why had my father deliberately tried to sabotage them? And had my grandfather really started years of fighting simply because he

was jealous? I wouldn’t put it past him considering he’d hidden my existence from my father. Still, it seemed remarkably petty.

As I considered Noah’s explanation, I felt like I was missing something. If my grandfather had acted out of jealousy, then why did my father hate his family? And why had William and Matthew reacted so strongly when they found out we were in a relationship? I felt like there had to be more to the feud than the business rivalry Noah had described.

“So, is that it then?” I asked.

A flash of emotion crossed Noah’s eyes, and I knew he hadn’t told me the whole story.

"What aren’t you telling me?”

He shook his head. “I think I’ve said enough for one night.”

I sat up in bed. “You can’t just give me half the story.”

“The rest is... It’s personal,” Noah muttered. “It goes beyond just business.”

He stood and started pacing around the room. There was a deep frown line furrowing his brow, and it was clear he was really struggling with what to say. Whatever was next in the story seemed even harder for him to talk about, so I waited silently to see if he would explain.

"Okay.” He held up his hands in defeat. “I’ve told you this much, I might as well tell you the rest.” He finally stopped pacing and sank back onto the bed across from me.

“I don’t really know how to tell you this. But my father was having an affair with Matthew’s sister, Georgina.”

My eyes went wide, and I stared at him for several long seconds as I tried to compute what he’d just said. I definitely hadn’t been expecting him to say that and didn’t know how to respond.

“My aunt?” I whispered the words almost to myself.

Noah nodded at the shock he saw in my gaze. “I still don’t believe it myself some days. It was so unlike my dad, and with everything that’s happened between our families... Well, at the time it was unthinkable to imagine a LaFleur and a Hastings getting mixed up like that.”

“Are you sure then?” I asked. “That they were having an affair?”

"I’m sure.” His eyes were fixed on the ground. “They were together in one of our labs one night.” His voice had gone so quiet I could barely hear him as he breathed the words, and my heart ached for him as he spoke.

“There was a fire. Some faulty wiring. With all the chemicals in there, the place went up in seconds. Neither of them survived.”

My body went cold. All I wanted was to go to him and hold him. I could see how much he was struggling to recount the story, and I felt awful for pushing him to explain. It was no wonder Noah had been avoiding telling me what happened.

“God, Noah, I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s hardly your fault,” he said. “It was an accident. But I think a part of me will always wish that my father had never gotten caught up with a LaFleur. That maybe he wouldn’t have been at the lab so late that night. That maybe he’d still be alive...”

I couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like for Noah to bear that weight on his shoulders. It made sense he couldn’t stand my father’s family. That his grandfather wanted him away from me and Matthew.

We both sat in silence, the enormity of his confession hanging over us. Matthew had said my aunt died before her time, but I’d had no idea of the circumstances surrounding it. It was tragic and heartbreaking for both Noah and my father. Perhaps this was why Matthew hated the Hastings so much too? Why he had warned me away from Noah in the first place.

“You can’t tell anyone what I’ve told you tonight,” Noah said, finally looking my way. “About my father and your aunt, about the financial trouble our company is in. No one knows any of it. Not even Cress.”

“They really don’t know?” Things had to be pretty bad if Noah hadn’t even told his cousin his family was in financial trouble. And I had to wonder how no one knew about his dad and my aunt. Affairs were secretive in nature, but once it had been discovered, I imagined it would have been hard to keep quiet.

“If people knew about the state of the company, it could ruin us completely,” he said. “And the affair? My grandfather managed to keep it secret to protect my father’s legacy. I don’t want him to be remembered for that.”

“No, of course,” I said. “I won’t tell anyone. Not even Cress.”

He released a breath and relaxed a little. “I know it’s a lot to ask, given everything, but my grandfather would freak if anyone found out.”

“I won’t say a word,” I reassured him.

“Thank you.”

We sat there staring silently at one another as I allowed everything he'd told me to sink in. There was a lot to digest, but it meant so much to me that Noah had trusted me enough to share the truth.

"Thank you for telling me," I finally said. "I'm surprised you can even stand to be in the same room as me after all that's happened."

"You're not the problem," Noah said. "You never were. I'd look past all that in a heartbeat for you, but..."

"Your grandfather," I murmured.

"My grandfather." He nodded. "He didn't give me any choice. If I stayed with you, he'd see it as the worst betrayal, and…" His voice trailed off, but I knew what he was going to say.

"You can't lose him too, I get it." Neither of Noah's parents were around anymore, and his grandfather was all he had. If being with Noah meant losing my mom, I would have made the same choice too. "It doesn't make it any easier though."

"No." He shared a sad smile with me. "How do you feel? Now that you know."

"It's a lot to take in," I said. "I can't believe our families have been through so much. I know we can't change the past, but I just wish there was a way we could mend the pain and hurt we've caused each other."

Noah's brow furrowed as he looked at me. "That's impossible."

"But what about your dad and my aunt? If they were together, it means they put the rivalry and the fighting and the history aside. How did that happen if it's impossible? How did *we* happen?"

Noah's frown deepened, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He probably thought I was silly for wishing our families could change. They had hated each other since before either of us were born, and hostility like that wasn't easily forgotten.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced at it to see a text from Cress asking how I was. The play was over, and she wanted to know if I needed her to pick anything up on their way back to the hotel.

I sent her a quick text back saying I was fine and didn't need anything before I lifted my eyes to Noah.

"Everyone's coming back now," I said. "You should probably leave. If a teacher catches you in here, we'll both get in trouble."

"I'm not leaving you when you're sick."

“I’m okay,” I quickly replied. “I’m feeling much better. I just need to try and get some sleep.”

He nodded and started to stand. “If you’re sure…”

“I am. Thanks for looking after me.”

“It was no problem.”

“And thanks for talking to me. I know it can’t have been easy.” Having everything out in the open felt cathartic. But it also felt like the end of something. Now I knew the truth about why he had to break up with me, what more was there left for us to say? Any slim hope I’d retained that maybe this was all some big misunderstanding had been thoroughly crushed.

He came to the bed and lightly brushed a hand over my hair. The gesture was gentle and surprisingly intimate. He seemed to realize that at the same time as me because he quickly stole his hand away. “Text me if you need me, and I’ll be here.”

“I know.”

He smiled down at me, and it struck something deep in my soul. Noah and I might not be together, but I felt like he would always be there for me despite that.

“How lucky am I to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard,” he whispered before he turned and walked from the room.

It was only once the door closed behind him that I realized he’d quoted me *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Our class went to The Met the following morning. I probably should have stayed in my hotel room and continued to rest, but I was far too stubborn and refused to let a slight stomach bug keep me down. I was in New York City, and the last thing I wanted was to let a little food poisoning hold me back.

"It turns out you weren't the only one who got sick from the food last night," Wes said as we walked through the museum together. Mr. Wagner had just told us we could take some free time to explore before meeting back at the entrance in an hour. Cress and Anna had practically sprinted off in excitement. There was a special Alexander McQueen exhibit showing, and they felt like an hour wasn't nearly long enough to take it in. I'd taken one look at their eager faces and told them to run along without me. I was still far too weak to be rushing anywhere and didn't want them to miss out.

"Oh no, really?" I asked.

"Sawyer was up all night sick," he said. "He's still at the hotel recovering now. I heard a few others using the same excuse to stay back too."

"That's not good."

He shook his head in agreement. "So, I'm impressed you're here. You should probably be tucked up in bed as well."

"And waste another second of this trip in my room? I don't think so."

As much as I was enjoying The Met, my mind kept drifting back to my conversation with Noah last night. I'd struggled to sleep after he left and

spent way too many hours thinking over everything he had said about the history between our families. Those thoughts continued to plague me today.

Noah had given me answers, yes, but I wasn't sure if I had the full story yet. It felt like there had to be more to it. Surely something had happened to start this whole feud. Considering the hatred and anger between our families, my grandfather's jealously alone just didn't seem like enough.

Matthew's role in the whole thing was also playing on my mind. Why was he continuing his father's vendetta? Was he really the villain Noah made him out to be? I was curious to hear what Matthew had to say, and I wanted to get his side of the story before I decided how to feel about it all.

I let out a sigh as I gazed up at one of the paintings we were passing. The artwork was a beautiful depiction of a ballet class. The painter had really captured the movement of the dancing ballerinas and the controlled chaos of the other girls in the class looking on. It was an impressive piece of work, but just like the rest of our tour of The Met, I wasn't really appreciating it. My head was somewhere else, and this museum just wasn't where I wanted to be right now.

"What's up?" Wes asked. "Are you not feeling well?"

"No, it's not that," I murmured. "I was just thinking about my dad."

"Do you still want to go to his office?"

"Yeah, I'd like to," I admitted. "But I don't know when I'll have time. I'll probably have to wait until after the school trip is over, but then Cress, Anna, and Sawyer are going to have all sorts of stuff planned. I don't want to bail on them." It was hard not to sound disappointed at the idea I might not get the chance to find and talk to my father. After everything Noah had revealed last night, I didn't want to wait until Matthew visited Weybridge to question him.

"Well, we could just sneak off now..." Wes gave me a cheeky smile, and his eyes danced with mischief.

I glanced around nervously, checking there weren't any teachers nearby. When I saw the coast was clear, I whispered, "Won't we get in trouble?"

Wes shrugged. "Your father's building isn't far from here, and it's not like the teachers are keeping close tabs on us."

He looked excited by the prospect of sneaking off, and I slowly started to share his smile. "Okay, but if we get caught, I'm telling them it was your idea."

“Excellent.” He grabbed me by the hand and started to guide me from the museum. We didn’t bump into any teachers as we wound our way back through the building, and when we neared the entrance, Mr. Wagner was in such a deep conversation with one of the museum staff that he didn’t notice us as we passed.

As we stepped outside, I started to laugh. I had no idea how we hadn’t been caught. We’d walked right by Mr. Wagner, and he hadn’t even glanced our way.

Wes didn’t seem nearly as surprised. “I had Mr. Wagner for English last year,” he said. “The guy loves nothing more than to hear himself speak. That poor museum curator was such a captive audience I doubt Mr. Wagner would have noticed if the building was on fire.”

We hurried down the iconic steps in front of the building, and Wes hailed a taxi. He gave the guy directions, and we took off from the curb, our escape complete.

“How do you know where my dad’s office is anyway?” I asked as I stared out the window at the buildings flashing past.

“My father has a hotel across the road,” Wes said. “And The LaFleur Corp is kind of hard to miss.”

I shot him a questioning look, but he simply smiled in response.

When the cab started to slow, Wes nodded to my window and pointed upward. Curious, I peered out, and as I gazed into the sky, I saw LaFleur printed in bold letters across the top of the building.

“You can see it from practically every high-rise in the city,” Wes explained.

“Subtle,” I joked, still staring in awe at the building and my father’s name proudly displayed as part of the New York skyline. Just when I thought I was starting to understand just how rich and successful he was, I realized there was so much I still didn’t know about him.

Wes paid the cab driver, and we got out of the car. I drew in a deep breath as I looked up at my father’s building once more. I felt so small and insignificant standing in front of it, and I had to tilt my head back to look to the top. His wealth seemed so vast to me. The differences between us were so impossibly huge.

“So, what are you going to say to your dad?”

I tore my gaze from the building to look at Wes. I’d thought about what I was going to ask my father many times since the White Ball a few weeks

ago. After speaking to Noah last night, I had even more questions. Wes didn't know I'd spoken to Noah, and I couldn't give him details because I'd made a promise I wouldn't tell a soul.

"You know how Noah took me home from the theater last night?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I finally got him to tell me the history of this bitterness between our families." I felt a sudden chill go down my back, and I wrapped my arms around me as I remembered what it had been like to hear Noah's story.

"Shit, really? What did he say?"

"It was a long story," I said, trying to avoid explaining any further. "I just want to ask Matthew for his side of things. I'm sure Noah wasn't trying to be biased, but it's his family so how could he not be?"

"Yeah," Wes agreed. "I guess it would be impossible to be totally impartial."

I let out a sigh and glanced up at Matthew's building again. A wave of nerves rocked through me. What if my father wouldn't see me? Or what if I upset him by bringing up his sister? I didn't want to overstep.

"Do you need backup?" Wes asked "I can wait out front if you like? Or I'm happy to come with you. I..."

His voice trailed off, and I glanced at him. There was a surprised look in his eyes and he was focused on something behind me. I turned to follow his gaze, and I drew in a sharp breath as I saw what had caught Wes's attention. Noah had just walked out of my father's building and onto the sidewalk.

"What's he doing here?" Wes voiced his confusion before I could.

"I don't know." I replied, keeping my eyes locked on Noah.

I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing, but there he was. Through the crowds of people streaming past the building, I was definitely looking at Noah standing at the entrance

He didn't notice us, which wasn't all that surprising given how many people were on the street. He paused briefly as he took out his phone and checked something on the screen before tucking it into his pocket. He took a deep breath and glanced up at the building towering above him. A frown crossed his brow, but it disappeared again as he stepped to the edge of the sidewalk and hailed a cab.

I was still in a state of shock as I watched him climb into the car, and by the time I was able to think clearly again, he was already driving off down

the road. Noah had visited my father's building. Was he there for the same reason as me—to visit my father?

I reconsidered our conversation from last night. Noah had given no indication he had any desire to talk with my father. In his eyes, my father was the villain. Even worse than my grandfather. After I had suggested the unlikely idea of one day reconciling the differences between our families, he had balked and said it was impossible. My stomach dipped unpleasantly. If Noah had been in this building, it wasn't for anything good.

I slowly turned to face Wes. "You saw him too, right? Noah was coming out of the building?"

"Yeah, it was him," Wes nodded. "He wasn't at The Met earlier, but I just assumed he was out sick like everyone else who is MIA this morning."

"So, he bailed on The Met to come to my dad's office? Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he was asking your dad for your hand in marriage?" Wes suggested.

I shook my head. I wasn't in the mood to joke about this. "Seriously though, why would Noah come see my dad? They're supposed to be worst enemies..."

"Maybe he wants to bury the hatchet?"

"That's impossible." I echoed Noah's words. "You should have seen the way he spoke about my family last night, especially my father. There's no burying the hatchet between them." I was more confident of that than ever before after speaking to Noah last night and seeing the pain in his eyes when he'd recounted what had happened with my aunt and his dad. Though I didn't repeat that to Wes. "Plus, his grandfather would probably disown him for being within a few hundred feet of this building let alone setting up a meeting to let bygones be bygones. Noah would never go against him."

Wes shrugged. "It could also be a coincidence," he suggested. "There are a few restaurants and some other offices in this building. I guess you'll have to ask Noah or your dad if you want to find out."

"Yeah, I guess."

I jumped as my phone started ringing, and I pulled it from my back pocket. I hadn't realized quite how on edge I was, but my heart rate kicked up another notch when I saw my dad's number lighting up the screen. I flipped the phone around to show Wes.

"This just keeps getting weirder," I said.

“Are you going to answer?”

I nodded and lifted the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hello, Isobel,” my father said pleasantly, his deep, English accent making my name sound far posher than it was.

“Hi, Matthew. What’s up?” I glanced up at the building as I spoke, wondering if he somehow knew I was out front. Or if perhaps his call had something to do with Noah?

“I know you’re in town this week, and I’ve managed to shuffle my schedule around. I was hoping we could have dinner tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

I was outside his building right now, but I supposed I could wait until this evening to talk to him. If I went storming into his office, he might not be as receptive to answering my questions. I might be better off letting him do this on his terms.

“Sure, that would be great.”

“Perfect. Text me the address for where you’re staying, and I’ll have a car pick you up and bring you to my apartment tonight.”

“Okay.”

“I’m just between meetings, so I must rush off, but I look forward to seeing you tonight.”

“I’ll see you then,” I said.

He hung up the phone, and I blew out a breath. “Looks like operation break into my father’s office and accost him is off. He wants to have dinner with me tonight.”

“That’s great.” Wes smiled. “And I don’t think it’s considered breaking in if you’re his daughter. I’m sure he would have loved to see you.”

“Maybe.” That was still something I didn’t feel all that confident of though. I hadn’t had a proper conversation with him since the ball, and I was quite sure our next discussion wasn’t going to be particularly pleasant. Matthew certainly seemed reluctant to talk about his history with the Hastings, and after hearing Noah’s side of things I could see why.

I was still in a state of shock over everything Noah had revealed. He had painted Matthew as the bad guy, but I still wasn’t sure what to believe. I dreaded to think what further twists Matthew might have to add to the tale.

Either way, this dinner was no longer simply about the rift with the Hastings, it was also about what kind of person my father was. I wanted the

truth, but how was I going to feel once I finally had it? And what if Noah was right? What if Matthew was the villain in all of this?

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We started making our way back to the museum but not before Wes dragged me to his favorite hot dog stand which was just down the street. He told me it was the best in the city, but I was still feeling too fragile so I watched as he devoured his food.

Once he was done, we jumped in a cab and hurried back to The Met. Our little excursion hadn't taken as long as I'd expected, so we got back in good time. We easily snuck back through the front entrance while Mr. Wagner was talking to another unlucky staff member and returned to wandering the galleries.

While our mission to my father's office hadn't quite turned out as planned, I knew I'd have a chance to get the information I wanted at dinner tonight. I'd also got to spend time hanging out with Wes, which was never a bad thing. Though I was still at a loss as to why Noah was at my father's building.

When it was time to leave the museum, we took the short walk back through Central Park to the hotel. Cress and Anna chatted the whole way about the Alexander McQueen exhibit, while I smiled and nodded as enthusiastically as I could.

I didn't see Noah again until we got back to the hotel. It was late in the afternoon, and all the students and teachers were mingling in the lobby, collecting their luggage and preparing to get back on the bus to Weybridge. I hadn't seen Noah at The Met or on the walk back, so he must have skipped the visit completely.

Maybe Wes was right, and Noah had told the teachers he was too sick to go to the museum. Instead of resting in his room though, he was visiting my father's office. I was dying to pull him aside and ask him what he'd been doing there, but there were too many people around, and I wasn't sure how to ask him without it sounding like we'd been following him. It would be especially embarrassing if I questioned him and he had a simpler reason for why he was there, as Wes suggested. So, I left it, hoping I could come up with an appropriate way to ask him about it at another time.

Cress, Anna, and I said our goodbyes to everyone getting on the bus back to Weybridge before we took a cab to Cress's house. The journey only took a few minutes before the cab stopped in front of a beautiful old brownstone townhouse with tall arched windows that looked out onto the street. It was in a pretty neighborhood with gorgeous tall trees that had truly embraced the golden hues of autumn. Leaves softly fluttered down as we got out of the car, and the sidewalk was covered in a carpet of reds and yellows that crunched pleasantly underfoot as we walked to the front door.

Cress had a big smile on her face as she led us up the front steps. She looked so happy to be home, and I felt a hint of envy. I would have given anything to be walking through the front door of my apartment in Rapid Bay.

I was surprised as I entered the townhouse. I wasn't sure exactly what I expected the interior to look like, but it certainly wasn't something so bohemian. The tiles were all patterned, giving off a Moroccan feel, and large wrought iron lanterns hung from the ceiling dispersing shards of light in pretty patterns. The home was colorful and bright, and the furnishings were completely eclectic. I'd never seen a place quite like it before.

"My parents aren't home," Cress said, as she threw her keys down on the entrance table. "I think they're in Istanbul this weekend."

"They're not here?" I felt sure my mom wouldn't be comfortable with me staying here if she knew there were no adults looking after us. She probably wouldn't force me to head back to school or anything, but I imagined she'd be up all night worrying if she knew.

Cress must have sensed my concern because she waved a hand, dismissing it. "Our housekeeper lives here, so you don't have to worry, we're not *totally* unsupervised."

That didn't make me feel much better, but I guessed that one adult on the premises was better than none. It was probably best I didn't let my mom

know all the same. There was no need to freak her out unnecessarily. We were all capable of looking after ourselves.

Cress gave us a tour, starting with the courtyard out back where she introduced us to two massive koi fish she'd named Crabbe and Goyle—because apparently she didn't like fish and she thought they looked a little thuggish. She then quickly flitted past the massive kitchen that housed no less than three ovens, perfect for the many parties her parents apparently threw when they were in town. I barely got a look at the living and dining rooms as Cress only gave them a passing wave as she headed for the stairs.

The place was enormous. I'd spent most of my time in New York gawking at sparkling glass skyscrapers and towering brick apartment buildings. I'd never really imagined the city had such beautiful family homes. I lost count of the number of rooms we passed as we climbed up the floors, and it was only steps from the park. It must have cost a fortune. Cress was so down to earth I often forgot she came from just as much wealth as everyone else at Weybridge Academy.

When we finally reached the top of the house, Cress waved us into her bedroom. It was completely different from the rest of the home with none of the bold and unconventional furnishings I'd seen in the other rooms. Her walls were painted a subtle shade of pink and plastered in posters of bands and pictures of models plucked from fashion magazines. She had fairy lights twined around the posts of her bed and LED strips along the edges of her ceiling. It was much more suited to Cress than the rest of the place.

Cress put her bag down on her bed and slowly picked up the stuffed bear sitting in the center of the pillows. She frowned as she glanced down at it.

"That's cute," I said.

"My ex gave it to me," she replied, still considering the bear. "I should probably get rid of it." She walked over to her desk and dumped the bear in the trash can.

"Brutal." Anna chuckled.

"What?" Cress shrugged. "It's about time I put him in the past. Fluffy toys and all."

It was time I did the same with Noah. Any lingering hope I might have had that the rift between our families was something that could be repaired had been stamped out when I spoke to him last night. I hoped my conversation with Matthew at dinner would only help me accept that fact.

“Speaking of time, you should probably get ready for dinner with your dad,” Cress said as she glanced at her watch.

I checked the time on my phone and was surprised to find she was right. The car would be picking me up here in just twenty minutes.

“I was going to wear this,” I said, gesturing at the clothes I’d been in all day. “It’s just dinner at his place.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s fine then,” Cress replied.

“I might run a brush through my hair though,” I said. “And maybe clean my teeth.” Even now, my mouth still felt gross from being sick at the theater.

Cress gestured toward her door. “There’s a bathroom across the hall.” I nodded and gathered my things to freshen up. It was hard to concentrate on simple things like brushing my teeth when all I could think about was the difficult conversation I had ahead with my father. It hadn’t been easy talking it through with Noah last night, and I felt sure it would be just as hard to hear my dad’s side of the story, especially when it came to my aunt. At least I could be thankful I wasn’t going into it completely clueless.

When I was done in the bathroom, I came back to Cress’s room and found both girls on her bed.

“What are you guys going to do tonight?” I asked.

“The twins want to go for sushi,” Anna said.

My eyes widened with surprise. “Sawyer wants to go for sushi? Didn’t he have food poisoning too?”

“No one ever said he was smart.” Anna shrugged.

“The place is just around the corner from here though,” Cress explained. “Give me a call when you’re on your way back, and depending on the time, you can meet us at the restaurant, or we can come back home.”

“Sounds good.”

My phone buzzed, and when I checked the screen, I saw a message letting me know the car had arrived to pick me up.

“That’s my ride.”

“We’ll walk you out,” Cress said, jumping from the bed as Anna slowly pushed herself up to follow suit.

We made our way down from the top of the house, descending the many flights of stairs before walking out the front door.

At the bottom of the steps, I could see a large black vehicle with darkened windows waiting by the curb. One of the back doors opened and

out stepped my father.

“Matthew?”

He smiled brightly in response. I knew he was sending a car for me, but I didn’t expect him to be in it.

“Hello, Isobel,” he replied as he climbed the steps toward me. When he reached the top, I wasn’t sure what to do. We weren’t exactly at the stage in our father-daughter relationship where we hugged in greeting. Instead, we both stood waiting awkwardly.

“I thought I’d be meeting you at your place,” I said.

“I managed to get off work a little early so I could come meet you.

“Oh.” My cheeks flushed, but I didn’t know why. It was nice that he’d gone to the effort, but it wasn’t that big a deal. For some reason though, I felt like it was.

“These are my friends, Cress and Anna,” I said, hoping to divert his attention away from me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both.” Matthew smiled at them in turn.

“You too, Mr. LaFleur,” Anna and Cress responded with polite smiles.

“Please, call me Matthew. How has your trip been so far? Have you enjoyed it?”

“It’s been good,” I replied.

“Isobel got food poisoning,” Anna interrupted.

I shot her a glare.

Matthew faced me. “Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?”

“No, I don’t need a doctor,” I responded quickly. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain.” I shot Anna another scowl, but she just shrugged like she didn’t see the problem. I didn’t want Matthew babying me, and I definitely didn’t want to see a doctor. I had enough on my plate tonight without my father worrying about me being sick.

“We should probably get going,” I said before Anna could add anything else.

“Of course.” He stood to the side and gestured for me to go ahead of him, but I raised a hand. “Just give me one second.”

He nodded his understanding. “I’ll wait by the car. It was lovely to meet you girls.” He smiled at Cress and Anna.

“You too, Mr. LaFleur” they chimed in response.

I hovered by my friends as I watched him walk down the steps and over to the waiting SUV.

“Okay, wish me luck,” I said to the girls.

“Good luck,” Cress replied. “You won’t need it though. It’s just your dad.”

“Your superhot dad,” Anna added with a whisper. “Why didn’t you tell us he was so dreamy?”

I thumped her in the arm. *Hard*. “You did not just say that.”

“What? He is.”

I shook my head and did my best to ignore her. I did not want to think about whether my father was good-looking, let alone discuss it with my friends.

“Enjoy the sushi,” I called out as I jogged down the steps. “I’ll let you know when I’m on my way back.”

When I reached the car, Matthew was waiting by an open door, and he stood back to let me in. I gave my friends a brief wave before he closed the door behind me. The driver in the front seat nodded at me in the rearview mirror.

Matthew slid into the seat beside me, and once his seat belt was fastened, the car pulled away from the curb. My fingers fidgeted at the hem of my sweater as I considered launching into one of the many questions I had for my father. I wasn’t sure the car was the right place to ask him, especially with his driver in the front seat, but it was hard to wait when it was all I could think about. I’d been wanting answers for weeks.

“I’m sorry to hear you’ve been unwell. Are you truly feeling better?” Matthew asked.

He sounded so concerned, and I found myself holding back a smile. Noah was convinced my father was a terrible person, and maybe I would have agreed when I’d first met the man. He hadn’t given me the best first impression. But the more I got to know him, the harder I found it to believe that was possible. Maybe I was being naïve. Maybe when I finally got a chance to question him, I wouldn’t like what I discovered.

“I’m still a bit queasy,” I replied. “But I’m not going to be sick or anything.”

“Do you feel up to having dinner with me? I can drop you back if you’d rather rest.”

“No!” I protested the idea a little too forcefully. “No, I’m okay. I promise.”

He slowly nodded. “But if you start to take a turn for the worse, just let me know.”

“I will.” I highly doubted I would. At least, not before I’d had a chance to talk with him properly.

The traffic was bad as we drove to Matthew’s place, and the constant sound of horns and the flashes of brake lights surrounded us. We moved at such a crawling pace I wondered if it might be quicker to walk. I couldn’t imagine Matthew walking anywhere though, especially not in the expensive suit and strikingly shiny shoes he wore.

His place wasn’t far from Cress’s though, and despite the traffic, the car pulled over not long after we’d set out.

“Here we are,” Matthew said as the driver got out of the car and came to open my door. I stepped from the car and craned my neck back to look at the building that reached impossibly high into the sky above us. Matthew lived here? I shouldn’t have been surprised considering the gorgeous home he’d purchased in Weybridge and the skyscraper that housed the headquarters for his business.

I followed him in through the revolving doors at the front of the building and gasped as I got my first look at the foyer of Matthew’s New York home. The place was incredibly lavish with white marble coating almost every surface and shiny gold finishings on all the doors and light fittings. It was opulent but also light and bright—surprisingly so, considering we were on the ground floor of a high-rise building.

“Good evening, Mr. LaFleur, Miss Grace.” An older man in a deep-green suit smiled at us from behind a desk as we entered the foyer. He came around to greet us as we approached.

“Good evening, Edward,” Matthew replied. “Have you had a good day?”

“It was very good, thank you, sir. And yourself?”

“Hectic,” Matthew admitted with a chagrinned smile.

“I would expect nothing less,” Edward replied, smiling back. He walked beside us to the elevator as he spoke.

“Did you catch the game this afternoon?” Matthew asked.

Edward blanched. “Oh yes, it was terrible.”

Matthew’s eyes widened a fraction with surprise. “Worse than last week?”

“Much worse.”

“So I shouldn’t bother watching the highlights?”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t recommend it, sir.”

“Okay.” My father laughed and shook his head. “Thanks for the warning.”

When we reached the elevator, Edward pressed the button for us. The doors spread wide immediately, and he held them open as he gestured for us to walk inside.

“Will you be needing anything this evening, sir?” he asked.

“No, nothing tonight. Thank you, Edward.”

“Have a lovely evening,” the man replied, pressing the button for the top floor.

Once the doors were closed, I turned to my father. “He was nice.”

“Yes, Edward’s great,” my father agreed. “He certainly makes this place feel a little more like home. It’s nice to have someone around who I can talk football with. We follow the same team although I think we’re both regretting that choice at the moment. They aren’t doing very well this year.”

“Are you talking about soccer?” I asked. “You like soccer?”

“Well, I call it football, but yes. I don’t get much time to watch the games these days, but Edward keeps me up to date.”

“Huh.” I frowned and faced the elevator doors once more. Every time I thought I had Matthew pegged, he said something or acted in a way that shifted my perception of him. I tried to picture him sitting down with a beer and watching a soccer match, but I just couldn’t visualize it.

I was still trying to wrap my mind around the small but altering fact when the doors opened. I expected to see a hallway in front of me, lined with doors to various apartments. Instead, I was greeted by the entrance to an entire apartment. Matthew’s home wasn’t just on the top floor. It *was* the top floor. The space before us was a vast open-plan space with huge floor-to-ceiling windows. The view beyond truly caught my attention. I could see all of New York from here. It was breathtaking.

“Good evening, sir, Miss Isobel,” Caldwell said as we stepped from the elevator and into the apartment. I’d been so busy admiring the view, I hadn’t noticed he was there even though he was standing right by the elevator.

“Caldwell,” my father replied. “Are there any messages for me?”

“Nothing urgent,” Caldwell said. “Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. I passed on your instructions regarding Miss Isobel to Jacques.”

I wondered who Jacques was and what the instructions could be, but Matthew was already dismissing Caldwell before I got a chance to ask.

“Thank you,” Matthew said. “That will be all for now.”

Caldwell stepped away, and Matthew gestured for me to follow him into the apartment. “I only bought the place recently,” he said, as we moved through the unnecessarily large entrance. “I couldn’t resist it when I saw the view.”

“I can see why,” I whispered. It was incredible, but I couldn’t begin to imagine how much the view alone cost.

“Would you like to see the place before we eat?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Matthew’s tour was much more thorough than Cress’s had been. He showed me around the bottom level first, which included the living room, dining area, and kitchen. There was music coming from the kitchen as we approached, and Matthew opened the door to reveal a man cutting vegetables behind a long island bench in the center of the room.

Matthew gave him a smile. “Isobel, this is our chef, Jacques” he said. “He’s worked for me for almost ten years now and makes the most incredible desserts you’ll ever have the pleasure of eating.”

Jacques lifted his eyes and nodded at Matthew before turning to me. I raised a hand to wave, and the chef winked in response before focusing back on the food he was preparing.

Matthew backed from the room, and I got the impression he didn’t want to bother the chef too much while he was working. As we continued the tour, he pointed at another door that led to his study but then directed me up the stairs and showed me multiple bedrooms, a library, what looked like another living room, and another study as well as a room totally devoted to a home theater.

I’d lost count of how many bathrooms he’d pointed out, and I was surprised to learn there was a third floor in the apartment, which consisted of two bedrooms separated by a long hallway. His bedroom was to the left, but he directed me to the room on the right.

“This room is yours,” he said. His voice quaked a little as he spoke like he was nervous. “You’re welcome to stay here whenever you’re in the city.

I'm hoping you'll be able to visit again soon."

I nodded because the words stuck in my throat. Matthew had organized a room for me here too? I'd been so intent on grilling Matthew about the Hastings family tonight, but as I stood there, I realized this dinner was about so much more than that. I was flooded by thoughts of our conversation at the ball and his admission to me about how much he wanted me in his life. I was really beginning to see that he meant it.

This was just a bedroom, and Matthew clearly had more of them then he knew what to do with, but it meant more to me than he knew.

As he opened the door to show me the room, I wondered if I should backtrack on my previous thought. It wasn't just a bedroom. It was practically its own apartment within the apartment. I had a whole lounge area to myself that was decked out with soft, plush couches and a fireplace against one wall. The bedroom itself was just as gorgeous as the rest of the apartment with sheer curtains draped over the long windows and a bed so large it could have fit three of me.

There was a huge en suite bathroom and a closet filled with clothing for me. The room even had its own balcony. Not that I had any intention of going out there. We were far too high up for my liking.

Just like it had been downstairs, the view outside the window was impossible to ignore. I could see the endless expanse of Central Park below me and the jagged New York skyline surrounding it. I could even see my father's surname lit up on the top of his building, not far from here. I probably could have sat there staring at the view forever. It was hard not to be a little overwhelmed by it all.

I knew Matthew was wealthy, but this was beyond my wildest dreams. A familiar feeling that I'd been experiencing ever since I got to Weybridge came washing over me. I didn't belong here. I'd slowly become accustomed to living at school, but this was a whole other level of extravagance.

"Are you ready for dinner?" Matthew asked.

I'd been standing in silence staring out at the view for slightly too long, and I somehow tore my gaze from it to turn to him. His lips were curved in a half smile like he understood just how easily the view of New York City could suck you in. I gave him a nod, but as I went to follow him, I had to wonder how ready I really was.

This was my chance to hear his side of the story. It was finally time to uncover the reason why the LaFleurs hated the Hastings family so much.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The dining room was just as lavish as the rest of the apartment with a long table that ran alongside one of the huge windows overlooking the city. At the far end of the room, I could also see an outdoor terrace with a swimming pool. It was emitting a warm blue glow as lights shone up from below the surface of the water.

The room felt too big and too grand for a father-daughter dinner. It felt so formal and nothing like my meals back home with my mom. We always sat on stools at the kitchen counter whenever we ate. We didn't have a proper dining table, and I found I was somewhat grateful for that. Matthew's setup didn't feel comforting or homely at all.

We took a seat at the massive table, and waitstaff arrived moments later. I hadn't seen them in the kitchen, so I had to wonder if there were other rooms I'd missed on the tour. It wouldn't have surprised me.

"I know you're not feeling well, so I had Jacques prepare something light to start with," Matthew said. "If you'd like something else, I can have him put it together—"

"This is perfect," I said, interrupting Matthew as a bowl of chicken soup was placed before me along with a freshly baked but plain bread roll. "I'm not sure I could handle much more than this."

He smiled at me before he started on his own bowl of soup. I felt bad he was being subjected to the same bland food as me, but I was glad he hadn't had his staff go to extra effort to accommodate two different meals for us.

I took a small mouthful of the soup and was immediately surprised by how something so basic could taste so good. It made me wish I were feeling

better so I could try more of Jacques's cooking. If he could make chicken soup taste this good, I couldn't begin to imagine what else he was capable of.

I lowered my spoon after taking several mouthfuls and considered my father. I knew I needed to ask him about Noah's family, but I wasn't sure where to begin. I also wanted to find out what Noah was doing at his office today, but I didn't know how to bring that up without admitting I'd gone there to ambush him.

"How has school been?" Matthew asked, breaking the silence between us before I had a chance to broach any of the topics on my mind.

"It was fine. Nothing too exciting going on really."

"Have you had a chance to take your car for a spin yet?"

"Uh…" My cheeks reddened as I remembered what a disaster my attempt to drive it had been. "Once. It didn't go well. I'm not a very good driver."

"Your mother said you were still getting comfortable on the road."

I was surprised he'd spoken to my mom about it. Perhaps he'd wanted to get her approval before getting me the car. If that was the case, I'd be even more surprised she didn't tell my father the car was unnecessary. Mom accepted charity even less easily than me.

"That sounds like she was trying to put it nicely," I said. "I'm a terrible driver. I just get so nervous."

He gave me a conciliatory smile. "Would it help if I arranged a driving instructor for you?"

I hesitated.

"They might be able to help you gain a little confidence?"

After my disastrous drive with Anna, I'd been determined not to get behind the wheel again, but perhaps Matthew was right and with an instructor I could build the confidence I needed. "Uh, yeah, that might be a good idea," I agreed. I couldn't be worse than my experience with Anna.

"Okay, I'll have Caldwell set it up."

"Thanks." I smiled.

"Also, Caldwell tells me you haven't used the credit card I got for you."

"Oh, uh, I haven't really needed to yet. They have everything I need at school." I'd completely forgotten I even had the credit card. I felt uncomfortable at the idea of using Matthew's money. It was bad enough he'd paid for my schooling and given me a car.

“Well, it’s there to be used.”

“Like I said, I don’t really need anything.”

He chuckled under his breath. “You must be the first teenager that has to be encouraged to use their parent’s credit card,” he said.

I shrugged. The whole thing made me uneasy. I didn’t like spending money unnecessarily, especially his, and I had enough money saved in tips from working at my mom’s café to get me by.

He took a sip of his drink before he continued. “I hear you’re doing well in all of your classes.”

I guessed that meant he’d been checking up on me again. “Yeah, I’m doing okay. I like schoolwork and kind of throw myself into it.” Especially when I was trying not to think about a certain boy who’d broken up with me. Not that I was going to admit that to Matthew.

“I was the same at your age,” he admitted. “I always had my nose in a book.”

“Really?”

He nodded. It wasn’t surprising given what a successful businessman he seemed to be. But it felt nice to know we shared that in common.

“Mom never really understood it,” I said. “She’s always been better at hands-on learning rather than book learning.”

Matthew chuckled. “Candice was the same back when we dated. You could show her how to do something once, and she’d be a master in minutes, but there was no way you could get her to learn it out of a book.”

It was strange hearing Matthew talk about my mom. My whole life, I’d never heard details of their relationship. I had only ever focused on the fact he’d left and wasn’t around. “Mom never really told me much about the two of you dating.”

The lightness in Matthew’s eyes dimmed somewhat at my words. “I don’t blame her. She must have hated me, thinking I’d abandoned the both of you.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it was that. I get the feeling she never talked about you because she found it too hard.”

“I find it hard to talk about too. It took me a long time to get over your mother,” he murmured. “To this day, I haven’t met someone as special as her. I can’t tell you how many sleepless nights I’ve experienced since finding out I could have had the both of you in my life all this time.”

I slowly stirred my spoon around the bowl as I summoned the courage to ask my next question. With a deep breath, I blurted it out. “What would you have done if you’d got my mom’s letter about me?”

My stomach twisted with nerves, and I couldn’t look him in the eyes as I waited for his reply. Matthew reached across the table and took my hand in his. Slowly, I peered up at him.

“I would have done whatever it took to keep you both in my life,” he said. “I had a difficult relationship with my father, but I will never forgive him for not telling me about you. I regret that we’ve missed the last seventeen years together more than anything.”

Matthew really wanted me in his life. He truly wanted me. And I could see it now so clearly in his eyes. I gave him a smile as he squeezed my hand. When he released it, he coughed and glanced away, like he was struggling to keep his feelings at bay too. He turned his attention to his food, and I took this as my cue to eat something myself. It was hard sharing emotions with someone when you were still only on the precipice of getting to know one another.

The soup Matthew’s chef had prepared was amazing, but I barely seemed to taste it anymore. It was hard to focus on eating when your long-lost father had just told you how much he wanted you in his life.

“I suppose you would like to hear about what happened with the Hastings family,” Matthew said.

My eyes lifted in one swift movement to meet his. After everything Matthew had just admitted, I didn’t want to put a dampener on our dinner by turning the conversation to a topic that seemed so fraught with pain and anger. I also didn’t want to hear what he had to say if it was going to support Noah’s claim that Matthew was a bad person. The thought made me a little queasy. It felt like we were finally bonding, and I didn’t want to ruin that.

I wasn’t sure when I’d have another opportunity to talk with him about this though. And if my father truly had a malicious side, it was better I know that now. I had Noah’s side of the story, but I needed my father’s too. It was time I had the whole truth.

I slowly nodded. “I just feel like I’m stuck in the middle of something I don’t fully understand. You seem to hate them just as much as they hate you. And me... They hate me too just by association.”

“I’m sorry you’ve been made to feel that way. I’ll do my best to explain,” Matthew started. “There’s a history with our families, and it’s not very pleasant.”

He drew in a breath as if bracing himself for the story he had to tell. “Back when your grandfather and Noah’s grandfather were young and just starting out in their careers, they worked together,” he said. “James LaFleur and William Hastings were both brilliant and determined scientists, but they also shared a stubborn competitive streak and an inability to compromise or forgive.

“They fell out after a fire started in their lab and destroyed years of hard work,” he continued. “To this day, no one could tell you for sure what caused the fire, but they both blamed each other and went their separate ways. That might have been the end of the feud, but William Hastings lodged a patent on the cancer treatment they’d been working on together. A treatment my father believed had been lost in the fire.”

“Wait, so you’re saying that William stole my grandfather’s work?” I asked.

“It was both of their work, but yes,” Matthew said. “It only confirmed to my father that William had started the fire to cut him out. It commenced years of backlash and fighting. They were constantly competing or attempting to sabotage one another. My father was in and out of court for almost a decade trying to prove he had a right to his own work.”

I swallowed as I considered what Matthew had said. His account of what started the whole feud was far more detailed than Noah’s had been. This was the first I’d heard about a fire destroying their work, and that was certainly a more reasonable explanation for my grandfather’s hatred than mere jealousy. If William really had started the fire and stolen my grandfather’s work, then maybe the LaFleurs’ vendetta against the Hastings was justified.

“This isn’t just about your father though, is it?”

“No.” Matthew let out a sigh. “I’ve had my own hand in the battle between our families. All my life, I saw my father being torn apart because he couldn’t manufacture the treatment he worked so hard to create. And he had to watch as William Hastings grew rich off the back of it. I often wondered if my father would have been a different man, a softer man, if he hadn’t been so brutally betrayed.”

Matthew seemed to get lost in his thoughts for a moment but then shook his head and continued. “Anyway, a couple of years back, the patent ended on the treatment they’d fought over. So, I started to manufacture a generic version of it. William had been charging extortionate fees for the drug for years, and the price on it was so high that most people couldn’t afford it.

“I hated knowing that people who needed my father’s treatment couldn’t access it, so I decided to sell it as cheaply as possible. I don’t make any profit on the drug. Actually, I think we might run at a loss. But, our company is diversified enough that it is not an issue. If one good thing came out of William’s betrayal, it was that my father was always striving to be ahead of the game and constantly innovating and developing our products.”

“So, William Hastings hates you for selling the same product as him but cheaper?”

“Yes,” Matthew replied. “I haven’t seen any new developments come out of Hastings Laboratories in years, and they rely too much on this one drug. I think he’s suffered a big hit to his bottom line because of it.”

If what Noah had told me was true, it sounded like my father’s actions were sinking the Hastings’ company entirely. Whether Matthew knew that or not, I wasn’t sure. Still, I felt a sense of relief at his explanation. I took no joy from the fact that the Hastings’ business had suffered due to my dad’s actions, but it sounded like Matthew was simply trying to do the right thing.

He was also yet to mention my aunt. Like Noah, Matthew had focused only on the business side of the rivalry. But I now knew it was so much more than that. Maybe my father found it just as difficult to talk about as Noah.

I cautiously continued my questioning. “I understand there’s this history of business rivalry,” I said. “But I still don’t understand what it’s got to do with me. Why are you personally so against Noah and I dating? You warned me about him before I even met him.”

Matthew swallowed, and his eyes glassed over for a moment. He quickly glanced away before I could see his expression clearly. My question seemed to have hit a nerve. His throat bobbed as he swallowed again and slowly faced me once more.

“There’s more to the story.” He paused, but I didn’t press him as I could see he was going to tell me. He was just steeling himself for whatever it was he had to say. I sat silently, but I leaned forward slightly as I waited.

“My sister, Georgina, went to Hastings Laboratories one night.” As Matthew spoke, his eyes fell and his head lowered slightly. “It didn’t end well.”

I swallowed because this was what I’d wanted to hear more about, but seeing the pain in Matthew’s eyes, I quickly decided not to push my father for any more of an explanation.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said softly. “I already know about the fire and the affair.”

“Affair?” Matthew’s eyes snapped to mine.

“Noah told me everything,” I explained. “He told me his father and your sister were having an affair. That’s why they were at the lab together the night of the fire.”

“That’s not true.” Although Matthew hadn’t raised his voice, his words came out so forcefully it was impossible to miss the certainty with which he spoke them.

I shook my head in confusion. “But Noah said...”

"Noah was just repeating what his grandfather told him,” Matthew replied. “William Hastings simply assumed my sister was having an affair with his son. He never would have believed what they were really up to.”

“So, if they weren’t having an affair, what was Georgina doing with Noah’s dad?”

Matthew let out a sigh. “It’s my fault she was there,” he said. “I thought that I could work with Liam Hastings to try and repair the rift between our families. Georgina was helping us. We wanted to put all the toxicity behind us so we could work together once we had more control of the companies. But we had to do it in secret because our parents never would have understood. Their hatred of one another was too ingrained.

“I’ve regretted trying to work with the Hastings family every day of my life since. All Liam and Georgina wanted was peace, and yet their deaths only drove our families further apart.”

He sat up a little straighter in his chair and took a deep breath, regaining his usual calm composure. “So, as you can imagine, this conflict between our families isn’t something I take lightly. I hope you can see why I didn’t want you anywhere near the Hastings boy. It felt too much like history repeating itself, and I don’t think I could endure the pain of losing you too.”

“I understand,” I said, nodding slowly. Both Noah and Matthew had lost so much because of their families already and were scared to lose any more.

I didn’t want to be the cause of more pain for either of them.

“Given what you guys were up to, do you think the fire that killed them was an accident?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, your grandfather thought William started the fire that destroyed his work all those years ago. You don’t suspect he started this one?”

Matthew shook his head. “I might not like William Hastings, but I know he would never risk his son that way.”

“And your father?” I hated asking the question, but it felt like it needed to be asked.

“I’ve considered the same thing many times myself, but I always come back to the fact that, despite their faults, neither of our parents would ever want to hurt their own flesh and blood. It was simply a tragic accident.”

He sounded so certain, but there was the tiniest flicker of concern in his gaze, and I had to wonder if perhaps my dad still wondered the same thing sometimes.

I glanced at my bowl. There was still some soup left, but I’d lost my appetite after talking about my aunt’s death.

“Do you have any pictures of Georgina?” I asked. “I’d love to see her.”

“Of course.” Matthew smiled and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He flicked through it for a moment before turning it so I could see the screen. The picture on the display was of a young woman, maybe in her twenties. Her eyes were bright with mischief, and she looked a lot like Matthew. They both had the same dark hair and light-blue eyes. Matthew had told me before that I looked like her, and I thought I could see some similarities. We shared the same eyes but also the same smile and small button nose.

“She’s beautiful,” I said.

“She was,” he agreed. “She was always laughing and had a terrible knack for getting herself into trouble. She had an infectious personality that was impossible not to love.”

“It sounds like she was a lot of fun.”

He smiled but let out a slow breath at the same time. “Certainly more so than me. I think I used to be more fun, but I threw myself into work even more after she died. It feels like it’s been so long since I did anything just because I enjoy it. I’m afraid I wouldn’t remember how anymore.” It was sad hearing Matthew talk about himself that way, but it was understandable knowing he’d lost his sister.

“I’m sure we can figure out a way to remind you,” I said, and his eyes lit up. I got the impression that one throwaway comment meant more to him than anything else I’d said tonight.

“Speaking of fun, I’ve stolen enough of your evening,” he said. “I should get you back to your friends.”

It felt like we were ending the night too soon, but after everything Matthew had just shared, there wasn’t much more to say. I still had so many questions, but I wasn’t going to force them on him now. He’d be back in Weybridge soon enough. Hopefully we’d have another chance to talk about everything then.

Matthew joined me in the car when his driver dropped me back at Cress’s house. We didn’t say much on the drive, and I imagined it was because we were both still reeling from our conversation at dinner.

I glanced at Matthew, watching the city lights flickering across his face as he stared out the window. He looked like his thoughts were a million miles from the car. I couldn’t imagine how hard it must have been for him to lose his sister, and he was clearly still torn up about it years later.

I felt like I finally understood why Matthew had warned me to stay away from Noah. It might not be fair that Matthew judged Noah for his family’s mistakes and associated him with the danger that getting close to one of them presented, but fear wasn’t always rational.

I also understood where Noah was coming from. He too didn’t want to lose another family member in his grandfather. But I wasn’t so sure Noah’s anger toward Matthew was fair. The actions my grandfather had taken seemed justified given everything William did to him. I hadn’t wanted to take a side in the fight between our families, but after speaking with Matthew, I felt like I had no choice but to back my father up. He was just trying to do the right thing, and he didn’t deserve to be vilified for it.

There was no way to change what had happened. The only thing I could control was what happened next. Noah had chosen to believe my father was the bad guy. If he couldn’t understand Matthew wasn’t the villain in this situation, there was nothing I could do.

As the car pulled up outside Cress’s house, I realized I still had one last question for my father.

“You know,” I started. “Noah went missing from our school excursion today. My friend Wes was visiting his dad at the hotel across the road from your office and said he saw Noah leaving your building.” It was the only

way I could think of broaching the subject without upsetting my father or letting him know I was there too.

Matthew's eyebrows lifted with surprise, but his features quickly returned to neutral

"Why would Noah have been in my building?" he asked calmly.

"I don't know," I replied. "Wes had this crazy theory that he went there to see you."

My father raised his eyebrows slightly once again. "That really is a crazy theory," he said. "If Wes saw him there, I'm sure it was just a coincidence."

I watched him closely, trying to gauge what he was thinking. I couldn't really figure him out.

"Yeah." I laughed awkwardly. "That's what I said too."

In truth, Wes had suggested it was all just a coincidence. I was the one who couldn't stop wondering why Noah was there. I was still questioning it. Despite all of my father's honesty tonight, I had to wonder if he was still keeping things from me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I couldn't look at the price tags on the clothes the girls were buying. I'd looked at one of them earlier in the day and had nearly fainted when I'd seen the number of zeros. Neither Cress nor Anna seemed bothered they were spending more in a day than I had in my entire life. And the twins were just as bad.

The boys had disappeared into the men's department when we'd arrived at the expensive department store with plans to buy outfits for the night. I hadn't bought anything yet. I couldn't justify it when I knew I had perfectly good clothes packed in my duffel bag back at Cress's place, all of which had been selected by Matthew's stylist in New York.

"How are you getting on?" someone whispered in my ear.

I gasped and spun to find Wes grinning down at me. My hand was pressed against my chest as I scowled at him. "Wes, you scared me. You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

He chuckled. "I was hardly sneaking. I can't help that your head was in the clouds."

"My head wasn't in the clouds," I responded instinctively, but when I thought about it, he was right. My thoughts had been somewhere else all day. I was still reeling from everything my father had told me the previous night, and no amount of shopping was going to take my mind off that.

"Where was it then?" Wes asked.

"I was trying to figure out if Anna and Cress plan to shop *all* day."

He laughed. "I don't think that's much of a mystery. I'd say the answer to that question is a definite yes."

"Well, that’s not the answer I was hoping for.” I’d enjoyed shopping for the first couple of hours, but we hadn’t even stopped for lunch yet, and I was growing tired quickly. The girls were both in the fitting rooms at the moment and showed no signs of slowing down.

“That’s actually why I came to find you,” Wes continued. “I was thinking we should make a run for it.”

I perked up a little. “Were you just?”

“Uh-huh. Sawyer could be lost in the men’s department for hours, and I happen to know that a certain library you were interested in visiting isn’t far from here…”

“Really?” I couldn’t keep the smile from my face.

“Yep. And now I’ve seen your eyes light up like that, we haven’t got a choice but to go.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the fitting rooms. “I should probably tell Cress and Anna we’re going.”

Wes grabbed my hand and pulled me in the opposite direction. “And let them rope us into more shopping? I don’t think so. We can text them once we’re out of the store.”

Wes didn’t let go of my hand as we made our way to the exit. As we approach the wide glass doors, Wes broke out into a jog. “We’re almost to freedom,” he cried, and I laughed as he pulled me along.

One of the store employees shot us a hard look as we burst out through the front doors, and I gasped for breath amid my laughter as we finally came to a stop.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t mind if we left?”

Wes lifted one shoulder. “It was far more fun to leave that way.”

I shook my head. “Seriously, do you think the girls will mind?”

“Nah, they’ll just buy more clothes to make themselves feel better.”

“Yeah, probably.” I grinned. “What about Sawyer?”

“I already told him I was done with shopping, and if he sees something I might like, he’s going to get it for me.”

“And he was cool with that?”

“Totally cool. He secretly loves shopping. He almost likes it as much as Cress and Anna.”

“I guess being identical twins means it’s easy to shop for you too.”

He nodded. “One of the benefits of sharing a face.”

Once we'd recovered from our daring escape, we started in the direction of the library. The sidewalk was bustling with people, and I had to keep reminding myself to watch where I was going. It was easy to get distracted as I peered up at the huge buildings that towered high above us. This weekend was the first time I'd encountered skyscrapers in real life before.

"You're spacing out again," Wes said.

I smiled and tore my gaze from the sky to look at him. "Just taking it all in. I love how busy it is here. There are so many cars and people. Growing up, I couldn't walk ten feet through town without seeing someone I knew. Here I feel like you'd be lucky to bump into a single familiar face."

Wes looked around us like he was seeing the city through my eyes. "I think you'd be surprised. It's a big city, but the same people always seem to go to the same places, so it can sometimes feel way too small. Still, I can't really imagine living somewhere you know everyone."

"I could never imagine living somewhere you didn't. But, coming here, I get it. There's a kind of freedom that comes with walking down the street and not knowing a soul you share the sidewalk with."

"Just being one of the masses," Wes agreed. "It is kind of freeing."

"Have you always lived in New York?"

"Always. Though I've spent a lot less time here since starting high school. Still, it's home."

"And you love it?"

"It's a hard place not to love."

I'd only been here a couple of days, and already I was growing to love the hustle and bustle of the city. I loved the way the skyline lit up at night and the fast pace that thrummed through the city like an ever-present heartbeat. It was unashamedly loud and chaotic, and yet I found peace in that. Plus, the bagels didn't hurt. Sawyer and Wes had come to Cress's house far too early this morning and dragged us out of bed to go to their favorite bagel place. I hadn't enjoyed the rude awakening, nor the fact I'd still been wearing my Winne the Pooh pajamas when the twins had arrived, but the bagel had been totally worth it. I'd come all the way to New York just to eat another.

"So, how was dinner with your father," Wes asked.

I didn't know how to answer. Where did I even begin? I'd been given so much new information, and I wasn't sure how much of it I could tell Wes even if I wanted to. I decided to keep my response simple.

“It was good. I feel like we got to know each other a bit better.”

“Did you get all the answers you were looking for.”

“Yeah, most of them, I think.” It was somewhat true. A lot of my questions had been answered, but there was no way to tell if I had heard every part of the story yet.

“What about Noah?” Wes continued. “Did you ask why he was at your dad’s office?”

“He just said it must have been a coincidence.”

“Yeah, he could have been there for another reason.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, but I wasn’t sure if either of us were completely convinced. I quickly moved to change the subject. “How far is the library?”

“Not far.” Wes started smiling. “It’s right there.”

I followed Wes’s gaze across the street to the gorgeous stone building up ahead. It was grand and majestic with tall pillars, graceful arches, and intricate statues carved into the façade. There was even a set of stone lions sitting proudly out front, guarding the entrance.

“Come on.” Wes tugged me toward the building, up the stairs, and through the front doors. We were greeted by an impressive foyer with lofty ceilings, sweeping staircases, and elegant chandeliers. The gray stone walls reminded me more of a vast castle than a cozy library. I couldn’t even begin to compare it to my local public library back home.

Wes guided us through the building, showing me gorgeous rooms that were filled with so much beauty and history they almost brought tears to my eyes. It was the Rose Main Reading Room that really took my breath away though. Shelves lined with books surrounded the reading space, but the beautiful murals painted on the ceiling and the chandeliers that hung above the room made it truly special. A part of me wished I had brought my laptop so I could spend just a few minutes working in such a special place.

“Come on,” Wes murmured. “There’s more.”

I slowly followed him from the room, disappointed to be leaving it behind so soon.

“What are you showing me now?”

“You’ll see.”

He led me to a children’s section at the back of the building and stopped when he reached a glass case. I frowned at him before I peered inside. I was confused at first but my heart warmed when I saw the original *Winnie-the-*

Pooh toys on display. The toys looked old and worn, but it was clear they were just well loved.

"After catching sight of your Pooh bear pajamas this morning, I thought you might like to see them," he said.

My cheeks warmed at the memory. I'd changed as soon as Wes and Sawyer had arrived at Cress's this morning but not before they'd both seen and commented on my PJs.

"I thought we agreed we weren't going to talk about my pajamas ever again."

"You say that like I can control Sawyer. And the pajamas were cute."

"Maybe for a five-year-old," I grumbled.

"Well, I liked them."

I definitely didn't want Wes continuing to visualize me in my tattered pajamas, so I quickly moved on. "How did you know this display was here?"

"I came here a few times as a kid and I liked visiting the toys," he explained. "My mom would always read us *Winnie-the-Pooh* before bed when I was little. Eeyore was my favorite, and Sawyer was, of course, a Tigger fan. There was a time when he couldn't go a day without saying 'Don't be ridick-orous' or insisting he had a lot of bouncing to do."

It was all too easy to imagine Sawyer bounding around the house like Tigger. "My mom used to read the stories to me too. I always liked Pooh because we both loved honey so much."

Wes laughed, and I turned back to focus on the toys.

"It's kind of nice seeing them in real life, isn't it?" I said. "To be in the presence of something that inspired such beautiful stories and touched so many lives." Wes and I grew up in such different homes, and yet we were connected through the books that had been read to us. Even Noah had recalled a quote from the stories the other night. There was something almost magical in that. I couldn't help but wonder if Noah had come here before and admired the toys too.

"Yeah, it is," Wes agreed. He shared a soft smile with me, and my heart did a small flip in response.

My phone started ringing, interrupting our moment, and I was somewhat glad for the distraction as I pulled it from my pocket.

Cress's name lit up the screen, and I glanced up at Wes. "I think the girls have finally noticed we're gone."

He grinned brightly. “Took them long enough.”

I laughed and walked out into the stairwell as I answered the phone.

“Where are you?” Cress asked.

I put her on speakerphone so Wes could hear too. “Wes and I may have called mutiny and abandoned ship.”

“Well, that’s not cool. I want to get off the ship too. Even I can’t keep up with Anna’s shopping today.”

“*Hey!*” Anna complained in the background.

“Where are you guys?” Cress asked. “We’ll come meet you.”

“We’re at the library.”

“The library? What on earth are you doing there?”

“I needed to borrow a book.”

“Really?”

“No.” I laughed. “I just wanted to see it, and it was close by. We’re just about to leave though so we can meet you guys somewhere else.”

Wes reached out a hand and beckoned for me to pass him my phone. I handed it over to him.

“I have an idea of what we can do,” he said. “Go find my brother, and I’ll text you guys where to meet us.”

“Okay, catch you soon.”

Wes hung up the phone and passed it back to me.

“So, what are we doing then?” I asked.

He gave me a cryptic smile in response. “It’s a surprise, but I think you’ll like it.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

It wasn't just one surprise. It was a whole afternoon of surprises. Wes played tour guide and took us to all the nearby attractions. We took silly photos in Times Square, ate our bodyweight in pizza slices for lunch and went to the top of the Empire State Building. Wes even forced us all to buy matching "I heart NY" T-shirts. We all looked ridiculous in them, but they made everyone laugh as we darted about the city sightseeing. I loved every minute of it.

By the time we arrived back at Cress's place, it was already getting dark, and I was exhausted. We'd walked all over New York today, so I wasn't sure how I was going to handle a night out on top of that.

Anna, Cress, and I collapsed on the bed when we reached Cress's room. The boys had both gone home to change before the evening's activities, so it was just the three of us.

"I'm exhausted," Anna said. "I have shopping stamina that lasts for days but absolutely no endurance when it comes to sightseeing."

I nodded firmly in agreement. "Yeah, my feet are toast."

"It was a fun day though, wasn't it?" Cress said. She was lying on her back staring up at the ceiling.

"It was the best," I agreed. I'd barely stopped grinning all day, but it wasn't the sights that had made me so happy. It was my friends.

"And so sweet of Wes to organize it all," Cress said, glancing in my direction.

"Yeah, super sweet," Anna agreed. "It's almost like he went out of his way for a certain someone who's never been to New York before." She shot

me a knowing look. “A certain someone he *really* likes.”

“He doesn’t like me like that.”

“No?” Anna asked. “Because most boys wouldn’t go to that much effort unless they liked a girl.”

“Definitely not,” Cress added.

“We’re just friends.” I protested, but the girls were right about one thing; it had been really sweet of Wes to be our tour guide today. He knew how much I wanted to see New York. He’d even come to rescue me from shopping earlier and take me to the place I wanted to see most.

“Let’s not forget he also offered to kiss you,” Anna said.

“Because he’s a good friend.” Even I didn’t think it sounded convincing when I said it out loud.

Anna wasn’t listening. “Plus, he’s kind, smart, superhot, and finally single. I’m just saying, if you were interested in dating another guy, you really couldn’t go wrong with Wes.”

I frowned up at the ceiling as I considered it. I wanted to tell her she was wrong, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to do it. Wes was a great guy, and I really liked him. But did I like him as more than a friend? I wasn’t sure.

The thought of moving past Noah and being with someone else caused my chest to constrict with anxiety. My heart was still resisting the idea of closing that door in my life. As much as I hated it and as much as Noah didn’t deserve it, I still had strong feelings for him. We were never going to be together, so perhaps it was time to open a new door. Maybe Anna and Cress were right, and Wes could be something more to me. But it wouldn’t be fair to try to move on with him when I was still hung up on Noah. The problem was, I wasn’t sure if I was ever going to get over Noah. I shook my head. I was too confused to give voice to my thoughts.

Cress sat up on the bed. “You’re thinking about it. Aren’t you?”

Anna nodded. “She definitely is.”

I looked between the two of them. “I don’t know what to think.”

“Well, you don’t have to think anything for now,” Cress said. “You don’t need to rush things. Take your time, and I’m sure everything will figure itself out.”

I gave her a grateful smile. Cress was right. There wasn’t any pressure to rush into a new relationship. Especially not when I was still hurting over my old one.

“Well, I totally think you should rush. It’s much more fun that way,” Anna said. “But you probably shouldn’t listen to me. I have really poor luck with guys.”

Cress laughed and nudged her shoulder against Anna’s. “That *would* be your advice.”

Anna shrugged. “Hey, I’m more a live now, regret it later kind of girl.”

“And you’re always getting into trouble because of it.”

“Always,” Anna agreed with a sly smile. “Anyway, who knows, maybe we’ll find you another dreamy guy to set your sights on tonight.”

“A guy from New York?” I asked.

“Why not? I still think a rebound would do you wonders. It’s pretty clear you’re still hurting after Noah.”

“Is it really that obvious?”

“I guess to us it is,” Cress said. “But we’re your friends. We wouldn’t be very good ones if we couldn’t see you’re still hurting.”

I let out a sigh. “Yeah, I guess I am. Spending the weekend here with you both has really helped take my mind off it though.”

“I knew a good distraction would do the trick,” Anna said. “Now, let’s start getting ready for our next distraction—an epic night out on the town.”

Cress clapped her hands together with excitement. “I can’t wait to dress up in my new outfit. If we start getting ready now, we can relax until the twins get here.”

Cress’s prediction was optimistic. There was no time left for relaxing before the twins arrived because the girls used every available minute perfecting their hair and makeup.

They both insisted on helping me, and I had to admit they did a pretty incredible job. Anna had straightened my normally wavy hair and styled it up in a high ponytail so it wouldn’t get sweaty while we danced the night away. Meanwhile, Cress had given me a glam makeup look. It was a lot heavier than I normally went for, but I felt much more grown up when I saw myself in the mirror. It was like looking at an older version of myself, and I kind of liked it.

“You guys are beauty wizards,” I said, grinning as I turned away from my reflection to look at the two girls. They were finished with their own hair and makeup and already dressed in their clothes for the night. They looked gorgeous. Then again, they always looked incredible.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Cress said with a wink.

I laughed and glanced at myself in the mirror again. It was so weird seeing such a different reflection staring back at me, but it gave me a boost of confidence. The face I wore tonight felt like a mask, and the girl behind it could be anyone. I didn't have to be the sad girl who'd had her heart stomped all over by her ex, and the feeling was somewhat empowering.

"Now, go put this on," Anna said, holding out a dress that looked short enough to be a top. "I want to see the whole look."

I took the dress without complaint and headed into the bathroom across the hall. Anna had taken one look at the outfits I'd packed for the weekend and told me none of them would do. She'd insisted I borrow one of her new items from today's shopping spree, and since I had no idea what *was* appropriate to wear to a club, I hadn't had much leverage when I tried to argue that my own clothes were fine.

I squeezed and shimmied my way into the tight black dress. It was sparkly and short, which highlighted my legs. When paired with stilettos, they looked impossibly long.

"You look hot," Anna said as I stepped out of the bathroom. She was standing by the bedroom door like she'd been waiting for me. "Fair warning, Wes is definitely going to offer to be your rebound again when he sees you like that."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure he won't." My heart fluttered a little at the thought.

"He definitely will," Cress said as she appeared in the doorway next to Anna. "Damn, we're good."

"The best," Anna agreed. "I think all our hard work calls for a little champagne." She pulled a bottle out from behind her back and wiggled it in the air.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"I raided the Farley wine cellar. There was no lock on the door, so I assumed it was all fair game."

Cress lifted her eyebrows.

"What? It was a champagne emergency!"

Cress laughed and snatched the bottle. "You think everything is a champagne emergency."

"Well, it is!" Anna replied. "Now, you two get in close so I can get a picture. You both look gorgeous."

Cress skipped over to me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. Anna pointed her phone in our direction before I could object, and Cress and I grinned.

“Cute. But you need to smile like you’re having fun.”

“We are having fun.” I laughed.

“And we’ll be having even more fun once this champagne is open,” Cress replied. She popped the cork on the champagne, and the bubbles fizzed out the top of the bottle. The two of us squealed as it erupted into the air before we burst into fits of laughter.

“Anna, did you shake the bottle before giving it to us?” Cress asked.

“I swear I didn’t.” She was grinning widely, so I wasn’t sure whether to trust her. She must have seen the uncertainty in my eyes because she continued. “What? I would never. That’s like champagne blasphemy. Such a waste.”

“Champagne *is* practically her religion.” Cress poured the drink into the elegant glass flutes already in the room. I was guessing Anna had helped herself to them too.

“Sure is.” Anna wasn’t looking at us as she spoke. Instead, she was staring at her phone, her lower lip sucked between her teeth as she concentrated.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just showing the rest of the world what they’re missing…” She turned the phone to us, and I could see she’d posted one of the pictures she’d just taken to Instagram. It was the moment the champagne had erupted, and Cress and I were laughing. It was fun and cute, and even I had to admit we both looked amazing in the picture.

She’d captioned the photo “*Girls night with my BFFs*,” and my heart warmed to think she counted me as one of her best friends. I felt like we’d grown close, but it almost had me tearing up to know she felt the same way too.

“Oh, I love it,” Cress said.

“Me too,” I agreed with a smile. And I loved these two girls. How did I get so lucky?

“Ha! It’s already blowing up,” Anna said as she checked her phone again. “Sawyer’s posted about a million flame emojis. He also says they’re on their way and to stop having fun without them.”

Cress laughed. “I bet they were nowhere close to leaving, but now he’s gotten FOMO, and they’re already in a car.”

“Definitely,” Anna agreed. “Sawyer gets the worst FOMO.”

“What about Wes?” I asked. “Did he comment on the picture?”

Anna smirked at me. “No, but I bet he was leading the charge to get here when he saw you in that dress.”

My cheeks flushed as I realized how the question might have looked to Cress and Anna, like I wanted Wes to be just as impressed as Sawyer. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“And I’m sure it is,” Cress said. “You should have seen the way he was looking at you today while we were out being tourists.”

“And how was that?” I asked.

“Like he thought you were adorable.”

“I mean, she kind of was,” Anna said. “Did you hear her squeal of excitement when we arrived at Times Square? And then how she actually gasped when she saw the view at the top of the Empire State Building? It was like watching a puppy being given a treat.”

I poked my tongue out at them. “You guys suck.”

They laughed, and Anna raised her glass of champagne above her head. “Here’s to a fun night.”

We clinked our glasses together before taking a drink. Anna practically downed hers in one gulp while Cress and I only took small savoring sips.

“We should probably head downstairs to meet the boys,” Cress said.

“Yeah, we can grab another bottle of champagne too,” Anna added. “Your parents have excellent taste.” She happily trotted off downstairs, and Cress followed her with a shake of her head.

I went to grab my phone from where I’d tossed it on the bed before I joined them. There was a text message waiting for me, and my stomach tied itself in knots when I saw it was from Noah.

The message had only been sent a minute or so ago, so at least I knew it hadn’t been sitting there unread for hours while the girls dolled me up. I was tempted to delete the message without reading it. But I wasn’t strong enough. I was far too curious to know what he’d sent. With a mixture of dread and anticipation, I opened the message.

Noah: I wish things were different. You’re so beautiful. It breaks me.

I stared at the text, my heart warming and shattering all at once. Why did he send that? And why now of all times?

I wondered if he'd seen Anna's Instagram post. It was the only explanation I could come up with given the timing. But that didn't make it okay for him to text me. He knew we couldn't be together. He knew I wanted to move on. His message only messed with my head, and I hated him for sending it.

I gritted my teeth and deleted the message, wishing I could wipe it from my brain just as easily. This whole weekend was about forgetting Noah. Why did he have to make it so hard? Every time I felt like I was beginning to make progress, he went and derailed it all with a stolen look or a surprise message.

I hated how much I missed him. I despised how my heart still leaped when I saw his name lighting up my screen. I wished things were different too, but there was no changing the past, and I didn't want to spend another second living in it.

I placed my phone back on the bed where I'd found it, deciding to leave it there for the night. I didn't need any more cryptic messages from Noah, and I refused to let him ruin the rest of my time in New York. I downed the remainder of my champagne in one gulp before making my way downstairs.

Tonight was about having fun and moving on. Noah's message had only made me more determined.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

I was somewhat tipsy by the time we arrived at the club. It hadn't looked like a massive venue from the outside, but there was a long line snaking around the block to get in. Thanks to Sawyer, we somehow managed to skip the line and were shown straight inside to the VIP section.

I'd never been to a nightclub before, but I was fairly certain they were supposed to check your ID at the front entrance. Apparently, Sawyer knew the owner, and it wasn't an issue because not one of us was questioned about our age.

The club was loud with a pumping dance floor and dark lighting that flickered and flared around the room. Within minutes of arriving, I decided nightclubs weren't for me. I could barely hear myself think, let alone actually hear what people were saying. We all had to shout at each other to be heard, and I was worried we'd all lose our voices by the end of the night.

I put aside my initial distaste for the place. I was on a mission tonight to have fun and forget Noah.

"This place is great," Anna said, grinning as she looked out over the dance floor. We were sitting in a booth high up on a balcony overlooking the whole club. Our area was cordoned off with its own bar and a server who brought us drinks.

"I told you it would be good," Sawyer said. "It only opened a few weeks ago, but it's supposed to be the best place in town. *Everyone* comes here." He and Wes must have shaken hands with half a dozen people on the way up to our booth. It was crazy to think they recognized one person here,

let alone several, but I was guessing their New York friends all went to the same places.

“We should go dance.” Anna was almost dancing in her seat as she suggested it. It felt like we’d only just arrived. Our drinks had barely touched down on the table, but Anna had already knocked hers back. I had no idea how anyone ever kept up with her.

“I think I need to finish my drink first,” I said.

“Me too,” Wes agreed, sharing a smile with me. He hated dancing about as much as I did, so I knew he was eager to avoid it too.

“Fine, but you guys better come join us after a few songs, or I’ll come back and force you downstairs,” Anna warned. There was a glint of steel in her eyes, and I knew she was being deadly serious.

“Okay, okay, we’ll be down in a few songs,” I assured her.

“Good.” She grinned before dragging Cress and Sawyer down to the dance floor.

I slouched in my seat, somewhat relieved as they disappeared.

“Not in the mood for dancing?” Wes asked.

“It looks pretty crazy down there.”

“Yeah, these places aren’t really my scene either.” He took a sip of his whisky, and I tried not to focus on his lips. It was probably just the alcohol in me, but Wes looked damn hot tonight. He was wearing a dark button-down shirt and dress slacks. He was also sitting very close to me. He must have shifted when the others left because I could have sworn our knees weren’t brushing when we first sat down.

It was starting to feel really warm in the club, and I had a feeling Wes’s proximity was the cause of all that heat. I’d never really thought of Wes as more than a friend, but since Anna and Cress had put the idea in my mind, I couldn’t seem to look at him in the same way.

I was surprised by just how attracted to him I felt and how sitting so close made my skin tingle. A part of me wanted to get closer still, but another, *saner*, part of me wasn’t sure it was such a great idea.

I wanted to curse Anna and Cress for suggesting I get together with Wes earlier tonight. There was no way I’d be feeling this way if they hadn’t put these thoughts in my head. They’d continuously dropped hints about him liking me when we’d been getting ready, and they’d looked completely victorious when he’d arrived at the apartment tonight and told me I looked gorgeous.

Still, now that the thoughts were there, they were impossible to deny. I was attracted to Wes, but even just thinking that made me want to run away from him and the images that were popping into my head. I picked up my drink and finished it one go.

Wes chuckled as he watched me. “Thirsty?”

“I guess I was,” I agreed with an awkward smile. I could barely look Wes in the eyes. I was embarrassed by the thoughts about him filling my head, and I didn’t know how to deal with it. “We should probably go dance with the others.”

I hadn’t even lasted one song alone in the booth with Wes, but he didn’t complain as we started down to the dance floor. I wondered if he could sense how nervous I was? If he could tell my mind kept drifting back to his offer to kiss me in his room?

The girls jumped with excitement when we finally found them on the dance floor. “You actually came down!” Anna squealed while Cress grabbed my hand and started dancing with me. “I thought for sure we’d have to come up there and get you guys,” she shouted through the music.

I shrugged and gave her a smile. “I guess I finished my drink quicker than I thought I would.”

She didn’t seem totally convinced that was the only reason, and her gaze teetered between Wes and I. I refused to look at him. It felt like that would only feed her curiosity.

Song after song, we all danced together. The alcohol had loosened me up, so I was moving more than normal. I still had two left feet, so I probably looked like a total idiot, but I couldn’t deny it was fun jumping around the dance floor with my friends.

After a while, amid the throbbing crowd of people, I got separated from Sawyer and the girls, and I found myself standing in front of Wes. He gave me a timid smile and held out his hands toward me. I was wary of getting closer to Wes right now, especially given I’d been thinking about him in ways I probably shouldn’t. His smile was so genuine though, and there was a hint of hope in his eyes as I took his offered hand.

The music was still moving fast, but he held me close, and we slowly swayed together as though we were listening to a completely different tune. I suddenly couldn’t remember why I’d been so cautious. Dancing with him felt like the best decision I’d made all week.

I felt so safe being held by Wes, and his grasp on me was reassuring. I looked up and smiled at him when I realized neither of us had stepped on the other one's feet so far.

"You're not nearly as bad at dancing as I remember," I said. I had to lift onto my toes and bring my mouth close to his ear so he could hear me over the music.

He lowered his head and leaned in close as he responded. "You too," he said with a laugh. "It must be the alcohol."

"Definitely. Although, I thought alcohol would make me a worse dancer."

"Or perhaps it just gave you the confidence to unleash your inner ballerina."

"Well, your inner ballerina is shining tonight too."

"Thanks. I think..." His eyes were bright with amusement. I found it so hard to think straight when he looked at me that way. When he looked at me like I was the only person in the room.

"I never did ask; did you ever find a suitable rebound on Anna's list?"

His question caught me off guard, and I swallowed. Why was he bringing up the list? And why now, when we were dancing so close to one another? When he had to bring his lips so close to my neck whenever he spoke? When I was already being tempted by so many dangerous thoughts about him?

Somehow, I managed to act unaffected, and I rolled my eyes. "I told you I wasn't going to use the list. Besides, the options Anna suggested were terrible."

"Who was on there?" Wes chuckled, but his serious eyes suggested he really wanted to know the answer.

"Practically half the senior class. She even annotated it to tell me which guys she'd kissed herself and how good they were. I think she thought she was doing me a favor."

"She is committed. I'll give her that."

I tilted my head as I stared at him. "Why are you asking about the list?"

His eyes practically glittered as he looked over me, and his gaze tugged on something deep in my gut. "I just hope you know you deserve someone great. Not some random name off a list. Even though you could get any guy on that list without trying, especially looking like you do tonight."

My heart stuttered. It wasn’t just the compliment that was making it hard to breathe. It was the way he was looking at me, like perhaps he’d been having dangerous thoughts tonight about me too.

“What about the guys that aren’t on the list?” The question was out of my mouth before I could consider it, and Wes’s hands tightened on my lower back in response.

He brought his lips in close to my ear. “The guys that aren’t on the list too.”

A thrill ran down my neck. I wasn’t sure what was happening between Wes and I, and I had no idea where it had come from. The only thing I knew was I liked it.

His eyes were heated as he pulled back to look at me. He definitely wasn’t looking at me like I was simply his friend, and this felt like more than a little harmless flirting. He started to speak, but then something behind me caught his attention, and his voice drifted off, his eyebrows pulling in a frown.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw he was watching a girl dancing behind me. The girl had waist-length black hair and was practically glued to the guy she was dancing with. When she started to kiss him, I felt Wes tense, and I spun back to face him.

“Who—” I cut myself off when I saw the total devastation in his eyes.

Wes started to back away before he turned and rushed off the dance floor. I quickly raced after him, having to push and shove past people as I tried to keep up. He didn’t return to the VIP section. Instead, he made his way to the front of the club. The cool night air hit me as I followed him outside. My ears were still ringing from the deep beat of the music, but the gentle sounds of traffic were a welcome relief.

Wes was already partway down the street, and I hurried after him, my heels echoing through the night air as they hit the concrete. “Wes?” I called out. “Wes, slow down.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. It wasn’t until I finally managed to grab hold of his arm that he stopped. He turned to me with agony thick in his eyes.

I sucked in a breath as I realized there was only one person who could have made him react that way. “That was Sarah back there, wasn’t it?”

He slowly nodded, his hands reaching up to grip his hair in frustration. “I thought she broke up with me because of the distance. I didn’t realize

there was someone else…”

I hated seeing him this way. Wes was always so sweet and put together, but right now he was a total wreck. I didn’t blame him for feeling that way. I’d be the exact same if I were in his shoes.

“Are you sure it was her?” I asked. It had been dark in the club, and all I’d been able to see was the back of the girl’s head.

“It was her.”

I swallowed, trying to ignore the way his voice broke as he spoke. “Maybe it’s not as bad as you think,” I murmured. “Just because she kissed someone at a club doesn’t mean they’re serious. Maybe she’s like you and hurting too?”

He wiped a hand down his face as he groaned. “That doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“I know.” I didn’t know what else to say to make him feel better.

I pulled him into a hug, and he grasped me back tightly like I was the only thing holding him together. I could hear his pain in his ragged breath. I could feel it in the way his muscles had seized up.

“I’m sorry, Wes. I’m so, so sorry,” I murmured as I held him.

He slowly pulled back to look me in the eyes. “I just want to forget,” he said. “I want to forget her, the pain, hell, I’d forget my own name right now if I could. I—”

I didn’t wait for him to continue. His every word was a bleeding wound, a deep gash in his chest that I needed to heal. There was only one way I thought I could help him in this moment, and I didn’t hesitate as I lifted myself against him and pressed my lips to his.

His breath caught in his throat, and he froze against me. I’d truly taken him by surprise, and his hesitation had me worried I’d made a terrible mistake. It only lasted a moment because suddenly he was pulling me closer. His arms wrapped around me, and his lips moved hungrily against mine.

We might have been standing on a New York sidewalk in the middle of the night, but I lost all sense of the outside world as Wes started kissing me like I was the very oxygen he needed to breathe.

He was the air for me too, and it felt like he was saving me just as much as I was saving him. For the first time in weeks, I felt something other than pain and uncertainty. I felt the blissful ecstasy of a mind clear from churning thoughts.

I was probably going to regret this come morning. But that didn't matter right now. Wes was a really good kisser, and all I could wonder was why I hadn't done this before. Kissing him was like taking a painkiller for a headache, and I was an idiot for enduring the constant dull ache inside of me when there was such a simple and easy fix.

When we finally broke apart, I was nervous to look at him. I wasn't sure how he was going to react, but when I glanced up at him, I was relieved to find he was no longer staring back at me with the same hurt-filled eyes. Instead, he was looking at me in wonder, like he was seeing something amazing for the very first time.

"You kissed me." He finally broke the silence.

"You kissed me back."

He slowly smiled. "Yeah, I did."

He seemed happy, but I wasn't exactly sure what he was thinking. I was still clutching his shirt, and I dropped my hands to my sides. Wes didn't let my hands get far before he caught them up in his own.

"I'm glad you kissed me."

"You are?"

"I've been thinking about it all night," he admitted. "I know I was upset about Sarah, but just so you know, I wanted to kiss you before you jumped on me."

"I didn't jump on you." I blushed

"I didn't say it was a bad thing. In fact, I think I needed it to snap out of my meltdown."

"There were probably other ways."

"Probably," he smiled. "But none I would have liked as much as that. It worked like a charm. Your kisses are kind of magical..." His gaze dipped to my lips, and my heart leaped as I wondered if he was about to kiss me again. I didn't get a chance to find out because his phone started ringing.

I deflated a little as he glanced away, but it was probably for the best. Wes's lips had been kind of magical too, and I wasn't sure I wanted to fall under his spell.

"Sawyer, this better be good," Wes said as he answered the phone. He waited a beat as his brother responded before he spoke again. "Yeah, I saw her too. I'm outside the entrance to the club with Isobel. I don't know if we're going to go back in."

I really hoped we weren't. I didn't think it would do Wes any good to see his ex again, and one night of club dancing was enough to last me a lifetime.

Wes hung up the phone and focused on me once more. "The others are going to come meet us outside. Sawyer said Anna's had a few too many drinks and we should probably get her home anyway."

"Yeah, it feels like time to call it a night," I agreed.

Wes's eyes flicked down to my lips, and my stomach clenched as I pictured kissing him one more time. The last thing I needed right now was for our friends to walk out and find us making out, so I took a step back to remove the temptation. It was the right decision because the others soon joined us.

"You okay, man?" Sawyer asked, clasping Wes on the arm as he came up behind us with Cress and Anna.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Wes said, still smirking at me.

Sawyer frowned in my direction and then looked back at his brother. "I thought you'd be a mess after seeing Sarah."

Wes shrugged. "It was a shock when I first saw her, but I'm feeling better about it now."

"Good, because you deserve so much better than her," Anna said, shaking her head. She didn't seem as drunk as Wes had suggested. "Have you guys been out here long?"

"Long enough that it's starting to get cold," I responded. It wasn't that bad, but I was eager to leave. I didn't want the others beginning to wonder why Wes was miraculously doing so well after seeing his ex kissing someone. And he kept looking at me with that amused look on his face, which wasn't helping.

"I've ordered an Uber," Cress said. "It should be here any minute."

"I'll order one for us too," Sawyer said to his brother.

The girls and Sawyer chattered away as we waited, but Wes and I were both silent. I wondered if he was thinking about our kiss just as much as I was. Given the smiles he kept sending me, he must have been. And he wasn't even being slightly subtle about it.

When our car arrived, Cress and Anna moved quickly toward it. I glanced over my shoulder as I slid into the car after them. Wes was still smiling at me, and I mouthed at him to stop, but that only made his grin

wider. It wasn’t until I got home and checked my phone that I saw he’d sent me a text message too.

Wes: Thanks for a magical evening.

I shook my head and stuffed my phone under my pillow. Our kiss was a spontaneous, one-time thing, and nothing more.

Still, I couldn’t seem to wipe the smile off my lips as I drifted off to sleep.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Something totally happened with you and Wes on the weekend, didn't it?" Cress asked as we unpacked our bags on Sunday evening. We'd only just arrived back at school after our trip to New York, and I was already dreading having to return to class tomorrow. The weekend in the city had been a much-needed breath of fresh air for me, and I wasn't ready to face reality. I definitely wasn't ready to see Noah again—especially after I'd kissed someone else.

I hadn't told Cress or Anna about kissing Wes yet, mostly because I didn't quite know how to feel about it. Given the way Cress was looking at me now, I knew I couldn't pretend nothing happened.

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"Well, for starters, he wouldn't stop staring at you during the car ride back to school. He also didn't seem nearly upset enough about seeing his ex making out with some guy at the club. Something happened, I know it."

Cress was far too observant for my liking, and I still had no idea what to say, so I focused on the clothes I was supposed to be unpacking and continued trying to dodge her question. "Why are you only bringing this up now?"

"Well, I couldn't exactly ask when Wes was around. I'm dying here, Isobel. What happened?"

"Okay, okay." I knew there was no point resisting. "We kissed."

"I knew it." Cress squealed and jumped onto my bed beside me. "Now, dish, I need all the details."

Her enthusiasm was hard to ignore. “Well,” I started. "We were getting kind of close while we were dancing in the club, and I thought maybe we were going to kiss. But then Wes saw Sarah, and the moment was ruined. I followed him from the club to make sure he was okay. And when I was trying to comfort him, it just sort of happened.”

“I knew he should have been more upset about Sarah,” Cress gushed. “This is *huge*.”

“It’s not that big a deal.”

“Of course, it is. Now, tell me more. How was the kiss?”

I started to smile. “Wes is a really good kisser.”

She squealed again, making me laugh. “So, are you guys a couple now or what?”

“Gosh, no.” I shook my head. “It was just one kiss. I’m not ready to be in a relationship, and he probably isn’t either.”

A little of her excitement dampened. “Yeah, I get that.”

She seemed really pro-Wes, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Just a few weeks ago she’d been over the moon I was dating Noah. “Isn’t this weird for you?” I asked. “I mean, I was dating your cousin—”

“Who’s a total idiot,” she said, interrupting me. “He was stupid to let you go, so I’m completely on team Isobel-moving-on. I just want you to be happy.”

“Thanks.” I gave her a warm smile.

“Plus, I think we could come up with a really cute couple name for you guys. I’m thinking either Isley or Wesobel.”

I laughed. “Wesobel?”

“What? It’s totally cute.”

“And it’s also totally getting ahead of things. Wes and I don’t need a couple name.”

“Not yet…”

I rolled my eyes, but it was hard not to be slightly affected by Cress’s excitement. I’d enjoyed kissing Wes, but I hadn’t really thought about it being something more. If anything, I’d been worried about the kiss driving us apart.

“Do you think things are going to be weird between us now?” I said. “What if this affects my friendship with him?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“And that is…”

“You need to talk to him,” she said.

“Anything but that. Talking will only make things more awkward.”

“No, it will get things out in the open. You’ll find out where you both stand and can go from there.”

“But what if I don’t know where I stand?”

“Well, you can tell him that too. It’s better he knows you’re confused rather than thinking you regret the kiss.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I let out a breath as I looked at the duffel bag on my bed. It was only half unpacked, but now that Cress had me considering talking to Wes, I felt like I had to get it over and done with. I could unpack the rest of my clothes later.

I started toward the door. “I might go chat with him now.”

“Probably a good idea. Do you need a breath mint?”

“We’re not going to kiss again, Cress.”

She rushed over to her drawers, grabbed a tin of breath mints, and offered it to me. “Are you willing to take that risk?” I let out a grunt and took one but only because my mom had told me you should never refuse a breath mint when offered. There was usually a reason people suggested it, and I didn’t want to risk chatting to Wes with bad breath.

“I knew it,” she said, gleeful as I popped the mint in my mouth.

“You know nothing,” I replied, but she was still giving me a smug smile as I left the room.

I didn’t share her confidence or her enthusiasm ahead of my conversation with Wes. What if I said the wrong thing and totally messed up our friendship? We hadn’t known each other long, but we’d become close in my short time at Weybridge, and I didn’t want things to be weird between us. Cress was right though, I needed to talk it out with Wes, so I made my way to his dorm.

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THE BOYS’ dormitory was lively when I arrived. All the guys were out in the corridors, and the energy was chaotic as though they were making the most of the final weekend hours. There were shouts and laughter as guys tackled each other, and music was blaring from one of the rooms. There were even two idiots throwing a football down the hall, and I froze as the

ball came spinning in my direction. Luckily, someone stepped in front of me and snatched it out of the air before it hit me.

I glanced up to find Luther scowling at the guy who'd thrown the ball. "Watch it, Bertram. You nearly hit my favorite new girl," Luther growled before tucking the ball under his arm. "I'm confiscating this."

Bertram looked like he wanted to object, but his friend quickly grabbed him by the arm and ushered him down the hallway.

Luther grinned as he turned to me. "You're just a magnet for trouble, aren't you, newbie?"

I stood a little straighter and shook my head in the direction of the boys. "If those guys are on the school's football team, I can see why they're always losing."

"Yep, they're terrible." He laughed, but his expression quickly sobered. "How are you feeling? I hear your stomach lost a battle with a swanky New York restaurant."

I scrunched my face up. "Noah told you about that?"

"Yeah, poor little dear was a mess on Thursday night. He was messaging me for advice on what he could get to help you. I told him that kisses were the best medicine."

"Luther," I groaned. "Not only are we broken up, but I was throwing up. You did not tell him that."

"No, but I should have." He chuckled. "I think Noah would have done just about anything to make you feel better."

I let out a sigh. "I don't know why you think we're going to get back together. We're over, for good." The sooner everyone accepted that, the better.

"I have faith everything will work out." Luther shrugged.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I'm trying to decide if you're an optimist or just being willfully blind."

"Maybe I'm simply a true romantic," he replied. "Maybe I like to believe love overcomes all obstacles."

"Maybe you like to cause trouble."

"Oh, always that," he said with a grin. The smile slowly dropped from his face as he considered me. "Seriously though, Noah's been irritable and moody ever since you broke up. He's the worst company ever." He let out a sigh. "I was hoping the two of you would have made up by now."

"Like I've been trying to tell you, that's never going to happen."

“Maybe, maybe not,” he replied. “Look, just do me a favor, and don’t give up on Noah yet.”

I stared at him, at a loss for what to say. Did Luther know something I didn’t? What could Noah have possibly said to give him the impression there was any hope? I wasn’t sure, but the one thing I was certain of was if I didn’t give up on Noah now I would never get over him. I couldn’t spend my life letting my heart ache for a boy I couldn’t be with. It wasn’t fair for Luther to expect that of me. “You can’t ask me to do that.”

“Well, I did.” And he didn’t look the least bit remorseful about it. “Anyway, I’ll catch you around, newbie. Stay safe out there.” He went to walk away but paused and handed me the football he’d stolen from the guys. “Here,” he said. “A souvenir so you can remember that time I saved your life.”

“I don’t think my life was in danger…”

“That’s not how I remember it,” he replied. “And think about what I said. You and Noah belong together.”

He turned to leave, waltzing away like he hadn’t just tried to blow up my life with the world’s most ridiculous request.

“There’s nothing to think about,” I called after him.

He didn’t turn back, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he hadn’t heard me or because he refused to acknowledge my protest.

Not giving up on Noah? Luther couldn’t have asked something more demanding if he tried, especially seeing as Noah was the one to give up on us in the first place. I shook my head and continued down the corridor to Wes’s room.

I was relieved when Wes answered the door after only a couple of knocks. I thought he might be surprised to see me, but his face lit with a welcoming smile. A small crease then puckered his brow as he looked down and noticed the ball in my hand. “Trying out for the football team?”

“Trying to avoid the football team, more like.” I shook my head when I caught his curious expression. “Don’t ask.”

“But now I’m all intrigued.” He stood back and gestured into his room. “Want to come in? It’s kind of mad out there today.”

“Just *kind of* mad?” I asked as I followed him inside. Not only was it chaos in the corridors, it was dangerous too. “I swear the boys’ dorms have always been so quiet when I’ve come here before.”

“Clearly you’ve been coming at the wrong time,” Wes replied. “If our dorm parents look the other way for even a minute, the place turns into a jungle.”

“Yeah, well, I swear some of the monkeys out there are rabid.”

“They should probably put a warning at the entrance,” he agreed with a smile. “Enter at your own risk, or something like that.”

“Probably.” I placed the ball down on his bed and tucked my hands into my jeans as I looked around the room. It was almost like an invisible border ran through the center of the space. One side was a pigsty while the other was spotlessly clean. My eyes landed on the heap of clothes spilling out of a suitcase on Sawyer’s bed. It seemed he’d gotten about as far as I had when it came to unpacking.

“Is your brother around?” I asked.

“Nah, Sawyer’s out playing a pickup game of soccer. It’s just you and me,” he said, sitting at the end of his bed.

“Uh-huh.” I swallowed down the nerves that suddenly made an appearance in my throat. I didn’t want to talk to Wes with Sawyer around, but I was also anxious at the thought of being here alone with him.

“Did you want to sit down?” Wes asked, gesturing to the bed beside him.

“Um, no thanks, I’m good.”

He gave me a half smile, like he didn’t quite believe me. He stood and approached me slowly as though he was worried I might spook if he moved too fast. “I’m guessing you came to talk about what happened last night?”

I let out a deep exhale and nodded. I had no idea where to begin, and I was glad Wes had been the one to raise the subject. I guessed the best place to start was the one thing I felt sure about. “I don’t want things to be weird between us.”

“I don’t want that either. I really like you, Isobel.”

My cheeks felt hot, and my brain went into overdrive. Did he just like me or did he *like me* like me? Because there was a huge difference between the two, and I had no idea which kind of like I wanted him to be feeling.

It didn’t help that he looked so cute as he spoke. His warm brown eyes were gentle and filled with hope, and it was hard not to be pulled in by his easygoing smile. Wes was hot and sweet; a girl would have to be absolutely crazy not to want to be with him. Was I crazy for not immediately jumping for joy that he said he liked me? Probably, but I didn’t want things moving

too quickly. I'd fallen fast for Noah, and that had been a disaster. I couldn't make that mistake again, especially not when it might mean ruining my friendship with Wes.

"I really like you too, Wes," I admitted. "You're one of my closest friends here." Yep, I'd dropped the friend bomb. It was the equivalent of throwing a bucket of cold water on the guy, but it seemed far safer than saying anything else.

Wes didn't seem put off though, and he lifted one eyebrow in response. "Do you kiss all of your friends like that?"

"Uh, only the really good ones."

It was a terrible answer, but he chuckled, and the sound danced down my spine. He wasn't looking at me like a friend right now, and my heart beat quicker as he continued to stare at me.

"I'm just not ready for another relationship right now," I murmured. "And I don't think you are either."

He took a step toward me so we were standing only inches apart and reached up to tuck a stray curl behind my ear. The gesture didn't feel even slightly friendly, and the intense look in his eyes made me feel like he wasn't listening to a word I said.

"So, can we just pretend the kiss didn't happen?" I continued.

"I can't do that," he said. "Kissing you was the only thing that's felt right to me in weeks. Tell me you didn't enjoy kissing me, and I'll forget it ever happened."

My mouth suddenly felt dry. "Wes, it was a one-time thing."

"So, you enjoyed our kiss then." Apparently, he wasn't discouraged.

"Of course, I did, but we're friends. It would be weird. I—"

He didn't wait for me to continue as he lowered his head toward me and brushed his lips against mine. They felt like nothing more than a feather lightly grazing against my skin, and my whole body tingled. He didn't deepen the kiss like I wanted. Instead, he pulled back a few inches, so I could still feel his breath against me.

"Did that feel weird to you?" His voice was slightly deeper and more gravelly than it had been before. It seemed like he was just as affected by my lips as I was by his.

I answered by pulling him back to me and kissing him fully like my body craved. All thought and reason fled from my mind as he wrapped his arms around me, tugging me closer still. I didn't care if we were just friends

or something more in that moment. And there was definitely nothing weird about kissing Wes again. If anything, his kisses erased any apprehension I had. Wes was right; this was the first thing that had made sense recently.

The sound of Sawyer groaning interrupted us. “Oh, man, get a room.”

Wes and I jumped apart, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment as I turned to see Wes’s brother lounging in the doorway.

Wes wasn’t nearly as flustered as he answered. “I have a room. I’m using it.”

“No, this is *our* room. You could have at least put a sock on the door,” Sawyer said, coming inside and closing the door behind him. Now that I took a proper look at him, I could see he was grinning widely. He clearly wasn’t as annoyed as his voice portrayed.

“Isobel.” He tilted his head at me. “I see you took up my rebound offer. You got the wrong brother though. That’s Wes you’re kissing.”

Wes shoved a hand against his shoulder. “She doesn’t think I’m you, you idiot.”

“Are you sure?” Sawyer turned to me again and puckered his lips. “Because I’m ready to rectify the situation…”

I scrunched up my nose. “*Ew*, no.”

“Why not?” Sawyer laughed. “Wes and I have never kissed the same girl before. Finally, we can find out who is the better kisser.”

“Dude, that’s messed up,” Wes muttered.

“You need help,” I agreed. “I’m not going to kiss you, Sawyer.”

“But this feels like a bet I could win…”

Wes took his brother by the shoulders and steered him back toward the door. “You can leave now.”

“But it’s my room.”

“Don’t care.” Wes pulled the door open and shoved his brother outside.

I couldn’t contain my laughter when I saw Sawyer’s shocked expression right before Wes slammed the door on him.

“Your brother is ridiculous,” I said.

“Ridiculously handsome!” I heard Sawyer shout from the hallway.

Wes banged a fist against the door. “Go away.”

Sawyer laughed in response, but the sound soon drifted off as he wandered away down the corridor. It was only after a few moments of silence that Wes seemed to relax. “Sorry about that.”

“Sawyer is nothing if not entertaining.”

“Yeah, he’s a regular clown.”

I laughed, but my amusement quickly disappeared as I realized what we’d just done. “Shit,” I muttered. “I didn’t come here to kiss you.”

“But you did.” He grinned.

“Stop smiling. That can’t happen again. I refuse to ruin our friendship for some rebound kisses. I don’t care how good they are.”

His smile only grew.

“Why aren’t you listening to me? I think we both need to pretend that never happened. Okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded. His face was the picture of sincerity, but his eyes danced like he was just playing along and had absolutely no intention of forgetting our kiss.

“You’re almost as bad as your brother,” I muttered. “I’m going to go now.”

I opened the door to leave, and Wes leaned against the doorframe, watching me as I started down the hallway. “I’m glad we *talked*,” he called after me.

I shot a scowl over my shoulder at him, making him laugh. I had clearly failed in my attempts to talk with Wes. We’d done a lot more than that. And a small part of me wondered if maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I was running late to PE. I'd left my sneakers in my dorm room this morning and had to rush back to get them before making my way across campus to the school gym. I hadn't had a chance to change yet either. I was almost to the locker room when a hand snaked out and caught hold of me from behind.

"What's the rush?"

I gasped and turned to find Wes grinning down at me. He'd just emerged from the boys' locker room, so I hadn't seen him coming. He was already dressed for our sports lesson and didn't have nearly the same urgency about him that I was feeling.

"I'm running late."

He laughed and looked down at my school uniform. "I can see that."

"And you're not helping. I need to get changed."

His smile simply widened. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"Still not helping." I blushed at the ease with which he called me cute and how it made me feel. He shouldn't be calling me cute. And he shouldn't be standing so close to me. I was trying to forget about the kiss we shared in his room, but it was all I could think about when his body was pressed against mine like this.

"You better get a move on, or you'll be late to class," he murmured.

I scowled at him because I had a feeling he knew exactly the direction my thoughts had been tracking. "That's what I was saying," I complained before turning to dart into the girls' locker room. His soft laughter followed behind me.

I changed in what must have been record time before rushing to the basketball courts. One of my shoelaces was undone, and my hair was a mess from throwing my top over my head, but I didn't care. I could fix it all when I got to class. I just hoped I wouldn't get a detention.

I'd been worried about being late to class, but the teacher hadn't shown up yet either, and most of the students were milling around on the bleachers. I joined Cress and Anna on one of the benches, and as I sat, I noticed Noah scowling at me from the other side of the court. I had no idea what I'd done to piss him off, but I chose to ignore him.

"No Coach August yet?" I asked the girls.

Anna started to respond, but as she did, the teacher walked into view. "We're moving on to squash today, everyone," he said. "So, we're going over to the squash courts."

There were a few groans from the class, but I wasn't sure why. I'd never played squash before, but it looked like fun. I stood with Anna and Cress and was about to follow the rest of the class, but Coach August came over to me.

"Not you, Miss Grace," he said. "You still haven't completed the beep test from the first class of term. You'll be undertaking it today along with one other student. I won't be here to oversee it, so I'm putting a lot of faith in you to be honest with your results. If you score yourself higher than you actually achieve, you'll have no room for improvement this year. You'll only be failing yourself."

"Yes, Coach," I replied, as Cress and Anna both grimaced in my direction. Squash was looking really good right about now.

He turned and joined the rest of the class leaving the gym while Anna and Cress continued to hover at my side.

"This sucks," Cress said. "I thought he'd forgotten about your beep test."

"Me too," I replied. "I guess I better get it over with."

The girls shared sympathetic smiles.

"Maybe we can go to Toddy's after school for milkshakes to make you feel better?" Cress suggested.

"That sounds really great," I replied. "I think I'll need a pick-me-up."

"It's a date then. We'll see you after class." The girls waved and then lightly jogged to catch up with the rest of the class, disappearing from the gym far too quickly.

Once they were out of sight, I turned to search for the cones and the stereo Coach August had left behind for me. Only it wasn't the cones I noticed when I turned. Noah was standing there waiting for me.

"What are you doing? Wait, *you're* the one who's redoing the test?"

"I didn't get the result I was after." Noah shrugged. "Besides, I asked to redo it weeks ago so you wouldn't have to take it alone. It was back when we were…" He didn't need to finish his sentence. I knew he was talking about when we were dating. It was sweet he'd done that, but it made things awkward now.

"Well, I'm sure Coach August will understand if you tell him you don't want to retake it." I was sure the last thing Noah wanted was to spend an entire class alone with me. I certainly wasn't keen given the way things were between us. Everything felt relatively civil, especially after he took care of me last week in New York, but that didn't mean it was easy to be around him.

It hurt to be in his presence. To feel my heart tugging me toward him and know I couldn't act on it. And there was always an underlying tension. Whenever he was near, it was like the air was snapped taut between us, and it didn't matter whether I liked him, hated him, or wanted nothing to do with him, that feeling was always there.

"Who said I don't want to retake it?" he replied.

I let out a sigh. I was trying to give him an easy way out, but apparently Noah was a glutton for pain. "I guess we better get started then."

I walked over to the stereo that had been left on the ground and turned on the recording before walking to the first cone. Noah came and stood right by me. We had the whole court to ourselves; did he really have to stand so close?

The test didn't start right away. There was a monologue at the start of the recording explaining how it all worked. I wasn't sure I heard a single word. I was too focused on Noah. If we were going to be stuck together like this, then I had something I needed to ask him.

"I saw you on Friday," I said as we waited.

He seemed confused by my comment. "That's hardly surprising seeing as we were both on the same field trip."

"Except you weren't on the field trip," I said. "I saw you outside my father's building."

A flicker of surprise shot through Noah's gaze. He quickly covered it with a shrug. "So, we both skipped The Met. Again, not that surprising."

"Given your history with my family, it was kind of surprising. What were you doing there?"

"Certainly not seeing your father, if that's what you're getting at," he said. His features twisted with such distaste I reeled back from him.

I wasn't going to be put off by the irritation in his eyes. "So, what *were* you doing there then?"

"That's really none of your business."

"I guess I'll just have to ask my father then."

Noah huffed in response. "Like I said, my visit had nothing to do with him, so he won't be able to tell you. If you must know, I was there to see my lawyer. He has the great misfortune of sharing an office building with The LaFleur Corporation."

"Oh," I murmured. Wes had mentioned there were other offices in the building. Maybe it was a simple coincidence. I couldn't imagine why a seventeen-year-old needed to see a lawyer, but Noah wasn't your average teen.

"So, is being nosy something we do now?" Noah asked. "Because you looked awfully close with Wes outside the gym just before..."

I shot him a scowl. I didn't need to explain myself to him. Still, I found myself taking the bait. "Wes and I are friends; of course, we're close."

"It looked more than friendly to me."

"Well, you must be seeing things. Maybe you should get your eyes checked out?"

Thankfully the first beep of the test finally sounded, and I started to jog, eager to get away from Noah. He fell in right beside me, his feet slapping against the ground in perfect unison with my own.

"I've heard things too," he said after we'd done several laps between the two cones. Apparently, he wasn't done with our discussion. I definitely was, and I chose to ignore his comment. "Sawyer likes to talk a lot at soccer training."

"He likes to talk a lot period," I muttered. "But I prefer not to talk when I'm running."

I wondered if Noah was trying to hint that he knew Wes and I had kissed. I had a bad feeling that was exactly what he was getting at, and I really didn't want to talk about it with him.

Noah remained silent for several more laps. We were already jogging quite quickly, and my breaths were beginning to come in faster. He barely sounded puffed in comparison, but that was hardly a surprise given how fit he was.

“Are the two of you together?” His voice hitched slightly as he spoke.

I stopped in the middle of the court and turned to him. “Why are you asking me this?” I said between exhausted breaths. “Why do you care?”

He’d stopped barely a foot away from me, his green eyes stormy and filled with pain. “You know I still care. It’s just… I didn’t think you’d move on from us so fast.”

“I can move on however fast I want,” I replied. “You broke up with me. You don’t get to dictate how I move on.”

“You are with him then?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m not. We’re friends, just like I told you.”

“So, you’re kissing your friends now?”

“I’m kissing whoever can make me forget about you for just one moment. You think I’m moving on too fast, but that’s just the problem. I can’t seem to move on from you at all. You didn’t just break my heart when we broke up, you decimated it, and no matter what I do, I can’t fit the pieces back together again. So, yeah, I kissed Wes, and maybe I’ll do it again. We can’t be together, and I’m trying to accept that. Maybe you need to accept that too.”

I turned to walk away, but Noah called after me. “You think it’s easy for me to accept losing the best thing that’s ever happened to me?”

His words were a dagger straight to my heart, and I glanced over my shoulder at him. “If you really felt that way, we never would have broken up.”

He opened his mouth and went to say something but quickly closed it again. He looked lost for words, and I shook my head. He was never going to fight for us, and we both knew it.

I spun round and stormed away from him before he could torment me any further.



NOAH'S WORDS haunted me the rest of the day, so I was glad when Wes suggested we study together in the library after dinner. I hated that Noah had gotten in my head, and I jumped at the chance to fill my thoughts with economics homework instead.

Unfortunately, my economics homework didn't want to be in my thoughts. I must have been a terrible study partner. Wes was having to ask me something several times before I registered the question, and even when I heard him, I had no clue what the answer was. My mind was somewhere else entirely, and most of my homework lay unfinished on the desk.

"You seem distracted," Wes said after I'd misheard one of his questions yet again.

"I know. I'm sorry. I..." My voice trailed off as I looked at him. "Wait, you wear glasses?"

I was surprised I hadn't noticed him put them on, especially since they made him look like some kind of hot librarian. They gave off all these sexy nerd vibes, and now that I'd seen them, they were impossible to ignore.

I didn't know he needed glasses. I'd never seen him wearing them before. Maybe he realized he couldn't use them too often because they gave him too much power. He knew he would constantly captivate all the girls at school if he wore them every day.

"You only just noticed? Your head *is* in the clouds tonight." He gave a nervous smile. "But, yeah, I wear glasses for reading sometimes. I'm always forgetting them though."

"Uh-huh." Man, even I sounded completely captivated by him right now. I'd only just noticed the glasses, but their power was getting to me already.

He frowned at my response. "You think I look silly."

He went to remove them, but I lifted a hand in complaint. "Don't…"

He paused, lightly grasping the side of the frame between his finger and thumb.

"I like the glasses," I said.

He dropped his hand and tilted his head to the side as he watched me. "I can't tell if you're making fun of me."

"I'm definitely not."

"Sawyer says I look stupid in them."

"I'm sure he's just jealous."

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure he needs glasses too, but he refuses to get them.”

It was probably a good thing Sawyer didn’t also have glasses. I couldn’t even begin to imagine the kind of damage the twins would inflict on girls’ hearts if they both walked around the school looking like young blond versions of Clark Kent.

“Well, I think the glasses look great.”

He slowly gave me a smile and shifted slightly closer to me. “Really?”

I nodded, not quite able to find my words now that he was sitting so close. We were at a desk in the main section of the library, and there were enough students around that there was no way Wes was going to kiss me again. It didn’t stop my eyes from dropping to his lips though. Ever since I’d told him we were never kissing again, it was all I’d been able to think about, especially when he was around. Things felt so much better when he kissed me, would it really be so bad if I gave in to the temptation again?

I think Wes might have been thinking the same thing because his lips were only inches from mine. I hadn’t even seen him move. Or had I been the one that moved? One small kiss in the library wasn’t all that bad, was it?

A cough sounded behind us, and we both jerked backward, my cheeks flaming bright red. I turned to find the crotchety, old librarian frowning down at us. “You two. No funny business in the library,” she hissed.

I swallowed and quickly nodded. Wes and I responded at the same time, “Yes, Miss Davis.”

She lifted an eyebrow, and I quickly turned back to my homework, focusing on it until she moved away. As soon as she was out of earshot, Wes and I burst into hushed laughter, making the whole table next to us turn and shoot us curious looks. I tried my best to ignore them. I’d already overheard them gossiping about Wes and me this evening. People needed to mind their own business.

“That was close,” Wes said.

“Was it?” I turned to him. “I had no intention of partaking in any funny business in the library…”

He gave me a smile. “Sure, you didn’t.”

“I didn’t.”

“No one would blame you if you did. You do find me irresistible in my glasses, after all.”

“I didn’t say you were irresistible.”

“Your lips might not have, but your eyes did.” He gave me a cheeky grin. “And knowing how much you like the glasses, I’m thinking I should be more responsible with my eyesight and wear them more often.”

“I mean, if you want girls throwing themselves at you in the corridor, then go right ahead.”

“There’s only one girl I want throwing herself at me…”

My cheeks flushed as I glanced away. Wes was doing a terrible job at sticking within the friend zone. Ever since we’d kissed, the border of the zone had become blurry, and he’d been dancing right across it far too frequently this week.

The thing was, I didn’t hate it when he flirted with me. In fact, I quite liked it. It was easy and fun, and Wes always managed to make me smile. It didn’t hurt that he was gorgeous either.

Wes was still grinning when I focused back on him. “We’re really not getting much of our economics homework done, are we?” he said.

“Not really.”

“Want to take a walk outside instead? Perhaps we’ll focus better if we clear our heads.”

I wasn’t sure if he was talking in code or not. We’d been so close to kissing before that my mind immediately conjured up thoughts of finding somewhere far more secluded and finishing what we nearly started. He looked genuine enough though, and I was pretty sure I was just wishful thinking. I began to pack my books away. “A walk sounds great.”

We went to leave our table, but as I looked up, I found Luther and Kaden seated not far from us. They were watching me closely. Given the matching looks of accusation in their eyes, they must have seen me nearly kiss Wes.

My throat constricted with a feeling of guilt, but I knew I had no reason to feel guilty. I was single and allowed to kiss whomever I wanted. Admittedly, I probably needed to avoid nearly kissing them in the library and with an audience, but I’d done nothing wrong.

“I just need to borrow these books,” Wes said, holding up several texts he’d gathered before I met him in the library. “It won’t take me more than a few minutes. Can I meet you outside?”

I gave him a tight smile. “Sure.”

As he headed over to the librarian, I turned toward Luther and Kaden once more. Their eyes were still on me, and I stormed over to their table.

Luther leaned back in his chair as I approached, a disapproving look on his face. Kaden didn't appear nearly so judgmental, but I could see the disappointment in his eyes.

"What's with you and Wes?" Luther demanded.

"That's none of your business."

"Except, I think it is. I told you not to give up on Noah."

"And I told you that was unfair. I never agreed with you."

"So? What? You're with Wesley Montfort now?"

"Like I said, that's not your concern."

He shrugged. "It will be when Noah finds out. And he's going to find out. Every kid in the library has been trying not to throw up from watching the two of you canoodle in here all night."

I glanced around the room, and several people quickly looked away, avoiding my gaze. No matter what I did in this school, it seemed I always had an audience. I didn't want Luther's words to affect me, but they did. My chest tightened, and my heart struggled to remember the way it had been so happily beating only moments ago. I didn't want Noah to hear anything that might upset him, but I also couldn't spend the rest of my life walking on eggshells because I was worried about how he might feel. We were over, and despite Luther's concerns, Wes and I weren't in a relationship. We were just two hurt souls trying to help stitch each other back together.

"We weren't canoodling. Wes and I are just friends," I finally said.

"It didn't look that way to me or anyone else here," Luther replied.

"Noah's going to be really hurt," Kaden added. It was the first thing he'd said in the conversation, and somehow his quiet condemnation hurt just as much as Luther's hard words.

"How is this my fault?" My voice was raised, and several students looked up from their books. I made sure to talk much quieter as I continued. "I know you're both Noah's friends, but he's the one who chose to end our relationship. You can't get pissed at me for accepting that and moving on."

"So, you admit it, you're moving on."

I scowled at Luther. "Of course, I want to move on. Nobody wants to stay miserable."

"I think Noah does." Once again, Kaden's words were calm and thoughtful, and they cut deeper because of it.

“Well, that’s his problem. Not mine.” I shook my head. “Look, I’m not going to let you two make me feel guilty about anything I do or don’t do. Noah and I are over, and I’m going to keep doing my best to put our relationship behind me. So, stop with your judgmental stares and cryptic advice. It’s not helping anyone.”

I turned and walked away before either of the boys could respond. I wasn’t quite sure what I’d hoped to achieve by talking to Kaden and Luther, but it had only served to make me more annoyed. They were acting like I’d betrayed Noah, but we weren’t together anymore, and all I was doing was trying to survive the aftermath of our breakup. Was I really the bad guy for spending time with the one person who helped me forget the pain?

I was still sparking with irritation as I made my way from the library. I was sick of being told how to feel and what to think. And I hated how invested people had become in my love life. It was no one else’s business but my own, and yet I constantly seemed to hear other students gossiping about it. I was so sick of it, and I just wanted to take control of the narrative for once. More than anything, I just needed my whirring mind to stop.

Wes was already waiting for me in the corridor. There were other students milling around, but I barely noticed them as he started smiling at me. His expression dimmed when he saw my stormy demeanor.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I took a breath to try to calm myself. “It’s nothing.”

“Did something happen?”

“Just Kaden and Luther.” I shook my head. “But they’re not the real problem. I know they want to protect their friend. It’s everyone else that’s getting to me. I’m so sick of the gossip in this place. I swear, no matter what I do people are always talking about me. I’m single. I should be able to do whatever I want.”

He watched me for a second before he slowly started to smile. “So, you should do what you want then...”

“What—” I started to speak, but my question was cut off as Wes pulled me toward him, my hands landing against his chest as he wrapped his arms about me. His face was so close to mine, and I could sense everyone in the corridor was watching us. His eyes danced with mischief, and my heart raced in response.

“What exactly do you think I want?” I whispered.

“What you wanted in New York. And in my room...”

My eyes went to his mouth as he spoke. “You think I want to kiss you?”

“I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time,” he said. “And you did nearly partake in ‘funny business’ with me in the library.”

“I did not. I—”

He silenced my protests by pulling me closer and kissing me like we were completely alone in the world. For a few blissful moments, my mind went totally blank, and my body buzzed with a new kind of emotion. Wes’s lips worked their magic and somehow rebooted me, so when we drew apart, I no longer felt annoyed or worried.

He grinned, his cheeks turning slightly pink as he looked around at the staring students. “I don’t think I’ve helped you with your gossip problem.”

“No,” I agreed, my cheeks flushing too. Although if what Kaden and Luther had said was true, the kids who’d been watching Wes and I in the library tonight probably wouldn’t be surprised.

“I’m sure they will just blame the glasses. Really, you had no chance of resisting me.”

I laughed. “They are kind of irresistible.”

“I knew it.” He winked. “Remind me again why I shouldn’t wear them all the time?”

“Because I have no self-control when you do.”

“Now we couldn’t have that, could we?”

I swallowed as the more rational part of my brain started to kick in. “We probably shouldn’t have done that.” There were many reasons why, but I was already concerned about damaging my friendship with Wes. That was only going to intensify now that everyone at school would think we were together.

Wes waved my concern off with one hand. “Don’t overthink it. It was just one friend helping another out.” It was almost like he could read my mind.

“You’re sure it was nothing more?”

“It was nothing more,” he agreed. “You ready for our walk?”

“Uh, sure.” He was sounding way too calm and collected about all this. Meanwhile, I was internally beginning to freak out.

Wes lightly wrapped an arm over my shoulder and started to guide me away from the library, happily ignoring the whispers and curious looks that trailed us as we went.

I had no idea how he could act so unaffected by the attention. But more so, how he was so convinced that our kiss meant nothing. He was clearly fine with us just being friends. But why was a part of me disappointed?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lily collapsed into the chair next to me at breakfast the following morning. She was cradling a cup of coffee to her chest like it was her precious. “I’m so tired,” she said, stifling a yawn.

“I can see that. You’re looking at your coffee like you wish you could inject it into your veins somehow.”

“Oh, that would be the dream,” she said before taking a long sip.

“Why are you so tired?”

“My parents surprised me with a trip home over the weekend,” she said. “I left straight from New York and took an extra couple of days off. I only got back late last night.”

“I was wondering where you’ve been. But that’s so exciting,” I said. “I know how much you miss home. How was it?”

“So good.” She shared a sleepy smile with me. “I got to see all my friends, and my baby sister is getting so big. She’s nearly crawling now.” She fished her phone out and showed me a picture of a tiny baby with a big toothless grin. The little girl had chubby cheeks with adorable dimples, and she shared Lily’s big brown eyes.

“Aww, she’s so cute,” I said.

“Abby’s pretty sweet,” Lily agreed. “But it makes me sad. She’s changing so much and so quickly. I feel like I’m missing everything because I’m here at Weybridge.”

“That must be hard.”

“It’s not easy. Though sleep is a whole lot harder to come by back home. Abby wakes up crying at like 3:00 A.M. every morning. I definitely

don’t miss that here.”

“Every morning? Really?”

“Like clockwork. My mom looks like a zombie these days.”

“I’d probably look like a zombie too if I was constantly woken up in the middle of the night.”

“Tell me about it.” She placed her phone back down as she took another sip of her coffee. “So, how was the rest of your weekend in New York?”

“It was fun,” I said. “I had dinner with my dad on Friday night, but mostly I hung out with Anna, Cress, and the twins. We shopped and did some sightseeing and ate so much good food. We went to a club on Saturday night, but that was just chaotic and not really my thing.”

“I don’t think it would be my thing either,” she agreed.

“Yeah, I don’t recommend it.” I focused down on my granola pot. It was mixed with fresh fruit and yogurt and just about the most delicious thing I’d tried for breakfast so far at school. Everyone else raved about the waffles here, but there were only so many mornings a week you could eat them before you were waffled out.

“So, did anything else happen in New York?” Lily asked. “Like maybe you got closer with a certain twin...”

My head jerked up. “You already heard about that?”

Lily’s eyes were wide, and I could tell she hadn’t been certain if she should believe the rumor. “Amber heard you and Wes were acting all adorable together in the library last night, and then apparently you were seen making out in the corridor.”

“Oh, ah, yeah, we did kiss,” I said. “But it was just a kiss. We’re not dating or anything.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “I’m not ready for another boyfriend.”

“So, why were you kissing Wes then?”

“Uh...” I didn’t exactly have a rational explanation for our kiss. “It seemed like a good idea at the time?”

It had felt like the right thing to do last night, but now I wondered if we’d been a bit hasty. Things between us were getting confusing, and I really didn’t want to screw up our friendship. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to regret it.

“Wow.” She sighed. “I wish I could kiss a hot guy just because I felt like it.”

“Why can’t you?”

Her cheeks flushed and she quickly shook her head. “I’m not nearly brave enough for that.”

“I bet you’re braver than you think.”

“Nope. I couldn’t do it even if one of my book boyfriends showed up at school. And some of them are *perfect*.”

I laughed. “Yeah, guys in the real world have a lot to live up to if you read.”

“I bet Wes would be pretty close.” There was a suggestive look in her eyes. “He’s super sweet and very good-looking.”

“He is,” I agreed. His personality was nothing like Noah’s, and for that I was grateful. I was totally done with the whole dark and brooding type.

“And you really don’t want to date him?” she asked. “I bet he’d be an amazing boyfriend.”

I frowned because she was asking questions I thought I knew the answers to, but I suddenly didn’t feel so certain. Lily was right; Wes would make an amazing boyfriend. He was always so kind and generous, and his kisses were incredible. I loved our friendship, but what if a relationship with him was even better?

I did my best to quickly dislodge that line of thinking with a shake of my head. I was in no state to start another relationship. And I didn’t want to risk losing Wes as a friend for some short-lived fling. Besides, he’d been clear last night that he didn’t see us as anything more than friends.

“I don’t want to date him,” I finally answered Lily. “He’s a really good friend, and that’s it.”

“If you say so...”

“I do.” Although, if I was truly serious, it meant I needed to put a stop to our impulsive kisses, and I didn’t know how to feel about that.

I quickly thought of another subject, not wanting to keep talking about Wes. “So, are you reading anything good at the moment?”

Lily’s eyes lit up, and she happily launched into conversation about her latest fantasy read. She became animated as she explained the story and the characters. I liked how passionate she was whenever she talked about books. She also spared no detail as she told me about some of the more intimate parts of the book, and I had to wonder how someone so quiet and sweet could enjoy such a spicy read.

I laughed as she described one of the scenes. “It sounds like you’re reading some kind of fairy porn.”

“Oh, yeah, some parts are a bit like that,” she admitted, her cheeks turning pink. “But I like the tension between the characters more.”

“I can definitely see why you’re not interested in dating the boys at school.”

“Are you girls talking about book porn without me?” I looked up as Sawyer joined us at the table. “I need details.”

Lily’s cheeks instantly went from pink to flaming red, and she sank into her chair to hide herself. “It’s nothing you want to hear about,” she murmured.

“Clearly, you don’t know me,” Sawyer replied, leaning forward on the table. His eyes sparkled with excitement. “Tell me everything.”

“Maybe later. I have to get to class.” Lily practically choked out her response, and she was up and out of her chair before either of us could stop her.

“Class isn’t for another twenty minutes,” Sawyer called after her, but she was already halfway across the room.

Sawyer leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I miss all the good conversations.”

“You wanted to hear about faerie book porn?” I asked.

He grinned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

I shook my head and focused on my breakfast.

“Speaking of stimulating content,” he continued. “I hear you and my brother put on quite the show last night.”

“We just kissed,” I muttered, wondering how many more people were going to ask me about Wes today.

“Must have been some kiss. I think he’s in love with you.”

“That’s not true, and you know it.”

“Isn’t it?” He gave me a devious smile. “Because everyone’s talking about what a cute couple you are, and I’m wondering if I should start to call you sis?”

My eyes narrowed on him, but he didn’t seem the least bit concerned by my scowl. “Don’t call me sis.”

“But we’re practically family.”

“I think I preferred talking about faerie porn with you.”

“We can always circle back to that,” Sawyer replied.

I stood from the table and collected my empty bowl.

“Where are you going, sis?”

“Class.”

“Was it something I said?” He was grinning wickedly at me, and I could see just how much he was enjoying pushing my buttons. I ignored the comment and left the hall, bumping into Cress as I walked out into the corridor.

She caught my arm. “Where are you off to in such a rush?”

“Sawyer’s a nightmare.”

She laughed. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m wondering if he’s actually Satan’s spawn.”

“There’s a strong possibility,” she agreed. “Speaking of Montforts, on the way over here, I happened to hear people talking about a certain kiss between you and Wes.”

I let out a sigh. “I guess it was to be expected.” I knew people would talk about our kiss outside the library, but I couldn’t bring myself to regret it. It had been a great kiss. It just sucked that I couldn’t seem to do anything in this school without everyone having an opinion on it. And it was especially hard when I knew my actions might hurt people’s feelings—well, one person’s feelings. I was trying my best to avoid thinking about how Noah would react. I couldn’t imagine he would take it well given our fight in PE the other day.

“Don’t let it worry you. I’m sure they’ll all be gossiping about someone else before the day is through,” Cress replied.

“Want to go make out with someone in the dining hall to take the heat off me?”

She laughed. “I’m a pretty good friend, but I’m not *that* good a friend.”

“Maybe I should go back and try to convince Sawyer. I bet he’d do it.”

“Probably,” she agreed with a smile. “But I don’t think anyone would bat an eyelid at Sawyer making a scene, so they’ll probably still be more interested in you. You just need to suck it up and get through the day. It will be better tomorrow.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Despite Cress’s reassurance, the whispers didn’t let up at all that day and carried over into the next. A few girls asked me about it at breakfast the next morning, and a freshman boy even asked me if I wanted to go to the

library with him. He blew me kisses and then ran back to his friends laughing.

I certainly didn't enjoy the attention, but after dating and breaking up with Noah—and the bombshell about my dad—I was growing all too used to it. I might have been able to ignore it entirely, but the more people talked, the more I worried about how Noah would feel. He had to have heard about the kiss by now, and it left me feeling terrible. We might not be able to be together, but I knew he still cared.

I kept waiting to run into him, but he wasn't in any of my classes on Wednesday, and there was no sign of him on Thursday either.

It seemed like too much of a coincidence that he would disappear from school at the same time everyone was gossiping about Wes and me. There had to be another explanation. Noah wasn't the kind of guy who would let mere rumors about a girl he dumped worry him. I wanted to ask Cress if she knew why her cousin wasn't in school, but I didn't want her to know I was thinking about him. So, the question remained unanswered in my mind.

"I hear you've moved on quickly."

I had to smother a dark scowl as Veronica turned to me, a smirk lifting the corner of her mouth. I hated that I was stuck sitting behind her in English. She always had some snide remark for me, and today was no different. She must have cheered the moment she heard I'd kissed Wes. I imagined she felt she was one step closer to finally snagging Noah for herself.

"Aw, Veronica, I didn't know you cared," I replied. I tried to focus on the book I was supposed to be reading, but Veronica didn't want to take the hint.

"Oh, I don't. I'm just pleased to see you've finally proved me right."

She was dangling bait in front of me, and I really shouldn't have taken it, but I couldn't help myself. I lifted my gaze to hers once more. "And how have I done that?"

"It's just clear you never truly cared about Noah. Anyone who did would never be able to forget him so fast. You were obviously just using him."

My hands clenched into fists under the table as I tried to contain my anger. "You don't know anything about how I feel about him."

She shrugged. "I'm not the only one that thinks that."

“I’m sure you are,” Cress fired back. “And anyone who couldn’t see how much they both meant to each other is clearly blind.”

Veronica turned her smug smile on Cress. She didn’t seem the least bit bothered by her outburst. “Where is your cousin anyway? No one’s seen him at school in days...”

Cress stiffened. “Noah’s been sick.”

She’d responded so awkwardly that I wondered whether Noah was truly unwell. Either way, Veronica seemed to accept Cress’s reasoning, and she placed a hand against her chest in dismay. “Oh, the poor thing. I better go check on him. See if he’s okay.”

“He’s resting. I’m sure he doesn’t need or want your help,” Cress replied.

“No. If I know Noah, he’ll need someone to care for him right now. And I know all the best ways to *care* for him.”

My nails dug into the palms of my hands as my fists clenched tighter. I didn’t even want to think about what Veronica was insinuating.

She didn’t give either of us a chance to respond before she turned to the front of the classroom, lifting a hand in the air. “Mr. Wagner, I need a pass for the school nurse. I have a terrible headache.”

The teacher barely opened his mouth to answer her when Veronica gathered her things and started for the front of the room. She looked back in my direction when she reached the door and gave me a knowing smile before disappearing from the room.

“Noah’s going to kill me,” Cress murmured.

“Is he really sick?”

“Uh, he’s actually—”

“You know what, I don’t want to know. The less I know about Noah, the better.”

I didn’t want to think about Noah, but he remained on my mind for the rest of class. I kept wondering if Veronica had found him. If he was letting her look after him like she’d said she would. I knew I shouldn’t let her get to me, and I was probably a hypocrite for being hurt he was moving on. But I still cared for him. I just wondered when it was going to stop.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Sawyer has demanded your presence at his soccer game tonight.” Wes was standing at my bedroom door, a hopeful expression on his face.

“He told me to tell you he, and I quote, ‘he will be very disappointed if you miss another of his matches.’”

"Oh no, really?”

“Yep.” Wes sounded remarkably positive considering my response.

I’d been avoiding Sawyer’s matches for one very good reason. I didn’t want to watch Noah play. I’d been trying to purge him from my life, and going to his games seemed an unnecessary torture. I was working on moving on now, so it was probably time I stopped using him as an excuse. Still, it was cold this evening, and the idea of freezing my butt off as I sat in a soccer stadium wasn’t that appealing.

“Sawyer won’t even know if I’m there or not. Isn’t the presence of the rest of the school enough for him?”

“His need for adoration knows no bounds.”

I laughed. Sawyer did seem to enjoy soaking up the attention he got during his games. He wasn’t even the star player, but he certainly acted like he was.

“Also, he’s decided you’re his good luck charm. He didn’t play very well at his last game, and since you weren’t there, he’s decided you’re to blame.”

“He can’t be serious. Is he really that superstitious?”

Wes shrugged. “I might be his brother, but not even I understand Sawyer most of the time.”

“I’m not going to his game just because he played like crap last week.”

“He also promised to stop calling you sis if you come.”

“Ugh, he told you about that?”

“Oh yeah. He’s already planning our wedding.”

I groaned. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Wes grinned. “I am, *mostly*. He’s very team Wesobel.”

“Oh no, not the couple name. Has he been talking to Cress?”

Wes laughed. “Probably. You’ve got to admit though, Wesobel has kind of a ring to it.”

I glared at him, and he held his hands up in surrender.

“Okay, no couple name. But will you come to the game?”

“I don’t know. It seems like a lot of pressure to be Sawyer’s lucky charm…”

“I’m sure Cress would like you to see her dancing too,” Wes added.

I let out a breath, knowing there was no way I could say no now. If Wes wanted me at the game, he probably should have led with that argument. Cress had mentioned she’d like me to be there earlier today, and I was already feeling guilty about letting her down. I couldn’t avoid Noah’s games forever, so I was just going to have to suck it up and face the cold.

My shoulders slouched. “Okay, fine. You’ve twisted my arm. I’ll come.”

Surprise lit Wes’s eyes as though he hadn’t believed it would be that easy to convince me. “You will?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I can handle disappointing *both* Sawyer and Cress.”

“And don’t forget me. I would have been disappointed if you weren’t there too.”

“Well, we couldn’t have that.”

I changed quickly and threw on the same outfit I’d worn to the last soccer game, but I added a sweater, jacket, gloves, beanie, and scarf to keep me warm. I looked like the Michelin Man, but I didn’t care. I just hoped it was enough to keep me warm. There was nothing worse than being stuck outside in the cold when you weren’t wearing enough.

We set off for the stadium, and the moment I was outside, I began to question my decision. It wasn’t just cold this evening; it was freezing. Not even the extra layers I’d put on seemed to be helping.

“It’s not even winter yet. How is it so cold?” I grumbled as the freezing wind cut through my sweater and lashed against my exposed cheeks. There

was nothing I hated more than the cold.

Wes chuckled. “I’m surprised you can feel the cold at all given the way you’re bundled up.”

“I’m going to turn into an icicle,”

“You’d make a very adorable icicle.”

I rolled my eyes. “No one cares if they’re adorable or not once they’re frozen, Wesley.”

He kept smiling at me like my response only made me more adorable to him. I nudged him with my shoulder, hoping to distract him enough that he’d stop looking at me that way.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s walk faster so we can get out of the wind.”

When we reached the stadium, Anna waved us over to some seats she’d saved. “I can’t believe you came,” she said as I sat beside her. “Wes told me he was going to talk to you, but I didn’t think he’d actually be able to convince you. The weather’s foul.”

“I guess Wes can be pretty convincing when he wants to be.”

“It’s a skill,” he agreed with a proud smile. His blond hair was sticking out under the sides of his beanie, and his cheeks were pink from the icy wind. I had no idea how he managed to look so good despite the cold. It didn’t suit me nearly as much.

I kept sniffing because my nose was runny, and the cold had already permeated my jeans and was chilling my legs. I had expected my gloves to at least keep my hands warm, but my fingers were almost numb. I cupped my hands to my mouth and blew into them, hoping to thaw my fingers out a little, but it was useless.

“You look like you’re freezing,” Wes said. “Here.” He didn’t wait for me to respond before he wrapped his arm around me.

I turned rigid as he pulled me in close. I wasn’t sure if cuddling up to Wes at a soccer game was really a good idea, but the moment his warmth hit me, all hesitation disappeared. He was practically my own space heater, and I cuddled into him trying to get warmer still. I knew I should have been more cautious, in case this was giving him the wrong idea about us, but I was too cold to care.

The team came out onto the pitch, and I stiffened again slightly in Wes’s grasp as I waited to spot Noah. When I didn’t see him, I managed to relax. Cress had said he was sick, so maybe he wasn’t well enough to play today. I couldn’t help but feel a little relieved.

Wes laughed, and I followed his gaze to his brother who was blowing kisses into the crowd. Actually, he was sending them right at us. I scowled at him, but that only made Sawyer smile brighter.

“I think he’s happy his lucky charm is here,” Wes said.

“I hope he doesn’t actually believe that. I’m really not sure I can handle the pressure.”

Wes gave me a squeeze, and with his lips close to my ear, he whispered, “Maybe we can tell him you’re too busy being my lucky charm instead.”

I swallowed, my body tingling as I felt his breath against my neck. “Yeah, maybe that will work.” I tried to whisper, but my words seemed to become stuck in my throat.

Anna shot me a curious look, and I smiled back at her as innocently as I could. She shrugged and turned away as the girl next to her said something. I let out a breath. Wes was totally getting under my skin right now in all the good ways, and I hoped it wasn’t too obvious.

The game started, and thankfully Wes’s attention moved from my neck to the field. The teams seemed better matched tonight than the last game I’d come to, and Weybridge was finding it difficult to score. I wondered if it was because Noah wasn’t playing. He was a force to be reckoned with both on and off the field, and our guys seemed to be struggling without him.

Sawyer was playing well, but there was only so much he could do on his own. The rest of the team was lagging, and I had a feeling I wasn’t quite as lucky a charm as Sawyer thought.

When the whistle blew for the halftime break, both teams had yet to score. “I was thinking of grabbing a hot chocolate to warm up,” Wes said. “Do you girls want one?”

“That sounds great,” I said.

“Only if it’s spiked with Baileys,” Anna replied.

Wes lifted his eyebrows in reply. “I don’t think the school canteen spikes hot chocolates with Baileys…”

“I’m joking, obviously.” Anna laughed. “Although that would really help warm us up. But yeah, I’ll take a regular hot chocolate. Thanks, Wes.”

He started off down the bleachers, and I watched him go with a smile on my face. Wes could be really sweet.

“You guys should just date already,” Anna said, drawing my attention back to her.

My cheeks flushed. “It’s not like that between us.”

“It should be, and I bet he thinks it is. He’s completely in love with you.”

“No, he’s still getting over Sarah, and I’m just a distraction.”

“He doesn’t exactly look like he’s crying into his pillow at night over her. They might have been together for ages, but they’ve barely spent any time together lately. Even over the summer, they didn’t see each other. To be honest, I think they’ve kind of been over for a while.”

“We’re just friends.”

“The whole snuggling into each other as you watch a soccer game isn’t exactly giving off the just friends vibe.”

“It’s only because I’m cold.”

“Does he know that?”

I fell silent. Maybe Anna had a point. Things had been changing between Wes and I. We had kissed several times now, and he’d been flirting with me all week. We were definitely straying beyond the friendship zone. It was just a few impulsive kisses though. Did that really mean we automatically needed to be more than friends?

Thankfully, the dance team started their halftime performance and brought an end to our conversation. I didn’t have an answer for Anna’s questions. The truth was, I didn’t really know where I stood with Wes. He’d told me he was happy being just friends, but what if he wanted more? What if I wanted more?

“Did I miss much?” Wes asked, returning with the hot chocolates.

“Thanks,” I murmured, taking the drink from him before I shook my head. “Cress and the team only just started.”

“Good.” He settled into his seat, wrapping his arm around me again. He did it without any hesitation, and Anna’s words started rattling around in my head once again. I really liked Wes, and I’d have to be crazy to deny there wasn’t something between us. But Noah was still taking up too much space in my heart, loitering there like some kind of unwanted roommate, and it wouldn’t be fair to Wes to pretend otherwise.

I cheered loudly with Anna when the dance team finished their routine. Cress was waving up into the crowd as she made her way from the field, and her smile widened when she caught sight of me. I immediately felt bad for missing her other performances in my attempts to avoid seeing Noah and vowed to always come to his games even if I hated his guts just so I could make Cress smile that way.

As the teams returned to the field, Anna nudged me with her elbow.

“What?”

She nodded toward the field, and I saw Noah making his way onto the pitch. My stomach tightened at the sight of him. He looked tired, and he must have still been feeling unwell because there were dark bags under his eyes.

“I didn’t think he was playing today,” Anna said. “I thought he was sick.”

“I guess he’s feeling better,” I replied.

“Hopefully,” Anna added. “Someone needs to turn this game around. It’s been too close for my liking so far.”

The whistle blew, and the game kicked off again. As the second half got going, it was clear the Eagles were playing far better with Noah on the field. The other team could barely get hold of the ball, and when they did, Noah would be the one to win it back. Whatever illness had kept him from school, it certainly wasn’t slowing him down tonight. He was barking orders at his teammates, and they seemed to be responding, as every one of them looked more energetic than they had in the first half.

One of the opposing players became frustrated with the Eagles’ sudden dominance. The big, bulky guy with jet-black hair was sprinting around the pitch like a madman, desperately trying to get the ball back. When the ball fell to Noah, I gasped as the guy flew toward him and lunged at him with both feet. Noah didn’t flinch. He simply flicked the ball up and over the player, leaving him in a heap on the floor as he dribbled away. The crowd rose to their feet as Noah passed the ball between two defenders and straight into Sawyer’s path. It was just him and the goalkeeper, and he calmly curled the ball into the net.

The stadium erupted as the Eagles finally got their first goal, and the players all ran to congratulate Sawyer. Noah remained calm, as though it was no big deal, a focused and determined look still etched on his face. The guy with the jet-black hair wasn’t far from him, still on the ground, a furious look in his eyes.

Wes had his fingers in his mouth and was whistling loudly, and I laughed at his enthusiasm. “Stop encouraging Sawyer, or he’ll keep scoring, and I’ll be his lucky charm for life.”

He grinned at me and leaned in close to my ear so I could hear him speak over the cheers in the stadium. “Maybe that’s exactly what I want so I

can cuddle you at all his games.”

I swallowed as he pulled back to look me in the eyes. I’d seen that look before, and it certainly wasn’t friendly. I got the feeling he wanted to kiss me again. It was probably a good thing the referee started blowing his whistle loudly and Wes looked away; if we kissed again, the blurry line we’d crossed might disappear entirely.

“Shit,” Anna said. “What’s he doing?”

I glanced at the field and gasped as I saw two players rolling around on the ground fighting. Everyone on the field was rushing toward them, and when they pulled the two players apart, I realized Noah was one of them.

“That did not just happen.” Anna’s eyes were wide. “Tell me that didn’t just happen!”

"What’s going on?” Wes asked, his expression filled with confusion.

“I missed it too,” I said. “Why was Noah fighting?”

“I have no idea,” Anna said. “But I’m pretty sure number nine started it.”

The referee continued to blow his whistle as he tried to calm the players on both sides. Sawyer and some of his teammates had grabbed Noah and were pulling him away from the scene while a group of players on the other team were complaining to the referee. The guy with the jet-black hair was glaring at Noah, a smug grin on his face.

“That’s the guy he was fighting?” I asked Anna.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “He just ran right up to Noah after the goal, and suddenly they were on the ground throwing punches.”

Once things had calmed down, the referee marched up to both Noah and the opposing player and showed them a red card, ordering them off the field.

“Oh no,” Wes said. “That’s Noah out for the rest of the game.”

Noah trudged off the field, and the rest of the Weybridge team shook their heads. Some of them could barely look at him. They’d played so well since he’d arrived, but now they had to go on without him. When Noah reached the edge of the field with his head hung low, it started to rain.

Thankfully our seats were under cover, but the water fell in hard sheets, quickly soaking the players on the field. Noah didn’t seem to notice. His wet shirt gripped his skin, and his damp hair flopped against his face.

He finally looked up, but it wasn’t to focus on the game as it got back underway. Instead, his eyes went straight to the stands and directly to me.

He didn’t even need to search for where I was sitting; it was like he could sense exactly where I was.

The agony in his gaze as he looked at me was hard to endure. And it was only once he broke our stare off and disappeared behind the bleachers that I felt like I could breathe again. He’d just been in a fight that got him kicked out of the game, but I couldn’t help but feel like there was something else behind the pain I saw in his eyes.



“ARE you sure you don’t want to come to Toddy’s?” Wes asked as we left the stadium. The Weybridge Eagles had held on to win the game, despite Noah getting sent off, so it seemed my time as Sawyer’s lucky charm wasn’t over. I’d been secretly hoping the team might lose so he’d fire me from the position.

“I’m sure. I need to have a hot shower to warm up,” I said. “Besides, I’m not that hungry.”

“You aren’t hungry for a Toddy’s burger?” Wes placed a hand against my forehead like he was taking my temperature. “Something must be wrong. Are you feeling okay?”

I swatted his hand away. “Very funny.”

“Yes, I know, I’m hilarious.”

I went to blow warm air into my freezing hands only to realize the reason they were so cold was because I’d left my gloves behind. It probably served me right for taking them off to steal some of Wes’s fries.

“Shit, I’ve left my gloves back at our seats,” I said.

“I’ll go grab them for you,” Wes offered.

“Don’t be silly. You’ve got a date with a Toddy’s burger. You can’t risk being late.”

“It’s no problem,” he said, but I shooed him onward.

“It’s fine. It will take me two minutes to jog back there. I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” He bent down and brushed a kiss against my cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

As I watched him leave, following the stream of students away from the stadium, I gently touched the place where he’d kissed my skin. He’d done it

so naturally, so thoughtlessly. Like giving each other such easy kisses was something we always did. I frowned as I watched him walking away, wondering how I felt about the way things had been changing between us. Our friendship had definitely been developing into something new, and I was trying to decide if I wanted it to change more still.

I walked back to the stadium, passing the few stragglers who were still making their way from the game. It seemed that everyone had left quickly tonight, which was hardly surprising given how cold it was.

I jogged up the stairs to my seat, relieved when I found my gloves waiting for me. I picked them up and put them on before making my way back down the steps. Although everyone had now left the stadium, the floodlights still lit the field. I was just about back to the entrance when I noticed someone alone on the grass, kicking balls into the goal at the far end of the field. It only took me a moment to realize it was Noah, and I stopped to watch him.

He seemed angry as he thumped ball after ball into the net as though he still needed to relieve whatever emotions or aggression had caused him to act out during the game. I hated seeing him like this and wondered if he needed someone to talk to. I stepped onto the field before I could stop myself and started walking across the grass toward him. I was probably the last person he wanted to talk to, but I couldn't just walk away and pretend I hadn't seen him.

Noah didn't notice me as I made my way across the field, but when he struck a ball and it cannoned off the frame of the goal, it bounced back and rolled toward me. He turned to jog after it, but he froze, and his eyes widened with surprise when he saw me.

"You shouldn't be out here, Isobel." He quickly regained his composure as he collected the ball and turned back toward the goal.

I tucked my hands into my pockets and came to a stop just a few meters from him. "I just wanted to check on you."

"Well, you didn't need to bother. I'm fine."

People who were fine didn't get into fights on soccer fields, but I didn't want to say that. Not when he was already so defensive.

"Should you really be out here practicing when you've been out of school sick for days?" I asked.

Noah snorted as he placed the ball on the ground. "If you consider being pulled out of school by your grandfather sick, then sure."

“Wait, you weren’t sick? But Cress said...”

“Cress covered for me. I don’t need everyone in this place knowing my business.”

I could certainly relate to that. Noah’s absence from school was the least of my concerns right now though. “Noah, what happened tonight?” He shook his head, refusing to answer.

“Look, we may not be together anymore, but you know you can talk to me, right?”

He grunted in reply, his eyes focused on the ball as he kicked it toward the goal. He booted it so hard it soared right over the top, disappearing beyond the fence behind the goal. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it from his face in clear frustration.

As his hair moved, it revealed a red mark on his forehead. I gasped when I realized it was a gash. It must have been from the fight because the area around it was still pink and swollen.

“Shit, Noah,” I said, rushing closer. When I reached him, I lifted a hand to his face and pushed his hair aside to get a better look. The cut thankfully looked shallow, but it seemed no one had tended to it because it was still slightly oozing blood.

“What are you doing?” he asked, going completely still under my touch.

I pulled my hand away, aware I might have crossed a line. I also took a step back because I was standing far too close. “That looks like it hurts,” I said, nodding at his wound.

He frowned and touched his forehead. He seemed surprised when he pulled his hand back and saw blood on his fingertips.

“Huh,” he muttered.

“You’re bleeding from your head and 'huh’ is all you’ve got to say?”

He shrugged and wiped his hand on his shorts. “It’s just a cut. I hadn’t even noticed it.”

“*Just* a cut?” I couldn’t understand how he could act so blasé about the whole thing. “Noah, why did you fight that guy?”

He huffed out a laugh but didn’t answer.

“Noah...”

“He insulted my family,” he said. “And he threw the first punch.”

“So, what, you just punched him back?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” Noah’s eyes flicked to mine, and I could see them burning with emotion. “He wanted a fight just as much as I did. I’ve got my

grandfather breathing down my neck, dragging me from school to try and get me in line, and my ex-girlfriend cuddling some other guy in the stands. So, yeah, I punched him. And you know what? I don't regret it. Hell, with how I feel right now, I'd do it again if I could. What I don't need is your sympathy. And I don't need to share my feelings with you. I just need to get this damn ball in the damn goal."

He emphasized his words by turning and thumping another ball toward the goal, only this one went wide of the target, and Noah swore.

"Well, I'm sorry for bothering you." I turned to walk away before he could say anything else. I could feel his eyes on me as I left, but he didn't try to stop me. I didn't want him to.

I walked back to the dorms, trying my best not to think about how my conversation with Noah had left me so much colder than the chill in the air had all night. I should have just agreed to go to Toddy's and forgotten about my gloves.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"How was the driving lesson?" Cress asked when I returned to our dorm room on Saturday morning.

I groaned and face-planted on my bed.

"That good, huh?" she said.

I groaned once more before rolling onto my back and pulling a pillow to my chest. "Not as bad as when Anna took me out, but not far off."

"Hey!" Anna complained as she walked out of our bathroom. "I happen to think we made great progress when I took you driving."

"Don't pretend it wasn't a total disaster," I replied. "And today wasn't much better."

"Was the instructor hot at least?" Anna asked as she plopped herself down on the bed beside me.

"If you find a fifty-year-old man who smells like fish hot, then sure."

Anna grimaced. "Yeah, you lost me at smelling like fish."

"But you were cool with the fifty-year-old man part?" Cress asked.

"Well, yeah. He could look like Lucius Malfoy." She fanned a hand against her neck. "I could definitely be with an old dude if he looked like my favorite Death Eater."

I rolled my eyes. "This one looked more like Dumbledore than Lucius."

"Eww." Anna cringed again, making me laugh.

"So, was the lesson really that terrible?" Cress's voice was soft, and I could easily hear her concern.

"It wasn't great. I just get so nervous and overwhelmed when I get behind the wheel that I freeze up. We didn't even get out of the parking lot."

“You’ll get the hang of it,” Cress said in an unsuccessful attempt to cheer me up.

“Are you going to have another lesson?” Anna asked.

“I think I’m going to have to. I hate driving, but I don’t want to give up.”

“That’s the spirit.” Cress gave me a warm smile. “So, I wanted to ask, do you have any plans for today?”

“Just homework,” I said.

“You’re not spending the day playing tonsil hockey with Wes?” Anna asked.

“Tonsil hockey?” I frowned as Anna and Cress both laughed. Anna really had a way with words sometimes. “No, I’m not playing tonsil hockey with Wes. He’s off campus rowing today.”

“Oh yeah,” Anna said. “I think I remember him mentioning that. Damn, it’s a shame the regatta isn’t here. I do love me some buff boys in rowing uniforms.”

“Of course, you do.” Cress giggled.

“If it makes you feel any better, Wes told me the school’s hosting a regatta here next weekend,” I said. “You’ll be able to see plenty of rowing boys then.”

“Really?” Anna sat up, and her eyes started to sparkle with excitement. “It’s like all my Christmases come at once.”

“You have a strange idea of Christmas,” I said.

“You say that now, but just wait. It’s going to be a hot guy present fest.”

“Is the uniform really that good, Cress?”

“It can be.” She looked thoughtful as though she was remembering regattas of the past. “It’s pretty formfitting, so it depends if the guy has the body to wear it or not.”

“And Wes totally has the body.” Anna nudged me with her shoulder.

Blood rushed to my cheeks, so I ignored her and continued to focus on Cress. “So, why were you asking about my plans for today?”

Thankfully she chose to answer me rather than point out my glowing red face. “Oh, I was hoping for a favor,” she said. “The dance team is painting our booth for the Halloween carnival today, and I thought I could convince you to come give us a hand. Anna’s already agreed to help, and there will be good tunes and pizza…”

“You had me at pizza,” I replied with a smile.

She beamed in response and clapped her hands. “Thanks, Isobel. You’re the best.”

“It’s no problem at all.” It sounded way more enjoyable than being holed up in my room all day doing homework. Plus, I’d been too nervous about my driving lesson to eat breakfast this morning, so I was starved.

“Okay, so, I need to go into town to grab the pizzas, and I want to pop by the shops to get some snacks too. Do you guys want to come?”

“Definitely,” Anna said. “It’s been forever since I’ve been to the supermarket, and my deodorant has been spraying nothing but air for about a week now.”

“Huh, I thought you smelled more than normal,” Cress said.

Anna poked her tongue out.

Cress turned to me. “How about you, Isobel?”

“As long as I don’t have to drive, I’m down.”

The girls both laughed.

“No, you don’t have to drive,” Cress said as she grabbed her car keys.

The three of us headed into town and stopped at the supermarket first. Anna insisted she needed to ride in the shopping cart, and Cress and I took turns pushing her around the shop. We loaded the cart up with so many snacks that only Anna’s head and arms were poking out from under the mountain of food.

“Don’t forget my deodorant,” Anna said. “You guys are going to have to choose one for me because I’m buried.”

“You were the one who insisted on being in the cart,” Cress said.

“Yeah, because that’s where all the tasty snacks belong.”

Cress and I groaned.

“Do you think she’ll ever be less arrogant?” Cress asked.

“Probably not,” I replied.

“Guys, I’m right here!” Anna cried, making us both laugh.

Cress added a deodorant to the cart, and we headed to the checkout. The woman at the till had the biggest frown on her face when she saw Anna riding in our cart. Anna had absolutely no shame and grinned widely up at her before asking about her day. She chatted so much that the woman didn’t have a chance to tell us off. To be honest, I think she was simply happy to see us leave by the time we were ready to pay.

We stopped by the pizza place and picked up ten massive pizzas before heading back to school. We carried them over to the large shed that had

been cleared out so students could work on their booths. There were already some girls and a couple of guys there, all of them painting the booth a bright shade of hot pink.

“I’ve got pizza,” Cress announced.

Cheers of excitement went up from the team. Everyone dropped their paintbrushes and converged on Cress. I was somewhat glad I’d snuck a piece in the car because it was like watching Cress walk into a pack of pizza-eating zombies.

My phone started ringing, and I smiled when I saw it was my mom calling.

“I’m going to take this outside,” I said to Anna, somewhat grateful to avoid the horde of hungry dancers. She was carrying some of the pizza boxes herself and looked like she was preparing for the moment when the dance team realized she also had pizza for them.

“Okay, I’ll try to save you a slice,” she said.

“Thanks.”

I went outside and answered my phone.

“Finally,” my mom gasped. “You’ve been missing my calls all week.”

“You’ve been missing mine,” I replied with a laugh. “Phone tag is the worst. How are you? How’s the café?”

“All good,” Mom said. “Frank complimented Norma on her new haircut last night, and Norma’s been blushing ever since.”

I laughed. “I wish they’d get together already.”

“These things take time. How’s school going?”

“School is good. I had my driving lesson this morning.”

“And…”

“You don’t want to know.” I pushed down a shiver at the memory. “But, in happier news, I’m spending this afternoon helping Cress paint her dance team’s booth for the Halloween carnival in two weeks.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Yeah. We just grabbed some pizzas for everyone, and we have so many snacks I’ll probably need a trip to the dentist when I’m done. I think it’s going to be a good afternoon.”

“Well, I won’t keep you too long,” Mom said.

“No, it’s okay. I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” she replied. “Actually, that’s part of the reason I called. The café’s been quiet, so I was thinking of taking a weekend off to

come visit you."

"Really?" I could barely contain my excitement. "But you always work weekends."

"Well, that was before you headed off to school. Norma can manage just fine without me. You and me always spend Halloween together."

I let out a joyful squeal, making my mom laugh. These last weeks without her had been hard, and I needed a hug from her now more than ever.

"It's a long drive over, so I'll only be able to make it for one night."

"One night is better than none," I said. "And if you're coming for Halloween, that means you'll be here for the carnival. This is going to be so much fun. I can't wait to see you."

"Me too," Mom said. "And if this goes well, hopefully I can make it up there more often."

"I'd love that." The thought of seeing her more frequently had my heart beating with elation.

"Do you think your father will be in town for Halloween?" Mom asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "He's been stuck in New York the last few weeks. He was supposed to come this weekend, but something came up, and he had to cancel. He didn't say when he'd be back."

"Oh, okay."

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason." She responded so fast I felt like there definitely was a reason.

"Do you want to see him?" I prompted.

"I mean, it would be nice to catch up with him again after all this time," she said. "But I'm sure we'll cross paths at some stage."

"I could invite him to the carnival if you like?"

"No, you don't have to do that." Her reply came quickly again.

"I was thinking of mentioning it to him anyway..." I hadn't been, but it sounded like my mom wanted to see Matthew. It was understandable given they had a child together and he'd done so much for me lately.

"Oh, well, I'm sure he'd appreciate the invite."

"Yeah, he sounds super busy at the moment though, so I doubt he'll be able to come," I added. I didn't want Mom to get her hopes up.

"I'm sure he'll do his best." She sounded a little relieved, and I didn't know what to make of her reaction. It seemed like she wasn't sure if she

wanted to see him again or not.

We spoke about her trip for a few more minutes before she said she had to go deal with something at the café. When I returned to the shed, I had the biggest smile on my face.

“Why do you look like you just won the lottery?” Anna asked as she handed over the slice of pizza she’d saved me.

“Because my mom is coming to visit at Halloween.”

“That’s so great,” Cress said as she joined us. “How long is she coming for?”

“Just the one night. So, we’ll have to show her a good time at the carnival.”

“I think we can do that.” Anna grinned.

“Do you think she’d like to volunteer to be on our kissing booth?” Cress asked.

I spluttered out a laugh. “What?”

“Well, there will be lots of adults at the carnival, so it might appeal to the older demographic.”

I was beginning to think she was actually serious. “I mean, I could ask her, but I don’t think that’s the best idea.”

“Why not?” Cress replied. “I’ve seen pictures of your mom. She’s a total babe.”

“Yeah, but can you imagine if we have to watch her kiss a teacher or something?” The thought made me want to throw up, and Anna and Cress shuddered.

“You’re right, that’s a terrible idea,” Cress said.

“I bet Coach August would totally line up to kiss her too,” Anna added, pretending to gag. “Yuck.”

“Okay. Not my best idea,” Cress admitted.

“Not even close,” I said before taking a bite of my pizza. It was dripping with grease and so cheesy you could barely taste the other toppings, but it was so, so good.

“Well, no one’s going to be kissing anyone if we don’t get our booth looking right,” Cress continued. “We should probably get to work.”

I quickly finished my slice before joining everyone to paint the booth. It was a fun afternoon, but most of us got covered in paint when some of the boys decided to start chasing us with their paintbrushes.

Cress, Anna, and I were laughing as we made our way back to the dorms when the booth was finally finished.

“We look like works of art,” I said, laughing at the splats of paint covering my clothes and hair. I had no doubt it was probably on my face too.

“Yeah, on reflection, I probably should have warned you guys to wear old clothes,” Cress said. “Or organized some coveralls to protect them. Sorry your outfits are ruined.”

“Are you kidding?” Anna said. “I think the pink paint adds pizzazz. I want to do this to all my outfits.” I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not, but she sounded serious. “I’m not so sure about the paint in my hair though.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I added. I was probably going to have to wash it a million times to get the pink streaks out.

We were almost at our dorm when we ran into Luther, Kaden, and Noah. They were walking toward us, and they struggled to hide their reactions when they caught sight of our paint-covered clothes. Kaden was smiling sweetly while Luther’s eyes lit up brightly. I knew he was thinking of all the different ways he could tease us. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Noah. Not after Thursday night.

“Evening, ladies,” Luther said. “You’re all looking fabulous.”

“Aren’t we?” Anna agreed. “I always thought pink was my color.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “Now, was there wrestling involved with the paint, or did you all just happily roll around in it?”

“Perhaps there was a bit of both,” Anna sassed him.

“I think it’s cute,” Kaden said. He was looking directly at Cress, and I wasn’t sure he’d meant to share his thoughts out loud because the two of them immediately started blushing and refused to make eye contact. Cress definitely had a thing for Kaden, and I think he might have a thing for her too.

As the others talked, I finally risked a glance in Noah’s direction. He was staring straight at me. He didn’t look nearly as terrible as he had the other night, and the cut on his head seemed to be healing nicely. But his expression was more reserved than normal, and it was impossible to know what he was thinking.

“Can I talk to you, Isobel?” he asked when he caught my gaze.

The others all fell silent, and I slowly started to nod. I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk to him. Especially not when I’d had such a good day. But I

wasn’t sure I knew how to say no to this guy.

“We’ll catch you inside,” Cress said, as Luther and Kaden also made their excuses to leave.

Within moments, Noah and I were standing alone in the dusky evening light. I waited for him to say something, but he remained quiet as he stared at me.

“You wanted to talk?”

He blew out a breath and nodded. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier this week,” he said. “I shouldn’t have made you feel bad about trying to move on in PE, and I shouldn’t have taken my frustrations out on you at the soccer field. I was out of line, and it was unfair to you, especially when you were only being kind.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “Don’t worry. It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” he said. “Not really. I haven’t been myself this week. My grandfather dragged me out of school and…” He shook his head. “Sorry, you don’t need to hear me complaining.”

“I don’t mind.”

But Noah didn’t elaborate. It didn’t stop me from wondering what was going on with his grandfather and why he’d taken Noah out of school. He’d mentioned something about his grandfather pressuring him the other night, and I wished I knew what was happening. Did it have anything to do with me or Matthew? Or perhaps it was related to the financial difficulties the Hastings’ company was going through. I knew I couldn’t ask him though. He clearly didn’t want to talk about it with me.

We were both quiet and the seconds between us dragged out. Finally, I broke the silence. “Well, I should probably go inside and get cleaned up before dinner.”

I moved to walk past him, but he reached out and lightly touched my arm. It was the smallest brush of his skin against mine, and yet my whole body buzzed from it. “I like the pink,” he said, with the softest smile. “Kaden was right. It is cute.”

I struggled to swallow as I nodded. He looked like he wanted to say more, but the sound of people walking up behind me made him tear his gaze from mine.

“Have a good night, Isobel,” he said before striding away.

I watched him leave and didn’t move until he’d disappeared from sight. I wasn’t sure what to make of my interaction with Noah, but I appreciated

his apology. Maybe it was a sign we were moving in the right direction and one day this would all be behind us.

When I went to bed, my mind kept replaying the small smile he'd given me as he'd looked at the pink paint in my hair.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Knowing my mom was coming to visit in less than two weeks made it feel like time was standing still. Each day moved by at a painfully slow pace, and not even throwing myself into my schoolwork helped. The only upside was that Noah kept his distance from me. It was so much easier to feel like I was making progress moving on from him when we didn't fight and when we didn't share heated moments.

Anna and Cress took this as a sign that they should make more heavy hints about Wes and I getting together.

"You guys even look perfect together," Cress said as we walked back to Esher Hall after PE on Wednesday. Wes and I had been partners for squash, which must have triggered this latest attempt by the girls to convince me to date him.

"Yeah, like two golden deities walking amongst us," Anna added.

"I don't know where you come up with this stuff, Anna, but we're just friends."

"Friends with sexual tension," Anna said. "I bet if we locked you in a room together you wouldn't be saying the same thing. You guys definitely wouldn't be able to resist one another."

I laughed uncomfortably. "Why are we getting locked in a room together?"

"Uh...there's a pandemic, and you both get exposed to the virus and are thrown into quarantine?" she suggested.

"Pretty sure that's not going to happen." I laughed. "Besides, we spend plenty of time alone together and we manage to resist each other." Most of

the time, at least. I was choosing to ignore that time on the sidewalk in New York and that time in Wes's room.

"Aha!" Cress shouted, her voice filled with victory. "So, you admit it. You do have to try and resist him."

I rolled my eyes. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Sure, you didn't."

"I didn't." I let out a sigh. "But if anything changes, you guys will be the first to know."

"We better be," Anna grumbled.

Thankfully, the girls let it drop over lunch. It would have been super awkward otherwise since both Wes and Sawyer sat with us. It didn't stop them from shooting me knowing looks whenever Wes glanced my way. And it really didn't help that he did it frequently, often smiling so sweetly it practically made Anna and Cress explode silently in their seats.

I had economics with Wes after lunch, so we left the room together. We were literally just walking to class together, yet Anna wiggled her eyebrows suggestively at me as we left.

I scoffed as I turned away from her.

"What?" Wes asked.

"You really don't want to know," I said.

"Try me."

"It's embarrassing and stupid."

"Well, now I really want to know." He grinned.

I shook my head, wishing I hadn't said anything at all.

"Come on, I won't make fun of you, I promise," he said.

"Ugh, fine."

His smile only grew. "So..."

"Anna and Cress have been not so subtly hinting that you and I should be more than friends."

"Really?" He didn't sound all that surprised, which made me feel like they'd probably been giving him the same crap they'd been giving me.

"Yeah. Anna thinks there's so much tension between us that if we were ever locked in a room alone together we wouldn't be able to resist each other."

"That sounds like something Anna would say."

"I told you it was stupid."

Wes looked thoughtful.

“What?” I asked him.

“Do you think she’s right?”

“Of course, she’s not.”

“You sure about that?”

“Uh...” The way he was looking at me made me question my resolve. I’d kissed Wes three times now, which probably indicated my ability to resist him wasn’t as strong as I thought.

“I say we test it,” he said.

“What? Wes...”

He grabbed hold of my hand and started to pull me in the opposite direction of our classroom.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He was too busy looking up and down the corridor to answer me. Once the coast was clear, he opened the nearest door and pulled me after him into a room. As he closed the door behind us, he spun me round, and my back bumped gently against it. It was pitch-black, so I had no idea where we were. Wes was standing right in front of me, and there was barely room to move. A moment later, the light flicked on.

When my eyes adjusted and I looked around, I couldn’t help but laugh. “The janitor’s closet. Really, Wes?”

He grinned as he looked down at me. “What better place to test whether you can resist me?”

“Oh, so it’s just me that needs to be tested?”

“I already know I can’t resist you,” he replied. His voice was playful but had a serious edge to it, and I was suddenly very aware of just how small this closet was. Especially with Wes pressed up against me and my back against the door. He was far too big for such a small space. His shoulders practically brushed the stacks of shelves that stood against the walls on either side of him.

“I’m sure that’s not true.” I tried to swallow down my nerves and did my best not to look directly at him, which was pretty much impossible given that he was everywhere in here. “So, how long do I have to resist you to prove Anna wrong?”

“Hmm, how about until the bell for class rings?”

“That’s in like two minutes.” I scoffed as I glanced up at him. “You think I can’t last two minutes?”

“I’m sure you could,” he said. “I guess the question is, do you want to...”

My eyes drifted to his lips and then down to where my hands were pressed against his chest. I didn’t remember placing them there and wondered if I was already failing the test.

“What about you?” I whispered. “What do you want?” After I asked the question, I realized just how dangerous it was, because as I peered up and into Wes’s eyes, I found his expression had changed. It wasn’t hard to guess what he wanted as he looked at me with a hunger I’d never seen in him before.

He leaned in closer, placing his hands against the door behind my head. “I think you know what I want,” he said. My heart clashed against my ribs in response, and when I felt his breath against my cheek, my body flushed hot with need.

The bell sounded through the door and I didn’t know whether to feel relieved or disappointed. The test was over, but I couldn’t seem to relax. I also couldn’t seem to bring myself to open the door and leave the room either.

“I guess we proved Anna wrong,” I said, my voice sounding far too breathy for someone who was totally in control.

“I guess so,” he agreed. He hadn’t moved back to give me space, and he hadn’t opened the door. Instead, he stayed where he was, his body pressed against me, his lips so close to mine. The tension sparking in the air between us was impossible to ignore.

The longer we stood there, the more the pressure between us seemed to build. It didn’t help when he shifted slightly, his leg rubbing against mine, and I struggled to withhold a groan. Yes, I’d proven I could resist Wes, but I was very quickly realizing that wasn’t what my body wanted.

At some point, I must have closed my eyes, and when I opened them, Wes was practically devouring me with his gaze. Whatever line I’d tried to draw between us was nowhere to be found. It certainly hadn’t entered the closet with us.

“Screw Anna’s test.” I gripped him by the tie and pulled him to me, wrapping my arms around his neck as our lips met. He pressed me against the door, his kiss filled with desperation and relief. I wanted Wes. I needed him. And in the heat of that moment, I hated myself for even trying to resist

him. Our previous kisses had been amazing, but this one was so hot it put them all to shame.

A loud clatter sounded as one of us knocked something off a shelf and onto the floor. We froze and glanced at the door. The sounds of students walking out in the corridor reached my ears. I don't know how I hadn't noticed them before. Luckily, no one seemed to have noticed the noise coming from the closet, and after several seconds passed, Wes and I both managed to breathe again.

I was still wrapped in Wes's arms, but he slowly disentangled them, and I knew the moment was over. He smiled at me , his eyes sparkling in the dimly lit closet.

"So, apparently Anna knows what she's talking about," I said.

He chuckled. "Apparently."

"I feel like we're blurring the lines between..." I trailed off, feeling suddenly worried I was going to sabotage whatever was developing between us by talking too much. I liked Wes's kisses, but I also liked our friendship. Did there have to be a line in the sand between those two things?

"I'm kind of enjoying the blurred lines," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I want to find out." His eyes were sincere, and a small smile curved the corner of his lips. His words seemed to touch a part of my heart I was so sure I'd lost.

"I think I do too," I murmured. But then I shook my head, trying to clear the haze that had fogged my brain while looking into Wes's eyes. "But what if this doesn't work? I've been through too much heartbreak recently. So have you. I don't want to lose you as a friend as well."

His gaze turned more serious as he nodded in reply. "You're right, and I feel the same, but I think we could be something amazing."

I rubbed a hand against my face as I tried to process what he was saying. "You're still into Sarah…"

"Not as much as you might think," he said. "It took me some time to realize, but things between us had been over long before she broke up with me. And I know you still have feelings for Noah, but I can see you letting go of him a little more each day."

I started to object but then stopped as I considered what he'd said. Maybe Wes was right. Letting go of Noah had been hard. It was still hard, but I was in a very different place than I had been in the days after the ball.

I’d come to accept we were over, but it still didn’t stop the small pieces of my fractured heart from leaping whenever he was near.

I think Wes must have realized how confused I was because he nodded at the door. “We should probably get to class,” he said. “Or we’re going to be late.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I wrapped my hand around the handle and cracked open the door to take a look outside. The hallway was clear of students, so I was guessing we were already late. I went to leave, but Wes took hold of my hand, stopping me.

“Just think about it,” Wes said. “About us.”

“I will.”

His smile was so bright and filled with hope it was hard not to just fall into a relationship with him here and now. But Wes was right. I needed to think about this. We both did.

“So, on a scale of one to a thousand, how much do you think Anna will gloat when she hears she was right?” I asked as we made our way to class.

Wes laughed. “It’s probably in our best interest she never knows.”

“Probably,” I agreed, but I had a feeling she’d somehow only need to take one look at me to figure out I made out with Wes in a janitor’s closet. She had a sixth sense for these things, and it didn’t help that my cheeks flushed just thinking about it.

Anna’s reaction was the least of my worries. No, I had a far bigger problem. I somehow had to figure out what the hell I was going to do about the sweet, gorgeous guy beside me. The guy that deserved all of my heart when I only had small fractions left to give.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I was no closer to finding any clarity by the time Saturday morning dawned. The school was hosting its rowing regatta this weekend, which Wes was taking part in. He'd been sharing secretive smiles with me ever since our kiss in the janitor's closet on Wednesday, and I had a feeling he might want to talk more about our relationship-cum-friendship over the weekend. I didn't want to treat him badly, so I knew I needed to try to figure out my head and my heart.

"What am I going to do about Wes?" I asked Cress as we put on our makeup in the bathroom. We were getting ready to go down to the lake and watch the regatta, which would soon be underway.

I'd told her and Anna about kissing Wes in the janitor's closet, and the two of them had screamed before Anna composed herself enough to say "I told you so."

"You're still not sure?" she asked.

"No, and I need a second opinion. What do you think?"

"I can't make up your mind for you."

"I know," I groaned.

"Are you still worried about ruining your friendship?" she asked.

"That, and the fact I can't seem to forget about Noah. Is it fair to start something with Wes when my heart still beats faster every time Noah enters the room?"

"Wes isn't stupid. He understands you're still getting over Noah."

"I know."

“And it’s not like anything’s going to happen with Noah,” she added. “He’s never going to go against his grandfather’s wishes.” She softened her words with a sad smile.

“So, you think I should go for it?”

“I mean, what would you prefer? To continue just being friends or to actually date?”

“Well, kissing without committing to an actual relationship has been pretty great so far,” I muttered. “But it’s starting to get messy.”

“I don’t think that’s something either of you would want long-term either,” Cress said. “Wes isn’t the kind of guy that does casual. He’s the kind of guy that loves caring for someone and being in a committed relationship. I think you’re that kind of girl too…”

I blew out a breath and nodded. “Am I an idiot for even questioning this? The way you described Wes, any girl would be silly to turn him down, right?”

“You’re not an idiot,” Cress said. “You’re just being careful.”

“I can’t believe I’m even considering another relationship. Not after the last two breakups I’ve gone through.”

“I don’t think Wes will break your heart.”

“I don’t think so either,” I agreed. That didn’t make this decision any easier. “I thought talking to you would make it clearer in my head. But I’m still a jumbled mess. I don’t want to screw things up.”

“Sometimes doing nothing screws things up more. I think you need to make a decision.”

I knew Cress was right. I couldn’t leave Wes hanging. I either had to take a risk and commit to a relationship or let things go back to the way they were before. No more kisses in closets.

“Maybe the universe will give me a sign today,” I said.

“You’re leaving this up to the universe?” Cress laughed. “That sounds dangerous.”

“Well, I don’t really trust myself to make decisions like this. I always seem to make the wrong choice. So, I think I’ll let the universe take this one…”

Cress shook her head. “Be warned, the universe might be skewed in Wes’s favor today. He’s going to look pretty hot in his uniform.”

“You think I’m going to date him because of a uniform?”

“I mean, it’s a very convincing uniform. Why else do you think so many girls are going to the regatta today?”

A small spike of insecurity went through me. Wes was gorgeous, and I didn’t like the idea of half the girls at school salivating over him. Then again, they’d all done the exact same thing over Noah. I guessed it came with the territory when you dated a cute boy. The major difference here was that Wes wasn’t my boyfriend, and if we went back to being friends, he would be free to entertain any offers that came his way. I didn’t like that idea at all.

Cress and I finished getting ready before we headed down to the lake. As we neared the new boathouse that sat proudly on the shoreline, I could see quite a crowd was already gathered. Tents were pitched along one of the banks of the lake with different school logos proudly displayed across the material.

I didn’t recognize many of the students walking around the school grounds, and a group of guys nudged each other and grinned as Cress and I passed. One of the cuter ones sent us a wink.

“Anna is going to be drooling over all the fresh meat,” Cress said, making me laugh.

“Yeah, she is always complaining about how we always see the same guys at all our parties.”

“Not tonight,” Cress replied. “There’s usually an after-party at Luther’s on regatta nights, and some kids from the rival schools come. It can get pretty wild.”

“Because Luther’s other parties are so tame,” I muttered.

“There you guys are!” I glanced over as Anna came rushing toward us with Sawyer slowly trailing behind her. “I was worried you were going to miss all the fun.”

“I told her she was being dramatic,” Sawyer said. “That there’s no way Isobel would miss her sweet Wesley’s little regatta.”

I chose to ignore him, but unsurprisingly, I was thinking about Wes. “Speaking of Wes, any idea where he is? I’d like to wish him good luck before his race.”

“Ha, sure, *luck*,” Sawyer replied, his voice dripping with suggestion.

“Sawyer? Where is he?”

He flicked a hand over his shoulder. “He’s over by the Weybridge tent.”

“Okay, I’ll catch you guys back here in a bit.” I went in the direction Sawyer had indicated, but he called after me. “Remind Wes to row his little heart out today,” he said. “I’d hate for him to lose our bet.”

I paused and glanced over my shoulder. Those two boys and their bets. “Another bet? What happens if he loses?”

“If he loses, he has to streak through the after-party tonight.”

My eyes widened. “And if he wins?”

“Then I’ll be the one who’s streaking.” Sawyer grinned like he’d be happy either way.

I shook my head. “I guess I better go give him some more motivation to win.”

As I got closer to the Weybridge tent, I could see Wes standing in the entrance. My mouth went a little dry when I got a good look at his rowing suit. On a smaller guy, the fitted material would have looked terrible, but Wes filled it out in all the right places. Yep, I could definitely see why the girls were all big rowing fans.

He started smiling as he saw me approach. “You made it.”

“Why do you sound so surprised? I told you I’d come.”

He shrugged. “Guess I was just worried something else might come up.”

It made me a little sad to hear his response. It seemed like he was so used to being canceled on by his ex that he’d come to expect it.

“No way, I wouldn’t miss this for anything. Besides, I had to come wish you luck.” I reached up and pressed a kiss firmly against his cheek. “Good luck.”

His smile grew wider. “You know, I hear that good luck kisses only work if they’re on the lips.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a thing.”

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Fine.” I laughed and quickly brushed a kiss against his lips. He tried to deepen the kiss, but somehow, I managed to pull myself away. “You’re terrible. You know that, right?”

“Terribly handsome?”

“Terribly devious.”

“I think I can live with that.” He chuckled. “I have to go prep for my race, but come find me after. I’ll need to thank my good luck charm…”

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t make me your good luck charm too. Being Sawyer’s was already enough pressure.”

He winked. “Well, stop being so lucky then.”

I shook my head. “Have a good race, and make sure you win. I don’t want to see you naked for the first time because you lost a bet with Sawyer.”

His eyes lit up, and he smiled devilishly. “You want to see me naked?”

“*Oh, my gosh*. No. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I think you did.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why are you blushing?”

I stammered as I tried to come up with a reply, but he didn’t give me a chance to find my words.

“I’ll see you after the race, Isobel.” He flashed me another wide grin before he turned and walked deeper into the tent.

Stupid cocky boy, I thought as I watched him leave. A part of me hoped he’d lose now, if only to wipe the smug look from his face.

“So, is my brother going to win?” Sawyer asked when I finally found my friends again. They’d moved from where I’d left them and taken up a spot close to the lake to watch the races.

“He seemed pretty sure of himself,” I said.

“Which will only make my victory sweeter.” A fevered look entered Sawyer’s eyes as he rubbed his hands together like some cartoon villain.

“You guys really need to find a better hobby than placing bets on each other.” I shook my head as I faced the girls. “Have I missed much?”

“Only the one race,” Cress replied.

“And a group of Bexley boys came to chat with us,” Anna added as if that were the more important of the two updates. “They were superhot too.”

Sawyer rolled his eyes. “Yeah, if you’re into that whole pretty boy look.”

“Aw, Sawyer, are you jealous?” Anna crooned.

“Of a guy from Bexley?” Sawyer scoffed. “No chance.”

Anna laughed. “You keep telling yourself that.”

We watched several races, cheering with the rest of the Weybridge students every time our rowers were on the water. We were pretty evenly matched with the other schools, winning about as many races as we lost. It

only made my nerves grow as we waited for Wes to compete. I really wanted him to win.

We all fell silent as an announcement was made over the loudspeaker, and Anna started bouncing up and down on her feet.

“That’s Wes’s race,” she said.

We turned to the end of the lake where the boats were lining up at the start line. It was far enough away that it was difficult to tell which crew was which.

“I’ve got to admit,” Sawyer said as we both watched the start line, “I’m not sure if I want to win or lose this bet.”

I snorted. “You actually *want* to streak at the party tonight?”

“Well, everyone else will be all covered up in warm clothes, so it will give me a great excuse to show off my body to all the ladies. I’ve got to do something to compete with all these damn rowers.”

“And streaking is your answer to that?”

“It’s also a great icebreaker.”

“Because you really struggle to start conversations with girls.”

“What can I say? I’m a secret introvert at heart.”

“I don’t believe that for one second.”

He grinned and swung an arm over my shoulder. “That’s just because you know me so well, sis.”

I groaned and shrugged his arm off me. “Wes told me you’d stop calling me that if I came to your game the other day.”

“Oops, I guess I forgot.” Given the cheeky glint in his eyes, I knew he hadn’t.

The race started and our gazes darted to the end of the lake. The boats were barely larger than specks in the distance, but an announcer’s voice was blaring over the speakers as they commentated on the race. Bexley had started strong and was already pulling ahead of the rest of the competitors.

My hands bunched into fists at my side, and my heart raced as I listened to the announcer. Wes’s team was pulling up the rear.

I glanced at Sawyer who didn’t share any of the tension I felt. He looked the picture of ease as he watched the race, and when he caught my worried expression, he smiled.

“Stop stressing,” he said. “Like he does many things in life, when my brother races, he starts out slow but finishes hard and fast.”

“Sawyer!” Anna gasped from beside me. “That sounded way too sexual.”

He shrugged. “What? I’m just saying it how it is.”

I shook my head and focused back on the race, but Anna leaned in close to me. “Sounds like you and Wes should be doing more than just kissing,” she murmured, nudging me in the side.

“Anna, get your head out of the gutter. I’m trying to watch the race.”

“Okay, okay.” She fell silent, but I could still see her smirking at me from the corner of my eye.

My heart leaped as I heard the announcer call out that Weybridge were gaining on Bexley. They were moving up the lake swiftly, and I could see the boats more clearly. Weybridge was easy to pick out in their red uniforms, and they were only just behind their rivals.

The crowd started shouting and cheering as the boats came closer and closer. We were standing right by the finish line, and the two boats were neck and neck as they fought for the lead.

With only meters to go, the Weybridge crew attacked the water with a sudden burst of energy, pulling out in front just as they flew across the finish line. The crowd went wild as our boys came in first, and I found myself jumping up and down as I squealed with Anna and Cress.

When we finally calmed down, I noticed Sawyer didn’t look nearly disappointed enough about losing his bet. In fact, he was grinning brightly like he couldn’t be happier.

“And here I thought you’d be disappointed that Wes won the bet.”

He winked. “Wes was always going to win.”

“So, why make the bet then?”

“Because what is life without a little bit of risk?”

“That’s very deep of you Sawyer.”

“Like I told you, I’m a secret introvert. I’m really quite profound.”

“Sure, you are.” I laughed at him. “We should go find Wes to congratulate him.”

“And give him the satisfaction of admitting I lost our bet? I don’t think so,” Sawyer said.

“Anna? Cress?”.

“We’ll catch up with you,” Anna said with a knowing grin.

“Yeah,” Cress agreed with a bigger smirk. “We’ll be there in a minute. We just want to watch the next race, but you go ahead.”

“Fine. I’ll see you guys soon.”

Their faces were all too smug as I turned to go. I had a feeling they were yet again trying to push their Wesobel agenda on me, but I was too excited to see Wes to let it bother me.

When I caught sight of Wes, he was celebrating with the rest of his team. His whole body radiated excitement, and I loved seeing him so happy. When he saw me, his happy smile morphed into a beaming grin, and he rushed over to me, catching me up in his arms. I squealed as he swung me around before he lowered me to my feet once more.

“Did you see us?” he cried. “We won. We actually won.”

I laughed at his exuberance. He was so cute when he was this happy, and my heart was lifted by his brimming enthusiasm.

“You guys were incredible out there.”

“I really thought we were done for toward the end there.”

“Could have fooled me.”

He folded me into his arms once more, and I smiled as I leaned against his chest. It was impossible not to like Wes, especially when he was like this.

When he pulled back, he was still grinning down at me. “Date me, Isobel.”

“What?”

“I know I’m supposed to be patient and we’re supposed to think this through. But I want this. I want you. Be my girlfriend, for real.”

“You’re still high on adrenaline from your race.”

His expression sobered slightly. “Perhaps I am. But perhaps that adrenaline has also given me clarity. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

“Really?”

He nodded, and a hint of uncertainty entered his eyes. He’d probably been slightly high on energy when he’d asked me, but I could see in his gaze that he meant it, and I knew he’d be hurt if I turned him down.

Even as I looked into his eyes, I thought of Noah. My relationship with Noah had been like a starlit sky. It was beautiful and endless, and the darkness had a unique allure all its own. But the dark was also fraught with danger, and there were so many obstacles you couldn’t see.

Wes was more like the sunny sky overhead. He was happy, easy, and warm. Being with him wasn’t complicated, and his brightness chased away even the gloomiest of shadows. I deserved to be with someone who made

me happy. Perhaps this was the nudge I'd been asking for from the universe.

Slowly, I started to nod. "Okay."

"Okay?" A smile tugged at his lips as my nod became more definite.

"Yes, okay."

He laughed and pulled me up into his arms, swinging me around again. When he slowly lowered me to the ground, he sealed our relationship with a kiss. His lips tasted slightly salty, and the intensity with which he kissed me had me feeling light on my feet. I could feel his kiss all the way down in my toes, and I smiled as I heard his team whistling and jeering at us from behind.

Slowly, I pulled away, and when I opened my eyes, he was gazing down at me. He was looking at me like I was the prize he was taking home today rather than the trophy his team had just won.

"I think we just made a bit of a scene," I murmured.

"I think we might have too," he agreed. "Want to make another one?"

I laughed and pushed back from him. "Maybe later."

"I'll hold you to that." He glanced past me to his teammates who had returned to celebrating their win.

"You should get back to them," I said.

"I'd rather stay here with you."

I shook my head. "Go celebrate with your friends. I'll see you at the party later tonight."

He gave me a grin and then swooped down to kiss me on the cheek. "I can't wait." He jogged past me to catch up with his team and head back to the boathouse, and I smiled as I watched him go.

Wes was sweet and fun, and I liked him so much. Things were moving fast between us, but this felt right, and I was glad I'd agreed to be his girlfriend. I knew we were putting our friendship at risk, but I didn't want to let that hold us back. Not when we clearly both wanted to be something more. Sawyer was right; what was life without a little risk.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The party at Luther's was in full swing by the time we arrived. It seemed as though every student at Weybridge was here, and given the number of unfamiliar faces we passed, many kids from the other schools at the regatta had come to the party too.

The sunshine that had felt so warm during the day had disappeared, leaving behind an open night sky and a chill on the breeze. Anna and Cress were wearing short dresses, their skin turning pale from the cool night air. I'd opted for a pair of jeans and a thick woolen jacket, and I'd never been more pleased I ignored my friends' insistence on wearing something more revealing.

"Oh, thank God," Anna said as we arrived at the party. "They've set up a bonfire tonight." She didn't hesitate as she grabbed Cress's hand and pulled her toward the center of the clearing where the large flames crackled.

Despite the fact there were far more people at the party tonight than usual, the atmosphere seemed more relaxed. The music was mellower, and there was no raving dance floor like there had been at the last party I attended. Even the drinks station was a simpler affair with no lavish cocktails or expensive bottles of champagne anywhere to be seen.

I looked at the other side of the clearing, to the slightly elevated rocks where I'd seen Noah hanging out at my first party here. Kaden was sitting there, a group of guys and girls surrounding him, but there was no sign of Luther or Noah.

"There you are." Wes looked handsome as he walked toward me under the warm glow of the fire and fairy lights that lit up the clearing. He was

wearing a pair of jeans and a knitted sweater. He had far better taste than I did when it came to clothes, and he wore them all too well. “I just passed Anna and Cress; they looked like they were on a mission.”

I smiled. “They kind of tore off toward the fire when they saw it. I barely had a chance to go after them.”

He laughed. “Yeah, those two are hopeless at reading a weather forecast.”

“And they both really like to wear dresses.”

“That too.” He smiled before holding out a hand. “You going to come join the rest of the party or hang out at the entrance all night? Either way, I’m in.”

I smiled and took his hand. “I think I can handle joining the party.”

We walked through the crowded clearing together. It felt right holding hands with Wes. Like I had finally reached a place where I could feel happy again.

“How are you feeling after your big win today?” I asked. I hadn’t seen him since we parted ways at the lake, and given the slightly dopey look in his eyes, he’d been celebrating already. Clearly not as hard as some of his other teammates, a few of whom I could see swaying unsteadily on their feet.

“Pretty good,” he replied with a sly smile. “I’m not sure I’d call getting you to be my girlfriend a big win, but it definitely feels like one.”

I shoved my shoulder against his and laughed. “I wasn’t talking about that.”

“It’s the only win that really matters to me today.”

I shook my head but smiled. Wes was far too good for me. I still couldn’t understand how Sarah ever could have let him go.

We made our way through the crowd until we found Cress and Anna sitting near the bonfire on a bench seat positioned as close to the flames as possible. They’d be lucky if their boots didn’t catch on fire.

“Isobel, Wes, come sit!” Cress called.

The two girls shuffled down, making room for us on the bench. There was barely enough space for one of us to sit, let alone both Wes and I.

Wes placed his hand on my lower back and leaned in close. “I’ll go grab us some drinks,” he murmured before starting toward the drinks table.

“We turned around when we got to the fire, and you weren’t there.” Cress wrapped an arm around my shoulders and hugged me as I sat beside

her. She'd had a few drinks before coming tonight and was currently in what Anna called Cress's fun and flirty stage of drunkenness. It was probably the best stage Cress had when she was drinking, but Anna far preferred it when she leveled up and entered her "can't stop dancing" stage. I kind of thought Cress rarely stopped dancing even when she hadn't been drinking.

"Kaden's looking hot tonight," Cress continued, letting out a deep sigh. She was gazing over at him, a dreamy look in her eyes. "Then again, he always looks hot."

"Why don't you go chat with him?" I asked.

She blushed and shook her head. "I wouldn't know what to say. He's so smart. Anything I said would sound dumb."

"But he's so nice. I doubt he would ever think you were dumb." Every interaction I'd ever had with Kaden, he'd been sweet and kind. I really couldn't picture him judging someone because they weren't as smart as him. He was so clever, if that were the case, he'd have to look down on absolutely everyone.

"He *is* really nice. Isn't he?" Cress sighed. "And he's pretty to look at."

"You're not just looking," Anna said. "You're practically undressing him with your eyes."

Cress quickly glanced away from Kaden, her cheeks growing pink. "I'm not undressing him. I'm admiring."

"And picturing him naked."

"Oh my gosh, Anna. I'm not!" Cress insisted.

"Well, you probably weren't, but I bet you are now." Anna gave an evil laugh as Cress glared at her.

"I thought you weren't interested in any of the guys from our school," I said.

"I'm not," Cress quickly replied. "I can think Kaden is good-looking without being interested that way. I also think Tom Holland and Liam Black are hot, but that doesn't mean I want to date them."

"Ha, you would totally date Liam Black if you could," Anna said. "You had a picture of him as your phone background for like a year."

"Because I liked his movie, not because I want to date him."

"Liar." Anna grinned. "But we'll let it pass—for now."

Wes returned with two bottles of beer and offered one to me. I took the bottle and thanked him before taking a small sip. I'd barely lowered the

bottle from my lips when a cheer went up behind me. I stood and turned to where the laughter, whistles, and shouting was coming from, only for my eyes to meet a very naked Sawyer darting through the crowd.

“Oh my God!” Cress squealed at my side, grabbing hold of my hand.

“Stop covering your goods, and give us a real show!” Anna shouted as she jumped up on the bench to get a better look.

My hand went to cover my mouth as Sawyer lifted his arms and waved at Anna who started whistling. She was enjoying this far too much while I kind of wanted to poke my eyes out. I must have been the only one who felt that way. Everyone else at the party went wild as they applauded Sawyer.

“I can’t believe your brother’s actually streaking!” I said.

“Do you even know Sawyer?” he replied through his laughter. “He would have done this even if he hadn’t agreed to the bet.”

“True.” I shook my head and watched as Sawyer’s pale butt made its way to the far edge of the clearing and disappeared into the woods.

Anna jumped down from the bench and grinned at Wes. “Please tell me you and your brother are identical in *all ways*,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows. “Because, if so, Isobel, you are one lucky girl.”

Wes coughed uncomfortably and glanced away. “I should probably go check Sawyer has some clothing,” he said before quickly following his brother.

“I’m totally taking that as a yes,” Anna called after him.

Cress laughed as Wes disappeared. “I think you scared him off.”

“Oh yeah, he looked terrified,” Anna happily agreed. “You’d think he’d be proud that he shared his brother’s body.”

“You’re so weird sometimes,” I said.

She grinned brightly. “I know. It’s great, isn’t it?”

“Great. Annoying. Same thing really,” Cress replied.

“Hey!” Anna pouted.

Cress laughed. “You know I’m only joking.”

Anna folded her arms across her chest. “Ninety percent of jokes are born of truth.”

“Lucky for that ten percent then,” Cress replied.

“Lucky,” Anna muttered.

We sat back on the bench as the excitement of Sawyer streaking through the party dissipated, and the noise levels around us went back to normal.

“I still can’t believe you agreed to date Wes,” Anna said, changing the subject as she took a swig out of the bottle of champagne she held at her side. I hadn’t seen any champagne when I’d looked at the drinks table, but it was no surprise Anna had found a bottle somewhere.

I frowned. “You think it’s a bad thing?”

“No, of course not. Wes is great. I just thought you two might stubbornly refuse to see how great you are together for a while longer.”

“We weren’t being stubborn; we were being careful.”

“Well, I’m glad you decided to throw caution to the wind. I hated seeing you so upset after Noah. And no offense Cress, but your cousin was a dick for breaking up with Isobel in the first place.”

“None taken.” Cress turned to me. “I’m really happy to see the universe wanted you to move on.”

“Thanks.” I returned her smile, grateful she could be happy for me even if things hadn’t worked out with her cousin.

Wes returned to our group several minutes later, looking completely flustered.

“My brother’s an idiot.” He shook his head.

“What’s Sawyer done now?” I asked.

“Take a look yourself…”

I glanced past Wes and laughed when I saw Sawyer parading around in nothing more than a pair of boxers. “What is he doing?”

“Apparently, he wants to make sure all the girls here tonight know he was the one streaking, and he has to be half naked to do so.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

I laughed again. “Are you sure you’re both related?”

“I ask myself the same thing every day.” He chuckled, but then his eyes grew serious as he looked down at the bench Anna, Cress, and I were squished onto. A flicker of a smile pulled at his lips before he took me by the hands and pulled me up, swiftly maneuvering around me to steal my seat on the bench.

“Hey—” My complaint was barely free of my lips when he snaked his arms around me, guiding me back down and onto his lap. He didn’t hesitate to cuddle me close.

“There, that’s much better,” he said.

I couldn’t disagree. Especially not when his hand found its way under my jacket and his thumb drew small circles on the skin just by my hip. Yes, agreeing to date Wes was one of my better ideas, and given the way he was smiling at me, I got the feeling he was thinking the same thing.

“Ugh, you two are so cute together it makes me sick,” Anna said.

“Same,” Cress complained. “I need a guy to snuggle me by the bonfire.”

Anna’s eyes flicked across the crowd, and she smiled when her gaze returned to Cress. “I’m pretty sure there are plenty of guys here tonight who would be more than willing to snuggle you, Cress.”

“I don’t want to settle for just anyone. I’m not you, Anna.”

Anna thumped Cress on the arm. “Wow, don’t tell me you’ve bypassed dancing drunk and gone straight to bitchy drunk!”

Cress burst out laughing. “You should see your face. I was kidding.”

Anna didn’t look impressed. “Ninety percent, Cress. *Ninety percent*.”

“What do you think?” Wes murmured to me. “Is Cress kidding or being honest?”

I glanced between the two girls and laughed. “I think she might be being honest. She’s had too many drinks to be joking.”

Wes grinned at me. “I like it when you laugh.”

“I like it when you smile at me like that.”

“I’m beginning to think I liked it better when you weren’t dating,” Anna interrupted. She was grinning brightly at us when I looked over. “Seriously, you’re making me gag.”

We laughed, and Wes hugged me a little tighter.

The three of us spent most of the evening cuddled up on the bench by the fire. I wasn’t normally a big fan of parties, but this one was chill and definitely the kind of party I could get behind. I couldn’t understand why Luther didn’t throw parties like this more often. I could actually hear what my friends were saying, and I wasn’t being forced to dance. It was a win-win.

“I’m going to go grab a drink of water. You want anything?” I said to Wes when Cress and Anna started a debate over which school from the regatta had the cutest guys. I was obviously team Weybridge, so I didn’t have much to add to the discussion.

“Nah, I’m good,” he said. “Want me to come with?”

I smiled and jumped from his lap. “I’m not going far. I’ve got this.”

He gave me big, puppy-dog eyes, like he didn’t want to be left in the middle of Anna and Cress’s discussion.

“Stay warm by the fire.” I laughed. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I turned and headed over to the drinks table. There were huge tubs of drinks on the table and under it, but as I searched through them, I couldn’t see anything other than alcohol.

“After anything in particular?”

I glanced up and found Luther at my side.

“Water or even just a soda. I’m overheating from being so close to the fire.”

“Ah, yes, I’m guessing having an oversized yeti cuddling up to you doesn’t help the situation either.”

I tilted my head at him. “Wes isn’t a yeti.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing.” His lips teased a smile. “In fact, if it was snowing, it would probably be a great thing to be snuggled up to.”

“Be nice, Luther.”

He let out a sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

My eyebrows shot up. Was he actually apologizing?

“And I’m also sorry for being so hard on you in the library. I still think you and Noah belong together, but I guess I have no choice but to accept it’s not going to happen.”

If I thought I was surprised before, it was nothing compared to how I felt now. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

“I guess because you’re finally starting to look happy again, and I know you wouldn’t be if you were waiting for Noah,” he said. “Plus, Noah might have pointed out to me that if he’s had to accept it then so should I. I’m not going to stop hoping that somehow you find your way back to each other, but I can stop being a dick about it. Despite everything, we’re friends. And friends shouldn’t be dicks to each other.”

“Thanks, I think.”

He gave me a crooked smile and nodded to the drinks table. “I haven’t seen any water or soda out here in a while, but there’s always some in the storage shed.”

“The storage shed?”

“You would have passed it on the way here tonight. It’s just behind those trees.” He pointed to the edge of the clearing and the path that led back to the house. I remembered seeing the shed and knew it wasn’t far.

“You know, I’m pretty sure this is how most horror films begin,” I said.

He chuckled. “Do you need an escort? I have a scarily girlish scream, so I can be the sacrificial maiden who gets caught while you escape if you like?”

I laughed. “As much as I’d love to hear this scream, I think I can make it alone.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. “But if you’re not back in five minutes, I’ll warn everyone at the party to run.”

I laughed again. “Glad you’ve got your priorities straight.”

I made my way to the edge of the clearing and started down the path that led through the forest beyond. The storage shed wasn’t far from the party. The flickering glow from the bonfire could still be seen through the trees and the hum of music was only slightly dampened by the distance.

A soft light spilled out the open door as I approached. I walked into the room only to find a couple making out on top of the crates of drinks. The girl’s top was open, and the guy’s hands were roaming everywhere. I let out a surprised squeak as I darted backward, squeezing my eyes shut as I stumbled back into the night.

“Oh my gosh,” I muttered as I tried to erase what I’d just seen from my mind.

A soft chuckle came from the darkness. “I probably should have warned you about them.”

I turned to find Noah sitting against a tree opposite the storage shed.

“Noah, what are you doing out here?”

He slowly stood and took a sip of the beer he cradled in his hands. “Getting a bit of fresh air.”

“Getting fresh air and listening to a couple of students making out?”

He shrugged again. “I was here first, and it’s not like I can hear them over the noise of the party.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I thankfully couldn’t hear whatever was happening in the shed either.

I wondered how long Noah had been out here. I hadn’t seen him all night. He appeared tired but not drunk. In fact, there was a clarity to his gaze I hadn’t seen in weeks.

“Are you enjoying the party?” he asked.

“Ah, sure.” It felt awkward talking to him this way, especially now that I was with Wes.

“You look like you’re having fun.”

I slowly nodded, not sure what to say. “I should probably head back.”

He glanced toward the shed. “You’re leaving empty-handed?”

“Oh, right, my water.” I’d completely forgotten it, but I suddenly wasn’t that thirsty. Not if it meant going back into the shed. “I’m sure I’ll survive without it...”

One of the corners of his lips lifted, and he raised a finger, indicating for me to wait. “Give me a sec…” He turned and walked into the shed. “Knock, knock, coming through,” he said loudly as he entered. I heard a girly squeal and some muffled voices, and then a moment later, Noah returned with a bottle of water in his hand.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said as he passed it to me.

“You’re welcome.”

This whole conversation was too amicable, but I guessed this was our future now—polite conversations and both of us pretending that we hadn’t once meant so much more to each other.

I gave him a tight smile and turned to leave, but Noah reached out and gently touched my elbow. The contact sent sparks across my skin and tugged at my gut. I stopped and turned to him, and he was standing far closer than before. I didn’t want to have a reaction to him, but every cell in my body seemed to come alive at his proximity. Apparently, we could pretend all we wanted that we’d moved on, but my body was always going to betray me when he was near.

“Isobel…” he murmured. His eyes stared deeply into mine, making my heart drum wildly against the confines of my chest.

“Don’t look at me that way.”

“I’m not looking at you any way.”

“You are, and you know it.” I took a quick step away from him. “I’m with someone else now.”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “You’re right.” He ran a hand through his hair, and he squeezed his eyes shut. It was almost like he wanted to pretend this wasn’t real. When he opened his eyes again, they were empty of the charged emotions I’d seen moments before. It was almost like looking at a completely different person. I had no idea how he was so good at acting, but it made me wonder if he’d ever used these skills on me before.

“Was there a reason you stopped me?” I asked.

“I just...” He looked away. “I just wanted to say it’s good to see you happy again.”

I got the feeling he’d wanted to say something else, but I wasn’t brave enough to push him for the truth.

“Anyway, I’m sure Wes is wondering where you are,” he said.

His words were clearly meant to bring the conversation to an end, so I nodded. “Have a good night, Noah.”

“You too, Isobel.”

I walked away, but as I moved through the trees, I glanced over my shoulder at him. He was sitting on the ground again, staring up at the stars. Whatever act he’d been putting on when we were talking was gone, and there was a look of pain and longing on his face that reverberated in my chest. We were both supposed to be moving on, but why did I feel like Noah was still living in the past?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The week leading up to the Halloween carnival was chaotic. All the clubs and sports teams were in charge of different stands, and everyone in school was busy preparing for it. People were skipping classes to work on their booths, and nowhere in the school felt safe as people got in the Halloween spirit. The boys at Weybridge loved nothing more than jumping out from behind things to scare the girls, and I spent most of the week on edge.

The school itself transformed too. There were glowing jack-o'-lanterns in the gardens and spiderwebs dangling in the corridors with huge fake spiders crawling across them. The teachers decorated their classrooms, and some even came to class in costume and handed out sweets. I couldn't believe how much Weybridge Academy embraced Halloween.

"How's everything for your booth going?" I asked Cress as we made our way to lunch on Friday. It was only one more sleep until Halloween, which meant one more sleep until I saw my mom again. I was struggling to contain my excitement.

"Great," she said. "We're pretty much ready. I just have to finalize the roster so everyone knows when they're manning the booth. Are you sure I can't convince you to volunteer?"

"Yeah, unfortunately not," I replied. "Wes is a pretty understanding boyfriend, but I think there are limits." It was hard to believe we'd only been dating a week. Already, everything about us felt so natural, and it was like we'd been together much longer. I think it was because we'd started out as friends.

“You’re probably right,” she said. “I can’t imagine Wes happily sitting by and watching you kiss other guys. I wouldn’t do the booth either if I had a choice. But since I’m the captain of the team I have to set a good example. Anna, on the other hand, can’t wait. She was the first one to sign up, and she’s not even on the dance team.”

"Of course, she was.” I laughed.

Someone slung an arm over my shoulder, and I looked up to find Wes grinning down at me. “Hey,” he said, planting a kiss on my cheek.

I blushed as I smiled. I liked how comfortable I felt around him and how normal it felt to have him kiss me on the cheek.

“Hey to you too,” I said. “Where have you been all morning?”

“I got a pass to skip class,” he said. “Had to work on the crew contribution for tomorrow.”

“I feel like I should already know this, but what are you guys doing?” Cress asked.

“We’re in charge of the haunted house,” he said. “It’s going to be super spooky this year.” He wiggled his free hand in the air to emphasize the point.

“I’ve never found haunted houses all that scary,” I said.

“Well, this one will scare you for sure.” Lowering his voice, he said, “Keep this just between us, but we’ve come up with the most terrifying ending to it. We’ve roped in Mr. Keech who’s going to be telling everyone they failed their chemistry test.”

Cress and I laughed.

“That is terrifying,” I agreed.

“Yeah, I thought so,” he said with a pleased look in his eyes.

“So, have you put any thought into a costume for tomorrow?” I asked.

“Well, Sawyer’s pissed at me because I told him I was planning to go as Thor. He wants me to dress as the Goose to his Maverick.”

“Of course, Sawyer thinks he’s Maverick.” I laughed.

“Yeah. He does have a slightly inflated ego.”

“Just slightly,” I agreed.

“And he loves to play on the fact we’re twins when we dress up for Halloween. He thinks it helps him entice girls when we match.” Wes rolled his eyes.

“That sounds like Sawyer,” Cress said.

“How about the both of you? Got your costumes all planned out?”

“Yep.” Cress grinned. “I’m heading down the Marvel path too and going as Black Widow.”

“That’s great,” Wes replied. “You actually look a lot like her.”

“Yeah, I thought it would be a good fit.”

“How about you, Isobel?”

“My mom and I always dress up as zombie waitresses. She’s bringing our costumes.” A month ago, I might have been embarrassed to admit I was dressing up as a waitress because my mom and I always did it while working at her café. Especially after Veronica had shared pictures of me in my café uniform around school. I was surprised to find it didn’t bother me at all, and not one part of me was ashamed of my background. I might not have grown up in a wealthy home like everyone else at school, but I’d had the best mom in the world, and that was worth more than money ever would be.

“Aw, how fun,” Cress replied. “I’m so excited to meet her.”

“Yeah, she can’t wait to meet everyone too,” I said. “I wish she could stay longer than one night, but she said she’s going to try and get here more often.”

“We’re just going to have to make it the best day in Weybridge ever,” Cress said.

“Definitely,” I agreed.

The rest of the school day was pretty much a write-off. No one was concentrating in class, and the teachers weren’t all that focused on schoolwork either.



BEFORE I KNEW IT, it was Saturday. Mom wasn’t arriving in town until lunch and Halloween Fest didn’t start until the evening, which meant I had no good reason for avoid my driving lesson that morning. I tried to convince Cress I was too sick to go, but she wasn’t at all fooled by my pathetic attempts to avoid driving and happily shoved me out the door for my lesson.

I hoped I’d do slightly better this time around, but my lesson was just as pathetic as the last one, if not a little bit worse. The instructor had finally convinced me to pull out of the parking lot onto the open road, but I froze

as soon as there were other cars near me. He took over and did most of the driving from then on.

My head was lowered as I returned to my dorm room. It was hard not to feel defeated when most people made driving look so easy. Even my instructor seemed surprised by how slow my progress was. I had a feeling I was the worst student he'd ever had.

I pushed open the door to my dorm room and gasped as my mom jumped out at me.

"Surprise!" she squealed.

All my gloomy driving thoughts completely disappeared as I dashed across the small gap between us and wrapped my arms around her.

"You're here!" I gasped. "I thought you weren't getting in for a couple more hours."

"I made better time than I expected and wanted to surprise you," she said.

"Well, you certainly did that. My heart is beating from my throat." I laughed before pulling out of the hug to look at her. Although she was beaming at me and her face was bright, there were bags under her eyes and she looked tired from her journey. She was wearing her usual long cardigan and fitted jeans, but they hung a little loose on her like she'd lost a bit of weight. I hoped it wasn't anything to do with how hard she was working at the café or how stressed out she was.

Over her shoulder, I could see Cress lingering in the background, a huge smile on her face.

"I see you've met Cress," I said.

Mom grinned as she glanced at my roommate. "Yes, she's been telling me all about her kiss or scare booth," she said. "It sounds like it will be hilarious."

The idea had developed quite a lot since we came up with it. Now, anyone who bought a ticket for the booth would be blindfolded, and they'd either be kissed by whoever was manning the booth or have something strange pressed up against their lips to scare them. The girls had found all kinds of funny things for people to kiss. There was candy floss, cupcakes and other strange feeling foods, but then someone had also managed to commandeer a bunny, some mice, and a pet iguana.

"I hope so," Cress said. "And your mom said she would have been totally keen to volunteer for the booth. Didn't you, Ms. Grace?"

“*Mom*,” I groaned, giving her a slight shove.

“What?” she asked. “I like kissing as much as anyone.”

“Would you like me to die of embarrassment?”

“I can think of worse ways to go” She shrugged.

I felt like Norma had been a bad influence on my mom while I’d been gone.

“How was your driving lesson?” Cress asked.

“Terrible. I’m this close to quitting.” I held up my hand and showed her about a centimeter gap between my fingers.

“Don’t give up,” my mom said. “I think you’ll find it will suddenly click one day and you’ll forget it was ever hard in the first place. You just need to keep practicing.”

“Well, do you want to come practice with me?"

“I think I’ll pass. I love you, Iz, but I don’t need that kind of trauma before my morning coffee.”

“Fair,” I said with a laugh. “I guess you can be glad that at least Matthew’s paying someone else to risk their life with me then.”

“Yes, of everything he’s done for you, that’s one of the things I’m most grateful for.”

I shook my head. “Have you been to Matthew’s place yet?”

I’d told him my mom was visiting and invited him to come to the carnival too. He’d said he couldn’t get away from work for the weekend, but he’d insisted Mom stay at his place tonight. She’d been reluctant to accept the offer, but I’d convinced her it would be a waste of money to get a motel when the house was just sitting empty.

“Not yet. I came straight here because I wanted to see you first.”

“How about we go there now so you can drop your bags and freshen up. Then we can grab some food and still have time to get ready for the carnival?”

“That sounds great,” Mom said. “I could really use a shower. I drove through the night, and I’m feeling a little grimy.” She turned and gave Cress a smile. “It was lovely to meet you, Cress.”

“You too, Ms. Grace. I’ll see you at the carnival tonight.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Mom and I left the dorm and strolled through the school grounds to return to her car.

“I like Cress,” Mom said as we walked. “She seems like a good friend for you.”

“She is. I’m lucky I ended up with her as my roommate.”

“And this school,” Mom continued. “I can’t believe you attend a place like this. It’s incredibly gorgeous.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty nice,” I agreed. “But you know I’d still prefer to be at home with you.”

Mom waved my comment away. “That’s just crazy talk. I can see how much you like it here. And I love seeing you so happy.”

“I mean, I’m just extra happy today because you’re here.”

“Well, obviously.” Mom laughed. “But you seem to have really settled in here. Even before your falling out with your girlfriends back home, they were always making you feel like you weren’t good enough, and I can tell the friends you’ve made here are supportive and kind.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I was surprised because, when I thought about it, Weybridge was starting to feel like a second home. And as much as I missed my mom, I wasn’t homesick for Rapid Bay the way I was when I’d first arrived here.

“So, when do I get to meet Wes?” Mom asked. She looked around like he might magically pop out of the bushes. I’d told her all about us dating earlier in the week. At first, she seemed a bit worried about me moving on from Noah so soon, but I think the fact that Wes had already been such a good friend to me helped win her over. Now she couldn’t wait to meet him.

“He’ll be at the carnival,” I said. “He’s over there helping set up this morning; otherwise, he would have been around to meet you.”

“Will Sawyer and Anna be there tonight too?”

“Yep, the whole school turns out for this thing. You’ll get to meet all my friends then.”

“If they’re anything like Cress, I’m sure I’m going to love them.”

I laughed because Cress was, without a doubt, the most parent-pleasing one of my friends. Although, I bet Wes would be just as charming. Anna and Sawyer, however, were much more unpredictable. “We’ll see,” I said. “So, how was your drive out here?”

“Long,” Mom replied. “It probably would have been easier to take the bus. Perhaps next time I’ll consider it.”

“So, the drive hasn’t put you off coming back?”

“Not at all.” Mom smiled.

“And how do you feel about leaving the café with Norma?”

Mom blew out a breath. “I’m not good at handing over control, but it’s worth it to spend some time with you.”

It meant so much to me she’d made the effort to come visit me. She always went above and beyond for me, even when her work consumed so much of her time. It was no wonder I hadn’t grown up wondering where my father was. Mom had been better than two parents ever could be.

“But, let’s not talk about Rapid Bay,” Mom said as we arrived at her car. It looked completely out of place in the school parking lot, which was filled with high-end, expensive vehicles, but I didn’t care one bit. Mom smiled. “This weekend is all about enjoying ourselves and spending time together. I want to get a small peek into your life here.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said.

“Now, I must admit, I’m starving. Maybe we should grab some lunch before we go to your father’s place? Do you know anywhere good?

“You ask that like I haven’t been raving about the burgers here ever since I arrived.” I laughed. “Come on, I’ll direct you where to go.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Just one lunch at Toddy's Burgers was enough to turn my mom into a fan. She normally didn't like burgers that much, but apparently, we'd found the exception to the rule, and the two of us stuffed our faces with so much food that we pretty much rolled our way back to her car.

She also loved the town of Weybridge. She kept gushing over how quaint it was and would let out an "ooh" or an "ahh" whenever we passed one of the cute little shops that lined the main street. It was probably a good thing she needed a shower, or I doubt I could have pulled her away.

When we arrived at Matthew's home, her gushing came to a stop, and she went suspiciously quiet. Her eyes had slowly been growing wider as we'd driven up the long driveway that led to the house, and her lower lip dropped slightly as she parked in front of the mansion. I could tell she was truly surprised by the size of it. It was one thing to know Matthew had money but another thing to see the evidence of it in the flesh.

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea," Mom said as she turned the car engine off.

"What do you mean?"

"I know Matthew insisted I stay here, but it feels weird," she said. "Maybe I'd be better off in a motel tonight."

I glanced up at the huge house towering over us. It was such a world away from our place back home. It felt like stepping into a whole different universe. From the way my mom was staring at the place, she felt exactly like I did when I first came here—like she didn't belong and like she wasn't good enough.

“Do you think I should text him and tell him I’ll stay somewhere else?” Mom asked. “He’s not here, so it’s not like he’s expecting us…”

My chest tightened as I glanced at the house once more. “Uh, I wouldn’t speak too soon,” I said, nodding toward the front door.

Mom looked over and gasped as she saw Matthew emerge from the building.

“He’s here?” she squeaked as she finally found her voice. “What is he doing here? He said he wasn’t going to be in town.”

“I don’t know.” He hadn’t said anything to me either. “He told me he couldn’t make it and we’d have the place to ourselves.”

Mom grabbed hold of my arm, jerking my attention back to her. “How do I look?”

I let out a soft laugh at the worry in her voice. “Mom, you look beautiful, just like always.”

“I haven’t showered this morning,” she said. “I haven’t even brushed my teeth! I knew I should have done it at the gas station on the way here.”

She was officially freaking out, and I lightly grasped her hand. “Mom, it’s okay. Like I said, you look beautiful. It’s just Matthew, there’s no need to freak out.”

She slowly nodded, but I could see my words weren’t exactly helping.

“Why are you so nervous?” I asked.

“Because I haven’t seen him in seventeen years…” She glanced out the car window again. “He’s still incredibly handsome, isn’t he?”

“Ew, Mom.”

She laughed, and the sound seemed to shake the fog of anxiety that had been covering her. “I guess we better go say hello.”

“Yeah, he’s going think something’s wrong if we stay in the car much longer.”

Mom pulled her keys from the ignition but hesitated before she opened the car door. “One more thing.” She turned to me. “Do I smell like a cheeseburger?”

I laughed and leaned over so I could give her a sniff. “No, you smell just like your perfume.” She’d been wearing the same one since I was a little girl and always smelled of roses with a hint of vanilla.

“You’re not just saying that?”

“Mom, stop worrying. It’s going to be fine.” I shook my head and opened the door. I had a feeling she’d keep stalling if I let her, and then

Matthew really would think something was up.

Mom slowly exited the car after me. She was usually so confident, but right now she was a nervous wreck. I wasn't sure why she was freaking out so much. She'd talked on the phone with Matthew several times over the last few weeks.

"Hey, Matthew," I said as I approached my father. We still weren't at the point where we hugged each other or gave each other kisses in greeting. Seeing as he was usually so formal, I wasn't sure if we'd ever get to that point.

"Isobel, it's lovely to see you," he said. He was smiling, but I thought I could see the corners of his lips twitching slightly like he was nervous too. He turned to look at my mom.

"Candice," he said.

"Matthew," she replied.

The two of them stood there staring at each other for an inappropriately long amount of time. They almost seemed to be drinking each other in. Marking every line and scar that had marred their features in the time they'd been apart.

Matthew was the first to realize he'd been staring too long and jerked his gaze away from her. He gestured into the house. "Won't you come inside?"

"I just have to grab my bags," Mom said, glancing at the car.

Matthew shook his head. "I'll have someone see to that. Please come in."

"Oh, ah, okay," Mom replied.

We followed him into the house, and Mom was still struggling with the surprise of seeing Matthew here. She didn't even seem to notice how ridiculously opulent his home was. I doubted she noticed anything other than my father right now. Seeing him after all these years apart had to be weird for her.

"I thought you said you weren't going to be here this weekend," Mom said as we followed Matthew up the grand entrance staircase.

"I had a meeting cancel on me last minute," he replied. "I didn't intend to crash your girls' weekend, but there were some maintenance issues I needed to oversee here at the house. I'll stay out of your way as much as possible."

I couldn’t stop my eyebrows from lifting. Matthew had Caldwell to deal with stuff like that. I doubted my father had ever overseen a maintenance issue in his life. I had a sneaking suspicion he was here because he wanted to see my mom.

“Don’t be silly. We don’t expect you to stay out of our way,” Mom said before slowly glancing at me. “Does that mean you’ll be joining us at the Halloween carnival tonight?”

I was surprised my mom had jumped at the opportunity to remind Matthew of our invite. I had asked him earlier in the week but hadn’t expected him to be here.

“If that’s still okay with you both,” Matthew replied, “I would love to.”

“Of course,” I said. “Though be warned, Mom takes Halloween very seriously. You’ll be lucky to escape without some kind of paint on you.”

Matthew laughed. The sound was easy and light and so unlike him. “I’m sure I can handle a little paint.”

Mom’s face lit up with a smile. “Well, it’s settled then. We’ll go together.”

Matthew nodded, returning my mom’s smile. He then gestured toward an open door we’d arrived at. “I’ve had this room prepared for your stay,” he said. “If it’s not to your liking, I can find you another…”

“I’m sure it’s perfect,” Mom said.

“It’s right next to yours, Isobel,” he added. “I’ve had your room made up so you can stay here tonight as well if you like.”

“Oh, that is a nice idea.” My mom clapped her hands together. “What do you think, Iz?”

“Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks, Matthew.” Neither of them seemed to be listening though. They were staring at each other again. This time, it was my mom who realized the silence had gone on a little too long, and she cleared her throat.

"Yes, thank you so much, Matthew,” she said.

“Of course,” he replied, shifting slightly awkwardly as he broke eye contact with my mom. “Well, I will leave you to settle in. Caldwell is around, and I’ll be in my office if you need anything. I’m sure Isobel can show you the way.”

Mom shared a smile with him before he turned to leave. Once he was out of sight, she came to her senses enough to turn and focus on the bedroom.

“Isn’t this nice,” she said, walking into the room. “There’s a view of the gardens. Oh, and it even has its own bathroom.”

I gently bumped my shoulder against my mom’s. “What was that back there?”

“What was what?” She batted her eyelashes innocently.

“You acting all nervous around Matthew and then checking if he was coming to the carnival.”

“I was just being nice,” Mom said.

I felt like it had been more than that, and my suspicions must have shown in my eyes.

“What?” Mom asked. “He’s your father, and he’s being so hospitable to me. It would be rude not to invite him to go with us.”

“You couldn’t take your eyes off him.”

Mom tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Only because it’s been such a long time since I’ve seen him. You’re reading into things far too much.”

“Uh-huh.”

She waved me off. “I’m going to take a shower. Hopefully, when I’m done, you’ll be over all this silliness.”

“If it’s just silliness, then why are you blushing so much?”

“I’m not blushing,” she said, but she flicked her eyes to the mirror to double-check.

“Sure, you’re not.”

“I’m just warm. It’s a warm day.”

It wasn’t even close to being a warm day. It was the middle of autumn.

“Why don’t you focus less on feeding your imagination and more on thinking up fun activities for our afternoon,” Mom said. She disappeared into the bathroom before I had a chance to argue with her.



MATTHEW WAS true to his word and stayed out of our way for the rest of the day, but we spent most of the time in town rather than at the house. Mom loved little trinkets and knick-knacks, so we spent a while trawling through the eclectic antique store, and then we wandered through town taking in the gorgeous Halloween displays in the shop windows. We found a cute café

that served incredible hot chocolates and amazing blueberry muffins, and I knew I was going to have to bring Cress and Anna back there soon.

Mostly, I just enjoyed hanging out with my mom. It had been far too long since the two of us had done anything together, and I hadn't realized quite how much I missed it.

We returned to Matthew's place late in the afternoon to start getting ready for the carnival. We dressed up in our bloodied and torn waitress uniforms and were about to start on our zombie makeup when I received a text from Cress.

"Cress is freaking out about her booth," I said to Mom, looking up from my phone. "She needs my help. Do you mind if I meet you at the carnival?"

"Of course, that's no problem," Mom said. "Though you don't look very scary without your makeup…"

I glanced in the mirror and shrugged. "I guess I'll have to be a zombie waitress that only just died."

"I suppose that works." Mom laughed. "Do you need a ride?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. Cress says she's already sent the cavalry to come pick me up. It's probably Anna."

Mom walked me down to the front entrance. When we stepped outside, I was surprised to find Anna hadn't come to pick me up. Instead, Wes was pulling up the driveway in his Range Rover.

"Looks like you'll get to meet Wes sooner than the carnival," I said, and my mom smiled. My stomach swirled with nerves because I really wanted her to like him.

He parked the car and jumped out when he saw my mom at my side. He was already dressed in his Thor outfit, looking far too tempting to be meeting one of my parents.

"You're the cavalry?" I asked as Wes came around the front of his car.

"Apparently." He smiled brightly before walking straight over to my mom and holding out his hand. "Ms. Grace, it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"You too, Wes," she said as she took his hand.

"How was your trip?" he asked.

"Long, but it was worth it to be here." She looked his costume up and down as he stepped back from her. "And what are you dressed as?"

"Thor." He grinned. "Really, I just wanted an excuse to walk around with a big hammer."

Mom laughed. “Well, it’s very convincing.”

“Thanks. I like your costume too, but Isobel mentioned you go all out with your makeup, so I’ll reserve judgment until I see you later.”

“Just you wait, I’m going to be terrifying,” Mom said, making Wes chuckle.

“Well, now I can’t wait to see it.”

They chatted so easily. I should have known my mom and Wes would get along right away. Wes was so sweet; he was impossible not to like.

“We should get going,” I said. “Cress sounded really stressed in her text.”

Wes nodded. “I’ll see you tonight, Ms. Grace. I’ll do my best not to scream when I see you.”

Mom beamed in response. “I’d be offended if you didn’t.”

Wes grinned before he started over to his car while I turned to Mom.

“He seems sweet,” she said, lowering her voice so she wouldn’t be overheard. “And he’s very good-looking. I like him.”

“I do too,” I whispered with a grin. “Are you going to be okay here on your own?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Besides, I'm not on my own. Matthew is around. I’ll text you when we arrive at the carnival later.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “You don’t mind going to the carnival with Matthew?”

“You’re fussing like a momma duck.” She waved my concern away. “Stop your worrying and run along. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

I got into Wes’s car, and he grinned as my mom waved us off. “I like your mom.”

“She seems to like you too.”

“I mean, I’m the god of thunder, how could she not?”

I rolled my eyes at him.

“By the way, you’re not a very scary zombie waitress,” he said as he looked me over.

“That’s near-dead zombie waitress to you, and I’m clearly terrifying.”

“Clearly.” He laughed.

“I didn’t have time to do my zombie makeup,” I explained. “You’re not very scary either, you know.”

“That’s because my hammer’s in the trunk.”

“Because a hammer will make all the difference.”

“It will!” he insisted.

If I were being honest, I wasn’t too concerned about how scary he looked. I was too distracted by how hot he looked wearing the molded silver armor that was strapped to his chest. Wes could have easily been mistaken for a long-lost Hemsworth brother, and the effect was a little overwhelming. He even had a wig to lengthen his hair, and it was impressively realistic.

“What did Sawyer think of your outfit? Is he still pissed you wouldn’t be Goose?”

“No, not so much. He came up with a whole other outfit.”

“And…”

Wes struggled to withhold a laugh. “Just wait and see. I couldn’t possibly ruin the surprise.”

“Okay…” I was officially intrigued. “So, any idea what’s got Cress so upset? She didn’t say much in her text to me.”

“I’m not sure. She called me and told me to come get you. She sounded stressed and hung up before I got a chance to ask her what was wrong.”

“I hope everything’s okay.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. You know Cress. She’s probably worried there aren’t enough fairy lights or something.”

“Yeah, probably,” I agreed.

We arrived at the farm that was hosting Halloween Fest, and my eyes widened as I got my first look at the event. It was insane. We passed a huge hedge maze and some kind of jack-o'-lantern village covered in glowing pumpkins. There was an ice rink splattered in fake blood and a whole field dedicated to zombie laser tag. There were carnival rides and games, but the best part was the huge spooky barn in the center of it all. Wes said that was where they were hosting the haunted house, and it definitely looked the part. It was completely covered in spiderwebs, and given how dilapidated it looked, I wouldn’t have been at all surprised if there were rumors of real ghosts inside.

After we parked the car, we headed straight to where the dance team’s booth was being set up. Cress was pacing back and forth in front of it. She was already dressed up in her Black Widow costume, the fitted black one-piece suit hugging tightly to her body.

“Finally, you’re here,” she gasped when she saw us walking up. “It’s a disaster.”

“What is?”

Cress gestured toward her kiss or scare booth, and I could immediately see what she meant. Someone had sabotaged the booth by painting the word “French” in front of “kiss.”

“Oh no. Who would do that?”

“I don’t want to name names, but I’m guessing it was the cheerleaders,” Cress said. “I’ve heard a few of them complaining about all the fun changes we’ve made to the kissing booth this year and how boring their stand is going to be in comparison. Clearly, they’re jealous and want us to get shut down, because as soon as a teacher sees this, we’re done for. What am I going to do?”

I bit down on my lip as I considered the booth again. “Can’t you just paint over it?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was going to, but we’ve run out of the pink paint we used, and the hardware shop is closed already.”

“Well, I think it’s a great addition,” Anna said, coming out from behind the booth. She was dressed as Jessica Rabbit and wore a long red bustier dress with elbow-length purple gloves and a red wig. She looked incredible. “I reckon we’ll double the money we make from that one little addition alone.”

“Anna, I can’t ask anyone to French kiss strangers,” Cress scoffed. “And like I said, the school will lose their shit. This is supposed to be a family-friendly event.”

Anna sighed. “Spoilsports.”

“So, what should I do?” Cress asked, looking between us.

I had absolutely no clue. Thankfully, Wes seemed more optimistic.

“I have an idea,” he said, already backing away. “I just have to go find Sawyer.”

“And...” Cress prompted.

“And he should be around; he was helping set up the soccer booth. It shouldn’t take me more than five minutes to find him.” He turned and started jogging deeper into the fair.

“I meant what happens when you find him!” she called after Wes, but he waved a hand over his shoulder and continued on without a look back. “He

couldn’t explain what he was thinking before he ran off?” Cress moaned as she watched him run, his red cape flying out behind him.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” I replied.

That didn’t seem to ease Cress’s worrying, and she spent every moment Wes was gone fretting. Luckily, he didn’t take too long, and five minutes later, he came hurrying back with a bag slung over his shoulder. He was closely followed by a huge man I didn’t recognize. As the two of them drew near, I realized the guy in question was Sawyer. I burst out laughing, and Sawyer grinned in response.

“See? That’s the kind of reaction I was after,” he said, nudging Wes as they came to stand before us. He was wearing checked pajama bottoms, a sweatshirt, bathrobe, and Crocs. He even had a fake belly peeking out of the gap under his shirt. With the long blond wig and scraggily beard, he looked like such a mess it had taken me a moment to realize what he was dressed as. It was the hammer that gave it away. Sawyer hadn’t been able to let go of the idea of having a costume that matched his brother’s.

“Sawyer, did you dress as fat Thor?” Anna asked, laughing as she finally figured it out.

“Oh my God, Anna. Are you body-shaming me?” Sawyer sounded shocked, but he had a wide grin on his face. “But, yes, I did. And, for your information, I prefer to be referred to as out-of-shape Thor. So, what do you guys think?”

“I’m just wondering why on earth you would dress like that?” Anna asked, still laughing.

“So Wes and I match. It’s always a great way to get the ladies.”

“You think a beer belly is going to entice the ladies?” Anna asked.

Sawyer looked slightly crestfallen at this. “I just wanted us to match,” he grumbled.

“And you didn’t think of perhaps dressing up like Loki?” Anna asked. “You would have matched, *and* you would have been the god of mischief.”

Sawyer looked like he wanted to throw his hammer across the field. “Damn, I should have thought of that! I was too busy trying to figure out how I could have a hammer too. That would have been brilliant though.”

“Yeah, no girl is going to buy a ticket to our kissing booth to kiss you when you’ve got a beer belly peeking out from under your shirt,” Cress agreed, shaking her head. “But, that’s the least of our worries right now. What have you got planned?” she said, turning to Wes.

Wes lowered the bag he was holding to the ground to reveal a variety of different colored spray cans. “I know you didn’t want to repaint the sign, but if you’re up for something different, I was thinking you could do a graffiti sign like the soccer team has done for their booth. Sawyer managed to make theirs look quite good, so I was thinking he could fix yours.”

Cress frowned at Sawyer. “You’re moonlighting as a graffiti artist now?”

“I did a street art course in London last year.”

“Really?” Cress asked. “How did I not know about this?”

“It was just a bit of fun.” He struggled to meet her gaze, and I got the feeling it had meant more than that to him. “And you know I take art.”

“We figured you either wanted an easy class or were trying to meet girls,” Anna said. “We didn’t realize you were actually into it.”

Cress waved her hands to silence everyone. “That doesn’t matter now. Can you fix the sign?”

Sawyer looked up at the booth and nodded. “Yeah, but I’ll have to redo the whole thing. You cool with that?”

“As long as it no longer says French kiss, I’m cool with anything.”

Sawyer nodded and grabbed the spray cans before he got to work. It was somewhat comical to watch Sawyer painting the sign while dressed in his costume. He looked like some kind of vagrant with his oily hair and baggy clothes. It was probably lucky we were all there watching, or I imagined someone would have tried to stop him and escorted him from the property.

Cress was tapping her hand against her arm, watching on nervously. I could see she was worried Sawyer was going to mess it up, but I had faith he’d do a good job. There was no way Wes would have suggested it otherwise. As he worked, she slowly started to relax, and I could see she was beginning to trust that he knew what he was doing.

In what felt like no time at all, Sawyer had completely transformed the hot pink sign with an edgy street art design.

“Uh, Sawyer, you’re like insanely good,” Anna said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “You’re going to need to show us pictures of the work you did on your course. This is amazing.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Cress said, pulling Sawyer into a hug.

He laughed and tried to shrug her off. “It’s no big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal,” Cress replied. “You saved the day.”

“I mean, I think it would have been fine to hand out French kisses,” Sawyer said. “But I’m happy I could help.”

“And just in the nick of time,” Wes said, glancing over his shoulder toward the entrance to the carnival. “It looks like we’re about to open.”

“Shoot, you’re right,” Cress said. “We better get ready.”

“And I better get to the haunted house.” Wes turned to me. “I’ll catch you later.” He planted a kiss against my cheek before running off. I smiled as I watched him go.

Sawyer threw an arm over my shoulder, watching Wes with me. “You’re one very lucky girl, sis. My brother’s no fat Thor, but he’s a total catch.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled. “He certainly is.”

He lowered his arm from over my shoulder as Wes disappeared from view. “He really likes you,” he said, turning to me. “Please don’t break his heart.”

It was the most serious I’d ever seen Sawyer, and I shook my head. “I don’t plan to.”

He stared into my eyes, weighing my response, before he finally nodded. “Good. After what happened with Sarah, I just want him to be happy. I’m just a bit worried because you were so into Noah. What if he decides he wants you back?”

“That’s never going to happen,” I said. “Noah and I are over for good, trust me. And I want Wes to be happy too. I never would have agreed to date him if I wasn’t serious about him.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Sawyer said. He let out a sigh as people started filtering into the carnival. “I better get back to the soccer booth. Wish me luck.”

“What am I wishing you luck for? What is the soccer booth?”

“You’ll have to come check it out for yourself,” he said with a grin.

As he walked away, I considered what he’d said about Wes. Sawyer was worried for no reason. I really liked Wes, and I couldn’t see anything changing that. He definitely didn’t need to be worrying about Noah. He would never change his mind about us. And, more importantly, I felt like I was finally done with him too.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Matthew and my mom were running late. I was waiting at the carnival entrance for them, and when they finally arrived, they were looking far too chummy for my liking. Mom was giggling at something Matthew had said. *Giggling*. And she'd somehow managed to convince him to let her apply a little fake blood to his cheek and to loosen his tie. It was all too weird.

"Isobel, there you are," Mom said, smiling brightly at me. She hadn't applied her usual zombie makeup. Instead, she'd gone light on the face paint and seemed to be aiming for more of a sexy waitress. I had a feeling it was because Matthew was here.

"Hey, you guys. So, we've got a sexy—sorry, I mean—*zombie* waitress..." Mom shot me a scowl, but I happily ignored her. "And a..." I turned to my father, and my mouth puckered as I tried to guess what he was. "Can you give me a clue?"

"Apparently, I'm a zombie businessman," he replied.

He said it so seriously I laughed. "Yeah, I guess I can see that."

Matthew smiled, but his face turned serious again when he caught sight of someone beyond me. "If you will both excuse me for a moment, I see August Montfort. I've been meaning to have a quick word with him."

He must have been talking about Sawyer and Wes's dad. I hadn't told Matthew that Wes and I were dating, but given the way he managed to keep tabs on everything that was happening at school, he'd probably found out somehow. Still, I hoped he was planning to talk to Wes's dad about business or something completely unrelated to me dating his son. I'd already

experienced more than enough drama when it came to meeting my boyfriend's family, and I wasn't so keen to repeat it.

"Go ahead," Mom said.

I watched Matthew walk over to a man who was about his age. I could immediately see the similarity he shared with the twins. He had the same blond hair and a similar build to both boys, but he clearly didn't hit the gym as much as they did. Matthew smiled brightly as he shook the man's hand. There definitely wasn't any rift between my father and Wes's family—thank goodness.

"So, did you help Cress avoid her crisis?" Mom asked.

"I really just offered moral support," I said. "It was actually Sawyer who saved the day."

"That's Wes's twin brother, right? The cheeky one."

"That's him." I smiled. Though he hadn't been quite so cheeky when I'd last seen him. He'd been surprisingly thoughtful and honest as he'd questioned me about Wes. Although it was unlike Sawyer, I didn't take offense. If anything, it warmed my heart to know he cared so much for his brother.

When Matthew returned from chatting with Mr. Montfort, I was relieved he didn't come back with any warnings about dating Wes. Perhaps he didn't know we were together. Or maybe he knew and was fine with it. I definitely wasn't going to bring it up voluntarily. Ignorance was bliss, and I didn't want another relationship ruined because of my father's family name.

The carnival was already crowded with people as we entered. Locals from the town, kids from school, and their families and friends had all come out for the occasion. I was impressed by the elaborate costumes everyone wore and surprised to find so many of the parents had dressed up too.

There was something so enchanting about Halloween, and the carnival didn't disappoint with the spooky atmosphere it created. The sound of rides and squeals of delight rang through the air, and when we walked past a fortune-telling tent, I heard a witch-like cackle from within. Everyone had gone to so much effort, and if my mom was only going to attend one school event this year, I was glad it was this one.

We bumped into Lily and her roommate Amber not far from the entrance. The two girls were dressed as hippies, and their outfits looked more appropriate for Coachella than Halloween. Mom gushed over how cute they looked and insisted they join us for food. I was somewhat glad for

the company because my mom and Matthew were so busy chatting that, without my friends there, I was sure I'd have felt like a third wheel.

"I hear the haunted house is amazing this year," Lily said as we munched on corndogs Matthew had bought us.

"The haunted house?" Amber scoffed. "It's nothing compared to the soccer team's booth. I'll probably spend most of my night standing there drooling."

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"They have a dunking booth," Amber said. "Which means shirtless soccer players. Need I say more?"

"Probably not." I laughed. "I'm surprised Sawyer hasn't been bragging about it all week. He loves attention, and I imagine he'd love nothing more than to show off his abs."

"I mean, have you seen his abs? I'd want to show them off too if I were him," Amber gushed. "We should go check it out after we finish these corndogs."

I glanced at Mom and Matthew. She was laughing again at something he'd said. The two of them were in their own little world. She'd practically forgotten I was here, but I wasn't annoyed. Mom rarely took time off work to relax or socialize, and I liked seeing her so happy. It was nice to see her getting along so well with Matthew. They were both going to be a part of my life now, and it could only be a good thing if they were on friendly terms.

"Hey, Mom," I said. "I'm going to go visit a few booths with the girls. Do you mind if I catch up with you guys later?" I'd considered asking Mom and Matthew to join us, but after all the girls' talk of checking out shirtless soccer players, I wasn't sure it was an experience I particularly wanted to share with my parents. Besides, they looked so content spending time together, and I wouldn't be gone for long. We had the rest of the evening to explore the carnival together.

Mom smiled and shook her head. "That's totally fine, Iz. You have fun with your friends."

"I will." I flashed her and Matthew a smile before I walked off with Lily and Amber.

"Your mom and dad are so nice," Lily said once we were out of earshot. "I thought you said they hadn't seen each other since before you were born?"

“They haven’t,” I replied. “But they do seem pretty relaxed around each other.”

“Definitely,” Lily agreed. “I never would have guessed they weren’t a couple or at the very least close friends.”

“And they look so cute together,” Amber added. “Are you thinking of trying to parent trap them?”

“That’s the last thing on my mind. They’re very different people with very different lives. I don’t think they’d work out, even if they were interested in each other that way.”

“That’s a shame,” Lily said.

I shrugged as though I didn’t care either way, but that wasn’t really true. Until now, I hadn’t really thought much about my parents’ relationship and what it would be like when they saw each other again. Now that they were reunited, it was clear there was something between them. The slight glow of an ember from a fire that burned out long ago. I wondered if they had noticed it too. Even if they had, there was no denying I was right about them being different people from different worlds. Surely it couldn’t work, could it?

“Oh, is that the kissing booth?” Amber asked, saving me from my thoughts. I looked up as we rounded a corner and saw Cress’s booth up ahead. It looked amazing, and Sawyer’s sign was even more impressive when it was lit up at night.

“Yep, that’s it. Though they’ve called it a kiss or scare booth,” I said. “It’s pretty much a game of chance. You don’t know if you’re getting a kiss or something else.”

“Oh, sounds fun,” Amber replied. “We should give it a go, Lil.”

“Maybe later,” Lily said, refusing to meet Amber’s gaze. I didn’t blame her for being hesitant. Lots of people were standing around watching, and they burst into cheers and laughter when the blindfolded contestant spun the wheel and it landed on scare.

Cress was manning the booth, and she grinned as she pulled a guinea pig from a cage behind her and offered it out to the poor unsuspecting victim to kiss. The guy leaned forward and then flinched away when his lips brushed against fur. He pulled the blindfold off and burst out laughing when he saw what Cress was holding.

“Oh my gosh, is that Kaden?” Amber said. “Surely, he doesn’t need a kissing booth to get a girl to kiss him?”

Amber was right. I hadn't recognized Kaden with the blindfold on. I smiled as I watched him talking with Cress. They were laughing nervously as Cress returned the guinea pig to its cage and Kaden pulled out another ticket. As he handed it to Cress, I swear I could see his hand shaking slightly, and her cheeks flushed prettily in response. She nodded toward the blindfold, but Kaden shook his head. Instead, he reached over and took her hand, placing a gentle kiss across the back of it. Cress almost fainted.

Kaden gave her one last smile before he got up from his seat and left the booth. Cress was frozen, her mouth hanging slightly open in shock as she watched Kaden walk away. Then she shook her head and got up from her seat before the next person in line could sit down. She beckoned to Anna to take her spot, and Anna happily obliged.

Cress was pacing back and forth at the side of the booth as we walked over to her.

"Oh my gosh, Isobel, did you see that?" she said as we approached. "Kaden just kissed my hand. He kissed it!"

She usually tried her best to act like she didn't have a crush on Kaden, but she was totally failing right now.

"Yeah, we saw," I said with a grin.

"And he's asked me to meet him at the Ferris wheel," she said. "I think I'm going to faint."

"You're not going to faint." I laughed. "But you should probably take a few deep breaths."

She nodded and slowly dragged a breath in before easing it back out.

"Better?" I asked.

"Not even close."

"When are you meeting him?"

"In, like, five minutes."

"You should probably get going then."

She nodded but didn't move. I think she was still in shock.

"Do you want us to walk you there?" Lily asked.

"No, I'm good." Cress shook her head. "I guess I better head over there. Wish me luck."

"Good luck." I gave her arm a squeeze, and she smiled at me before heading off in the direction of the Ferris wheel.

The sound of raised voices caused me to turn back to the kiss or scare booth. Anna was standing behind her seat with her arms crossed over her

chest. She was glaring at Luther, who sat opposite her.

“You can’t buy all the tickets, Luther,” she complained. “That’s not how it works.”

“I’m just doing my part to help the fundraiser,” he said, grinning at her. “Just like you’re doing yours.”

“You don’t actually want to kiss me. Let alone twenty times or however many tickets you just bought,” Anna said. “You’re just doing this to mess with me, and it’s not very funny.”

“I would never,” he said.

“Fine. Put the blindfold on, and get ready for a scare because you better believe I’m going to find a toad for you to kiss.”

“I’m not afraid to kiss a few toads.” Luther smirked and lowered the blindfold over his eyes. He spun the wheel, and Anna breathed a visible sigh of relief when it landed on scare. Despite her promise to make him kiss a toad, Anna reached down into a box at her side and produced a bunny for him to kiss. Luther spun the wheel once more, and when it landed on scare again, Anna made him kiss a snakeskin handbag. By some miracle, Luther’s third spin also landed on scare, and Anna held a chocolate doughnut to his lips.

Luther didn’t complain once and simply smiled brightly after every unexpected kiss he experienced. He was actually enjoying it. “Mmm, fluffy,” he said after kissing the rabbit, and after the doughnut, I heard him moan dramatically, “Anna, your lips are so soft and sweet.”

Luther’s enthusiasm was only frustrating Anna more and more with each turn. She looked like she was ready to get the toad out if Luther spun the wheel and landed on scare for a fourth time.

However, on Luther’s fourth spin, the wheel finally landed on kiss. Anna scrunched her face up with disgust. She glanced around like she was searching for a way out, but she must have realized there was no escape. After one last grimace, she leaned over to Luther and gave him the quickest peck on the lips I’d ever seen. If there was a contest for speed kissing, she’d just won it.

“That was hardly a kiss,” Luther said, pulling the blindfold up to look at her.

“Well, you can take that up with management because I’m done.” Anna lifted her arms before storming away. She headed straight over to us, her cheeks flaming red.

“Oh my gosh, you guys saw that?” she said.

“It was hard not to,” I replied. “You two weren’t exactly subtle.”

“Ugh, because Luther is so ridiculous. Can you believe him? He bought every ticket for my shift at the kissing booth.”

I laughed.

“Shut up. It’s not funny,” she said. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Isn’t there? Because him buying all the tickets wasn’t even the worst part. Did you see the way he was dressed?”

I slowly shook my head. I’d been so caught up in their argument I hadn’t noticed what he was wearing. “No, how is he dressed?”

“He’s dressed as Draco Malfoy,” she said. Her eyes were wide, and I could see she was fighting some kind of internal battle. “And you know how I feel about Draco…”

“Like you want him to *slither-in*?” Amber guessed.

“Ha, that’s a good one, and exactly,” Anna said. “Man, my head is so messed up with all this. How did he even know I’m obsessed with Malfoy? I swear, he dressed up that way because he knew it would get me all confused.”

“So, you’re feeling confused about Luther?” I asked.

“No!” She shuddered. “Please let’s just pretend this conversation never happened. I’m planning to wipe this entire night from my mind.”

“Okay, from now on, this conversation never happened,” I agreed.

“Good.” She drew in a deep breath, which seemed to calm her.

“Why couldn’t Luther have just kissed my hand instead?”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about him,” I said.

“I don’t,” Anna gasped. “I need to get away from here. What are you guys up to?”

“We were just on our way to see the highlight of the carnival,” Amber said. “The soccer team’s dunking booth. That should help take your mind off the kissing booth.”

“Perfect,” Anna said. “Lead the way.”

A large crowd had already formed around the dunking booth by the time we got there. Most of them were girls. Amber wasn’t the only one with the bright idea of standing around watching shirtless soccer players waiting to get dunked.

“They should really charge to watch,” Anna said. “They’d make a killing.”

“I know,” Amber agreed. “I’d probably pay.”

I laughed because the two girls were hopeless. But, when I saw Noah sitting on the collapsing seat, waiting to be dunked, I didn’t find it all so funny. Somehow, I’d forgotten just how gorgeous he was, but it was impossible to deny when he was sitting there in all his shirtless glory.

The crowd was wolf whistling him and cheering as people took turns throwing a ball at the target. A direct hit would plunge Noah into the water. As he sat there, watching balls fly at the target, he was smiling along with everyone else. It felt like such a long time since I’d seen him smile that way. It might have been as long ago as the beach in Rapid Bay, when he flew me home to see my mom. Or maybe as we danced at the White Ball.

“I can’t believe you’ve kissed him.” I turned to find Veronica walking past us. She was with one of her friends, who was talking far too loudly to her. “Noah is so hot.”

Veronica’s eyes narrowed on the girl. “Sylvie, you’re staring.…”

Sylvie stopped talking and looked a little embarrassed, but Veronica didn’t notice because her focus was also on Noah as she gave him a small wave.

“Did Veronica come dressed as Paris Hilton?” Amber asked. I was guessing she’d heard Sylvie’s comment about Noah too.

“Looks like it,” I said. Veronica was dressed in a pink Juicy Couture velour tracksuit with a long blonde wig. She even had a small, yapping dog in the purse she wore over her shoulder.

“If she was going to use a dog as an accessory, I would have thought she’d come as Cruella de Vil,” Anna said, making us laugh.

A huge cheer erupted from the crowd, and we turned back to the booth just in time to see Noah dropping into the tank of water. The guy who had struck the target bowed with pride, and the applause increased, especially from the girls in the front row, when Noah emerged from the water dripping wet.

Veronica was the first one over to him, and she offered him a towel. It was harder to watch than I thought it would be. Noah had told me before he wasn’t interested in her, but I wasn’t sure if that was true when I saw him thank her and they shared a smile.

“Well, I think I’ve had enough shirtless fun for one evening. I’m going to go find my mom,” I said to the girls. “I’ll catch you all later.”

I didn’t stick around to see what else Noah and Veronica might share.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I wandered the carnival, checking out the different stands as I waited for my mom to text me back. It took her a while, and when she finally got back to me, it was to say that she and Matthew were just finishing up ice-skating. They were planning to go to the jack-o’-lantern village next, and she suggested I meet them there.

My eyebrows lifted, and I scanned the text message again to check I’d read it correctly. Ice-skating and a candlelit pumpkin village? It almost sounded like they were on a date. A date I was totally going to gate-crash if I met up with them like I had planned. I might have considered leaving them alone, but I did want to spend some time with my mom tonight.

I’d seen the jack-o-lantern village when I’d first arrived at the carnival. It was positioned at the edge of the forest on the other side of the makeshift parking lot that had been set up in one of the fields. There was a path that followed alongside the driveway to reach it, but cutting through the parking lot would take half the time, so that’s the route I took.

It seemed so much quieter among the cars as the sounds of the carnival became muted in the distance. I wasn’t sure why they’d set up the pumpkin carvings so far from the rest of the event, but I was guessing it was to create a spooky atmosphere. The carnival was so loud and bright it would probably ruin the creepy glow of the candlelit pumpkins.

I was almost to the other end of the parking lot and could see the entrance to the village of jack-o'-lanterns up ahead when a man came around the side of one of the cars. He’d appeared out of nowhere, and we almost collided.

“Sorry!” I gasped as I stumbled back to avoid plowing into him.

The man grunted in response, and as I lifted my eyes to look at his face, I froze. I was looking into the cruel green eyes of Noah’s grandfather.

“Watch where you’re going,” he barked. My heart was in my throat as he looked down at me. He didn’t seem to recognize me at first, but then something in his eyes flared. His expression turned dark, and his upper lip seemed to curl as he eyed my waitress costume.

“Ah, Matthew LaFleur’s bastard daughter,” he said.

The blood drained from my face at his words. “Excuse me?” I choked out. I couldn’t believe he’d called me that. Who the hell did this guy think he was?

“I was hoping never to see your face again,” he continued. “But now that I’ve had the misfortune of running into you, I’ve got a message for your father.”

He was either oblivious to the fact he’d insulted me or, more likely, he simply did not care. I was still too stunned to move or speak.

“Tell LaFleur to back down. If he thinks I’m going to sit back and do nothing while he throws another lawsuit at me, he’s got another thing coming.”

"I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

"Of course, you don’t.” He pointed a finger at me and stepped closer, towering over me. “Just tell your father. Make sure he understands that he isn’t the only one with the power to make other people’s lives difficult. You tell him that if he continues to try and take me down with legal action, I will make your life at Weybridge Academy extremely unpleasant.”

I took a step back from him, giving myself a bit of space to breathe, and managed to stammer out a response. “Are you threatening me?”

“It’s just a friendly warning.” A slow, hateful smile formed on his lips. “You’ll know when I’m threatening you, girl.”

“Grandfather!”

I turned as Noah stormed up behind me. His hair was still wet from being dunked in the tank at the soccer team’s booth, and he pushed the damp strands that hung across his face aside as he came to stand between his grandfather and me.

“What are you doing?” Noah growled at his grandfather. He hadn’t so much as looked my way, but it was clear he’d overheard William’s threats.

“Is this why you wanted me to meet you out here? So, I could watch you threaten Isobel?”

His body was practically shaking in anger, and it seemed like William had finally pushed his grandson too far. Was Noah actually going to fight for me? For us?

William’s eyes narrowed as he looked between Noah and me. A vein seemed to pulse in his forehead as his gaze eventually settled on his grandson. “How could you still have a soft spot for this LaFleur girl after everything that we’ve been through because of them?”

My heart was racing as I looked at Noah. I wasn’t sure what would be worse—if Noah declared his love for me or said I didn’t matter to him at all. William was clearly trying to elicit an emotional response from him, and Noah looked torn as he returned his grandfather’s hard stare.

Only a handful of seconds passed, but they stretched out painfully long as I waited for Noah to say something—anything. When he finally released a breath, all the fight seemed to leave his body with it.

“I don’t,” he muttered.

It was the right thing for Noah to say. We were over, and it wasn’t worth messing up his relationship with his grandfather because of me. It still hurt. I stupidly thought he’d finally grown strong enough to stand up to William.

“You told me you were over her,” William replied, clearly not satisfied with Noah’s answer. “Were you lying to me?”

Noah straightened as he stared his grandfather down. "I wasn’t lying.”

“I. Don’t. Believe. You.”

I wanted to disappear into the mud beneath my feet. I wanted to be anywhere but here. Not only had Noah’s grandfather threatened me, but he was now grilling my ex-boyfriend about his feelings for me.

As if this moment couldn’t get any worse, I spotted my father at the other end of the parking lot. He must have sensed my eyes on him because he looked at me and smiled. But when he saw who I was with, his expression turned, and he started stalking toward us. Thankfully, I couldn’t see my mom anywhere.

“What’s going on? Isobel, are you okay?” Matthew demanded as he approached. Concern lit his features, and he reached out and gripped my arm. He was standing far closer than normal, and from the way he positioned his body between William, Noah, and me, I could tell he was trying to be protective.

He only let go of me when I nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” I sent Noah’s grandfather a sharp look. “William was just letting me know what can happen when you get on the wrong side of a Hastings.”

Ever so slowly, Matthew’s eyes hardened, and he squared his shoulders as he faced William Hastings. Even without the fake blood splattered on his face, my father would have looked fierce as he glared at the man who had caused our family so much pain.

“Threatening my daughter in a darkened parking lot, William? And I thought you could sink no lower.” I had no idea how Matthew managed to keep his voice so calm but also sound so powerful. His tone only carried a hint of his tightly coiled rage, and the worry that had been evident in his words just moments ago was nowhere to be seen.

“I was simply reminding her to keep her distance from my grandson. They both appear to have forgotten...”

“We haven’t forgotten,” Noah said.

“We broke up just like you all wanted,” I added, anger pulsing through my veins. "Isn’t that enough?”

“No, it’s not.” William spat. “I wouldn’t be satisfied if you were in a school on the other side of the world. And even that wouldn’t be far enough.”

“Watch your tone with my daughter,” Matthew ordered.

“Why? So she thinks I’ll just stand by while she ensnares my grandson the same way your sister did my son?”

Don’t you dare mention my sister.”

The tension and anger between them was almost unbearable, and as I glanced at Noah, I could see he was struggling with it just as much as I was. This all needed to stop.

“Can’t we just put the past behind us?” I shouted over them.

Matthew and William both turned to face me.

“Seriously.” I focused mostly on my father. “You said you tried to work things out with Noah’s dad before. Maybe we can try again now?”

A flicker of concern shot through Matthew’s eyes, and he glanced at Noah. For a second, they shared a look, but I had no idea what they communicated in that fleeting moment.

“What’s she talking about?” William’s voice was low and filled with so much ice it rivaled the chill in the air.

My father’s expression turned just as cold as he faced Noah’s grandfather. “I’ve got no idea. She must be confused because I would never try to mend things with a Hastings. Especially not Liam.”

“What do you mean by that?” Noah asked. He’d gone completely rigid, and I gave Matthew a worried look. Why was he pretending he hadn’t tried to fix the feud? Surely, he knew to tread lightly where Noah’s father was concerned?

Matthew seemed completely oblivious to the fact Noah had gone lethally still.

“I mean that your father was the worst of you. He was a liar, a fraud and a cheater who got my sister and himself killed—” Matthew didn’t get a chance to finish as Noah’s fist came swinging through the air.

“Noah!” I screamed. But my alarm did nothing to stop him.

Matthew’s head cracked back as Noah’s fist connected with his cheek. He stumbled away, his hand clinging to his face as he stared at Noah in horror.

I ran to my father’s side, grabbing hold of him as I turned to glare at Noah. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I yelled before turning to my dad. “Matthew, are you okay?”

He slowly nodded, but he had to be in pain. His cheek was turning red, and I had no doubt it was going to bruise. What on earth had Noah been thinking? And why had Matthew felt the need to taunt him about his dad? Matthew was clearly on edge after finding me alone out here with William and Noah, but I’d never seen him lose his cool that way before.

Matthew gave Noah a tight smile. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer. Come on, Isobel.”

Matthew placed a hand on my lower back, and I let him lead me away. I was too shocked to put up any complaint. I couldn’t believe what had just happened. I’d thought Noah and I were in a more civil place, that maybe we could rise above the conflict between our families, even if we weren’t going to be together. Any hope I’d harbored that we could both somehow stay out of it had been completely torn apart the moment his fist had come flying toward my father.

I glanced over my shoulder at Noah and his grandfather. Noah was still brimming with barely leashed anger as he stared after us. His eyes were

hard, and his mouth formed an unforgiving line. I could tell he was still livid about the way Matthew had insulted his father. But that didn't excuse his actions, and I found I had no sympathy for him.

William's demeanor couldn't have been more different. There was a pleased look in his eyes as he watched us leave. Somehow, it felt like he had just won. And I hated him a little more for that.

"Oh my gosh, Matthew!" Mom cried out as we neared the candle-lit pumpkins.

She was waiting by the entrance to the jack-o'-lantern village, and she rushed over to us when she caught sight of Matthew cradling his cheek, his eyes scrunched in pain. The bright red mark was looking worse. He was probably lucky it wasn't bleeding.

Mom hurried toward us. She reached out a hand to Matthew's cheek but quickly dropped her arm to her side. "That's not fake, is it?"

"No," he grunted. "I wish."

"I go to the bathroom for two minutes, and you get in a fight?" Her eyes were wide with confusion. "What happened?"

Matthew glanced at me as both of us hesitated. I didn't want to explain what had happened with Noah. It hurt my heart too much. I'd known he was on his grandfather's side in all this. I'd been well aware that he would always choose the Hastings over me. But when I saw him punch my dad to defend his family, I finally realized I'd never even had a chance with him. Not in a relationship. Not as a friend. He would always choose them.

"Somebody better tell me what happened..." Mom said.

I knew there was no way she was going to let this go, so I answered as briefly as possible. "Let's just say Noah and I will never be getting back together."

"Noah did this?" Mom gasped.

She looked like she had a million more questions, so I headed them off before she got a chance to start firing them at me. "Can we talk about it later?" I said. "Maybe when there aren't so many other people around? I think we just need to get Matthew some ice for his face."

Mom looked around, finally realizing she wasn't the only one who'd noticed Matthew cradling his cheek. There were several other students and their parents giving him strange looks.

"Okay, we'll talk about it later," she said as she turned her attention back to us. There was a sense of promise in her tone, and I knew she'd be

wanting every detail. “Now, I’m sure we can get some ice from around here somewhere.”

“I think I’d just like to go home,” Matthew said.

“You’re right, maybe we should call it a night,” Mom replied.

It was still so early, and the thought of missing the rest of the carnival made me sad. I couldn’t imagine staying though. Not after what had just happened. There had been way too much drama for one night for my liking, and I didn’t want to risk sticking around and potentially seeing Noah or his grandfather again.

“Yeah, I think I’m ready to go,” I agreed.

“Give me your keys, Matt, I’ll go get your car,” Mom said.

He pulled them from his pocket without complaint and handed them to my mom. I imagined he didn’t feel up to driving right now.

“You two wait here for me,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Mom hated feeling powerless in situations like this, and I had no doubt that getting the car as quickly as possible was her way of feeling useful.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Matthew turned to me. “I’m sorry about what just happened,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset Noah.”

“I mean, you probably shouldn’t have said those things about his dad, but if anyone should be apologizing, it’s him,” I replied. “I can’t believe he hit you.”

“I deserved it for bringing up his father that way. I was really just angry at William. He shouldn’t have threatened you.”

“I was okay,” I murmured. “And you didn’t deserve to get hit. Violence is never the answer.” I glanced up at his cheek and caught him wincing as he went to touch it. “Does it hurt much?”

“It’s not too bad,” he admitted. “I’m sure it will feel much better once I’ve iced it.”

“I hope so.”

We waited in silence for my mom to return. The car mustn’t have been parked too far because she pulled up and ushered us into the vehicle after only a few minutes.

As she drove us back to Matthew’s mansion, I couldn’t stop looking at the mark on his cheek. The bruise was such a small thing. Within a few days, it would fade and the pain would be forgotten. But it felt so much bigger than that. It was yet another painful scar etched into the history of

my family and Noah’s family. A mark that would only fester and grow worse as the years went by.

Deep down, I guess I’d always known there was no fixing the rift between us. It felt like our families were inextricably pulled together and yet doomed to always fall apart. We were caught in some never-ending spiral of pain and hurt. And when Noah had thrown that punch, he hadn’t just shattered whatever tenuous harmony there was between us. He’d cemented that rage in my own heart. I wasn’t just angry with him. I hated him. And I didn’t think it was possible to ever come back from that.

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EPILOGUE

Noah

It was well after midnight as I slowly drove my car down Matthew LaFleur's tree-lined driveway. I was probably crazy for coming here tonight, but I couldn't sleep after what had happened this evening. The ache across my knuckles was a constant reminder of the punch I'd thrown, and I had to make sure everything was okay.

The hurt in Isobel's eyes as she stared at me was going to haunt me long after the pain in my hand went away. I wasn't sure she'd ever be able to understand my reasoning. And I was quite certain she would never forgive me for hurting her father that way.

My grandfather couldn't have been more pleased though. All night, he had been patting me across the shoulders and commenting on how my father would have been proud. Clearly, William didn't know my father at all because I knew he would have been disappointed at the idea of me punching anyone.

I parked under the shadow of a tree a short walk from the mansion and snuck around the back to enter the house through the kitchens. It was so risky to be here, and if I was caught, everything would be ruined. But the house was asleep, and I'd been told it would be safe.

The back door to the kitchen opened as I approached.

"I thought you'd get here sooner."

My heart froze, only to relax again as the dim light of the kitchen flicked on to reveal Matthew LaFleur.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “I got away as quickly as I could.”

Matthew stood back and gestured for me to enter the house, and as I passed him, I saw he was holding an ice pack. I glanced up at his cheek and grimaced.

“Sorry about that.” I nodded to the bruise that was still forming.

Matthew waved my apology away. “It was necessary.” He drew in a breath. “And I’m sorry for what I said about your father. You know I didn’t mean any of it, right?”

“I know. Still, I wish it hadn’t come to that. I panicked when Isobel started talking about how you, my dad, and your sister and tried to fix things. How did she know about that?”

“That was my fault.” Matthew shook his head. “I shouldn’t have told Isobel about them. Especially with what we’re trying to do... I just didn’t think it would cause any harm to let her know.”

“No, you couldn’t have known she’d bring it up in front of my grandfather.” I sighed. Tonight had been a disaster, but at least it hadn’t been completely pointless. “One positive thing has come from punching you. William’s confident I’m on his side.”

“Good.”

“He’s still not convinced I don’t have feelings for Isobel though.” I’d been stupid to rush to her defense tonight. But when I first saw her standing before my grandfather and heard him throwing thinly veiled threats her way, I hadn’t been able to stop myself. I’d acted without thinking, and now Isobel wasn’t just a weapon he could use against Matthew. She was one he could use against me too.

“So, convince him,” Matthew replied.

I let out a laugh. “Yeah, because that’s so easy.”

“I didn’t say it will be easy,” Matthew said. “But it is necessary. He can’t suspect you have any sympathy for my family. And if it comes to it, you know he’ll try to use her against you.”

“I know,” I growled. “But what do I do?”

“You suck it up and act like she’s the enemy your grandfather thinks she is,” Matthew said.

“If we could just tell her what’s going on...”

Matthew shook his head. “It could put her in more danger. I don’t trust William Hastings, and the less Isobel knows, the better. We saw that firsthand tonight.”

I nodded. If keeping Isobel in the dark afforded her even a small amount of protection from my grandfather, I would do it. It didn’t make any of this any easier though.

“She’s moving on,” I murmured. “She might never forgive me.”

Matthew gave me a sad smile. “It’s a risk you have to take. If you ever want to be with her, this is the only way.”

“I know.” It still pained me to admit it out loud. “I should go. I just wanted to check we were on the same page after everything that happened. Sorry again for hitting you.”

“You did well to think so quickly on your feet, and besides, I look like a badass now.”

I chuckled under my breath. I’d never heard someone sound so posh while saying the word badass before. It totally defeated the purpose. “Totally badass,” I agreed.

We both went silent as the sound of creaking floorboards echoed from above.

“Go,” Matthew hissed, reaching for the door to let me out. “Isobel and her mother are staying here tonight. They can’t know you were here.”

I rushed out the door, but Matthew kept it open a crack as he went to close it. “Just keep to the plan we talked about at my office,” Matthew whispered. “It’s all going to work out, I promise.”

“I know.”

He gave me a tight smile before he closed the door and quickly turned to face whoever had entered the room.

“Matthew?” The sound of Isobel’s voice struck my heart, and I quickly darted down behind the kitchen window so I couldn’t be seen through the glass kitchen door. Matthew was right; she couldn’t know I was here.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said. “I couldn’t sleep, so I’m just getting some more ice for my face.”

I slowly edged myself up to catch a glimpse of Isobel, and I smiled when I saw she was in the cute Winnie the Pooh pajamas she’d worn in New York. Her curly hair was piled in a bun on her head, and she wasn’t

wearing any makeup. I had no idea how someone could look so beautiful, and it killed me that I couldn't walk in there and say as much to her.

"I couldn't sleep either," she said, her voice soft.

I wanted to stay and find out why she couldn't sleep. I didn't get to hear her voice nearly enough anymore. I couldn't risk getting caught at Matthew's house though. Not when everything we had planned hinged on no one knowing we were working together.

With a sigh, I started back to my car. I had a tough road ahead of me. Not only did I have to keep my feelings for Isobel a secret, I somehow had to convince my grandfather they didn't exist at all. William Hastings wouldn't be satisfied with simple indifference though. No, I was going to have to go further than that. I was going to have to convince him I hated her.

Matthew and I had a solid plan, and I felt confident everything was going to work. But I had a bad feeling I would hate myself by the end of this. I was going to move heaven and earth for Isobel, but I was afraid by the time I had it would already be too late.

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SWEET
Ruin

BOOK THREE

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CHAPTER ONE

A chill ran down my spine as I watched my mom's car crawling away. It wasn't the biting air that made me shiver. Rather, it was the disquiet I always felt whenever I had to say goodbye to my mother.

I stood there even after her car had disappeared down the treelined avenue that stretched from the main school building behind me to the tall metal gates at the entrance to Weybridge Academy. A light rain misted the air, but I hardly noticed it. My mom had just left, and I wasn't sure when I'd see her again.

It had been so good to have her at Weybridge this weekend, but it was hard to appreciate the fun moments we'd shared when our evening at the Halloween carnival had turned into a complete disaster. William Hastings had threatened me, and Noah had punched my father. Despite the past between our families, I'd always felt there might somehow be room for reconciliation. But it was amazing how much could change in one night. The burning-hot anger that now flooded my veins when I thought of Noah and William was impossible to deny. I had no idea how I was going to stomach the rest of the school year seeing Noah every day.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there staring down the driveway, but the rain was no longer spritzing the air. Instead, it was falling in fat droplets, promising a stronger storm to come. I finally considered moving, but it was hard to drag myself away. Walking away meant admitting she was truly gone.

I missed my mom so much already. She'd been reluctant to leave today after everything that had happened last night, but Matthew had to return to

New York this morning, and I would be back in class as normal tomorrow. Life didn't stop, and she needed to get home to her café. Still, I wished she could have stayed. Everything felt so much easier to cope with when she was with me.

I started slowly traipsing my way back to the dormitories. A few students ran past me, trying to get out of the rain as it started to fall even harder. I didn't join them though. A part of me liked the way it soaked into my jacket and drenched my hair. It was something real when everything else felt so surreal.

When I reached the courtyard between the two dorms, I paused. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back to my room just yet. There were so many things spinning around in my head. Between my mom leaving and the events of last night, I needed to vent. There was only one person I wanted to talk to right now, and I found myself turning in the direction of the boys' dorm. Wes probably didn't want to hear me complain about my ex, but he was also one of the most understanding and calming people I knew, and I really needed one of his hugs right now. I felt like they could cure even the deepest of emotional wounds.

When the door to his room opened, I crashed into his arms.

"Whoa," he grunted, but he didn't hesitate to wrap his arms tightly around me. He hugged me firmly and didn't question me or let me go until I finally released him and took a step back.

"Isobel, are you okay?" His expression was serious as he reached out to grip my arms and look me in the eyes. I'd briefly spoken to him on the phone last night to tell him that I'd left the carnival early with my mom and Matthew as we'd had a rough night, but I hadn't explained why.

"I'm okay," I muttered.

"You don't look okay. If I'd known you were this upset, I would have come to see you last night."

"No, don't worry. You didn't need to come." I let out a sigh and walked over to sit on his bed. "I'm just a bit upset now because my mom's gone home."

He nodded with understanding and joined me on the bed, the mattress dipping as he sat beside me. He carefully reached out and took my hand in his. "And last night? What happened?"

"It was terrible." I took a moment to gather my thoughts before I continued. "Noah's grandfather cornered me in the parking lot and

threatened me. Then Noah and my father arrived, and everyone got in a massive argument. I didn't think it could get any worse, but then Matthew made some comments about Noah's dad and…" The words caught in my throat. Maybe if I didn't say it out loud, it would be like it never happened.

"And what?" Wes squeezed my hand to comfort me.

"Noah punched my dad."

"He what?" Wes's eyes widened with surprise.

"Noah punched my dad," I repeated. It didn't feel any less surreal the second time I said it. I rubbed a hand across my face as a wave of exhaustion washed over me. "I don't know what he was thinking."

"He has been acting weird recently," Wes said. "He had that fight on the soccer field the other night. But this… This is something else. What did your dad say to him?"

"Something he shouldn't have. But I still can't believe Noah's reaction." I looked down into my hands. "I feel so damn angry about it all. I don't know what I'm going to do when I see him again."

"You'll do what Noah didn't and what you always do," Wes said, making me look up at him. "Take the higher road. You might be a LaFleur, but you're also a Grace. Obviously, that's a quality Noah doesn't have."

I gave him a small smile but then shook my head. "So, I'm supposed to just ignore it? He needs to know what he did was horrible."

"Maybe he does," Wes shrugged. "He might apologize next time he sees you."

"Maybe." I didn't feel confident though. Not after last night. "I kind of want to punch him myself all the same."

Wes chuckled. "Then go for it. He definitely deserves it. I just want you to do whatever puts a smile back on your face."

As I stared into Wes's eyes, it hit me just how lucky I was to have him. He had been a good friend since the day I met him, but I had discovered he was an incredible boyfriend. We'd only been officially dating for a week, and already my ex and my family drama were getting in the way. Wes didn't seem phased though. He just wanted me to be happy.

"And look, I might be biased," he continued. "But my advice is just forget about Noah. He's clearly got some issues, but he's not your problem anymore. I'm your problem." He leaned in close to whisper the final words in my ear, and I laughed at the tickle of his breath on my neck.

“You’re not a problem,” I whispered back. “In fact, I think you might be the solution.”

I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders a little as I looked at him. Wes was right. Noah had been acting very strangely recently. After his fight at the soccer match, I’d tried to comfort him, and he snapped at me. But he later apologized. He’d blamed it on the pressure his grandfather was putting him under. Maybe that pressure had gotten to him once again and he’d cracked. It didn’t excuse what he’d done, but maybe he would apologize this time too.

“Got any other problems I can solve?” The low rumble of Wes’s voice tugged me from my thoughts. He was still leaning in close, and his brown eyes were sparkling.

“Maybe…” I replied, my gaze dropping to his lips. He grinned and started to move closer. Our lips were just about to touch when the door to the room burst open.

“Ugh, my eyes!” Sawyer cried out.

Wes grabbed a pillow off his bed and tossed it at his brother, but Sawyer easily dodged out of the way. “We weren’t even kissing,” Wes said.

“But you were going to.”

“Apparently not if you’ve got anything to do with it,” Wes complained. “I thought you were on team Wesobel.”

“Oh, I am. But only when I don’t want to be in our room.” Sawyer winked at me before launching himself onto his bed. It was a mystery how he managed to get comfortable considering the amount of clothes strewn across it. Wes looked like he was about to storm across the room, pick up his brother, and throw him and his dirty laundry out into the hallway, but I didn’t want him to cause a scene. It was Sawyer’s room too, after all, and I didn’t want him to feel uncomfortable in it because of me.

“How was the rest of your night at the Halloween carnival?” I asked Sawyer before Wes could make his move to kick him out.

“Well, everyone loved my costume,” Sawyer replied, totally unbothered by the fact he’d clearly interrupted us. “It makes me wonder why I even go to the gym. Obviously, my Sawyer magic affects the ladies no matter what I look like.”

“Sawyer magic?” I laughed. In an effort to match Wes’s Thor costume last night, Sawyer had dressed as the overweight version of the character

from *Avengers: Endgame*. Clearly, it hadn't affected his confidence with girls.

"Yeah, Sawyer magic, it's a thing," he replied.

"If you were so happy with your costume, why did I see you running round the carnival half naked?" Wes grunted. He was still glaring at his brother but seemed resigned to the fact he was here to stay.

"Well, I left my costume on for the dunking booth, and it got wet. It was so heavy I had to ditch it."

"You walked around the carnival shirtless?" I asked. "It was so cold last night. Are you crazy?"

"It wasn't *that* cold, and I had a cape," Sawyer replied with a shrug. "Do you mind if I put the TV on? The guys are all watching some movie in the common room, but there's a game on I want to watch." Yep, Sawyer wasn't going anywhere.

"I was just about to head off anyway," I said.

"You don't have to leave." Wes looked disappointed.

"It's okay. I should get back to my room. Cress might be wondering where I am."

He followed me as I walked to the door and gathered me up in a warm hug. "Sorry about Sawyer. Let me know if you want to hang out tonight," he said. "I can come to your room, or we can go for a walk. Whatever you want, I'm here."

"Thanks," I said. "But I think I'll be okay. You've already made me feel a lot better, and I haven't had a chance to do any homework yet this weekend with everything that's been going on. We could do it together, but you're somewhat of a distraction."

"Only somewhat?"

I smirked and pushed him back into his room. "I'll see you later."

I let out a breath as I started back to my dorm. Wes might have made me feel better about things with Noah, but I was still missing my mom.

The rain hadn't let up when I got outside and, even though I ran across the courtyard, the downpour soaked through my clothes quickly. Thankfully, the girls' dorm wasn't far.

I was almost to the front entrance when a high-pitched giggle rang through my ears. I saw two figures emerging from the building, and I froze as I realized it was Noah and Veronica.

Rain was pouring down around me, but my feet were pinned to the floor. Noah's arm was effortlessly slung across the back of Veronica's shoulders, and my blood turned to ice as she reached up and ran a hand through his hair.

I couldn't look away. I couldn't move at all. The way he hugged her close to him betrayed an intimacy that made my heart stop. I was furious with Noah after what he'd done last night, but my stomach still plummeted when I saw him with the girl he'd told me not to worry about.

What was his problem? First, he punched my father, and now he was moving on with Veronica of all people? She'd taken such pleasure in trying to destroy me this semester.

Noah had insisted there was nothing between them when he'd taken her to the White Ball instead of me at the start of the term. Had it all been a lie? Had I been so stupidly infatuated with Noah I hadn't seen the truth? From the way he was looking at Veronica now, it certainly appeared so.

The hot anger I thought had cooled after my talk with Wes returned with a vengeance. I felt like a cornered alley cat, and it took everything in me not to bare my teeth and hiss at him. This boy had already caused me so much heartache, and now this?

I might have yelled at him, but shock stilled my tongue. I was so furious I was practically shaking, and I couldn't get my thoughts in order quick enough to speak. It didn't help that Veronica was still on his arm. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing they were getting to me.

When Noah's eyes met mine, he held my gaze and seemed to smirk. His arm tightened around Veronica's shoulders, and he pulled her slightly closer. Veronica followed suit, and the corners of her lips kicked up in a pleased smile, which she flashed in my direction as she gladly snuggled closer to Noah. They were just rubbing it in my face now.

"Today was fun." Veronica raised her voice slightly, and I knew she was talking for my benefit.

"It was," Noah agreed. "I'll call you later."

He lowered his lips to brush a kiss against her cheek, and I felt the freezing rain against my skin once again. The cold crept down my spine, and my wet clothes clung to me. It all seemed to hit me at once, and I wrapped my arms around my body as I shivered.

Veronica untangled herself from Noah and returned inside the girls' dorm while Noah pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and started

toward the boys' building. He walked right past me without acknowledging my presence at all. I'd foolishly thought Noah might apologize the next time he saw me. That maybe by now he would have come to his senses and realized he'd acted completely out of line. But apparently, he had instead gone out in search of the next best way to hurt me.

I'd been willing to consider Wes's advice to take the high road and forget about Noah. But, right now, that didn't seem possible. Seeing Noah with Veronica had reignited my anger. And the more I thought about Noah punching my dad, the more I trembled with rage. Was he really not going to apologize to me? Why was he being so vindictive?

I whirled to face him. He was nearly at the entrance to his dorm, and I stormed across the courtyard after him. He was just about to pull the door open, but as I caught up with him, I placed my hand against it and slammed it shut.

"What is wrong with you?" I yelled.

He stepped back from me and slowly lowered his hood, lifting one eyebrow as he stared down at me. His eyes filled with judgment as he looked upon my drenched hair and clothes. "Jealousy isn't a good look on you, Isobel."

"Jealousy? I'm talking about you punching my father."

He folded his arms across his chest. "He insulted my dad."

"So? Do you solve all your problems with your fists now?" I shook my head as I stared at him.

"If you're waiting for an apology, you're not going to get one," he said.

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to. You owe my father an apology."

"That's certainly not going to happen."

"And what about Veronica? You two are suddenly together now?

"Like I said, jealousy isn't a good look on you."

I was so mad I had to clench my hands into fists to control myself.

"I don't know what's going on with you Noah, but I'm done. I thought you were different. But clearly you take right after your grandfather."

He flinched a little, and his eyes briefly disconnected from mine. I wondered if my words had made him see sense, but he soon regained his composure. His back became rigid, and his expression turned cruel.

"Maybe I am." He leaned in closer, towering over me, but I held my ground as I glared up at him. He was only inches away from me, and our

chests were heaving with emotion. I knew Noah's anger matched my own as he scowled down at me.

"What? Are you planning on punching me too?" I asked.

"You think I'm capable of punching you?"

"I don't know what you're capable of anymore. I thought I knew who you were, but I can see now I was wrong."

We were still standing so close, and the air was charged with fire. Even when I hated him, there was an undeniable connection between us. I wished I could burn it away, along with every other emotion I felt when Noah was near.

"You believed what you wanted to believe about me," he replied. "It's not my fault you made me into some fairy-tale prince."

"How could I have ever thought you were a prince when you're so clearly the villain?" I replied.

Noah released a dry laugh and stepped away from me. "Finally, you've got it all figured out."

The way he was looking at me, it was hard to believe he'd ever cared about me at all. "Just stay away from my family, Noah. Stay away from me."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to do."

"Good." I turned and started back out into the rain, my anger driving me away from Noah. He wasn't the same boy I'd dated just a few weeks ago. He wasn't even the same boy who'd broken up with me. He'd done it so reluctantly at the time, bowing to his grandfather's wishes without a fight. Now he was physically attacking my family members and going out of his way to hurt me.

Something in him seemed to have changed. The line of division between us and our families was clearer than ever. Noah hated my family, and he hated me. I was more than happy to make the feeling mutual.

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CHAPTER TWO

The girls kept throwing me worried glances at breakfast the following morning. It was understandable seeing as Veronica was cuddled up next to Noah. No one other than Luther and Kaden ever sat at Noah's table, so her presence at his side was essentially the dining hall equivalent of updating their Facebook status to "in a relationship."

We weren't the only ones watching them with curious eyes. Everyone in the room was captivated. I was trying my best not to look. No one wanted to witness their ex engaged in dining hall PDA. But it was almost impossible not to notice them when Veronica's high-pitched giggle kept drifting across the room toward us.

"I honestly can't believe they're together," Cress said. "Noah can't stand Veronica. He's been trying to avoid this for years."

It was hard for me to believe too, but Noah had proven himself to be his grandfather's little lap dog, so it wasn't all that surprising. "The two of them deserve each other."

"I guess Veronica and Noah are the least of your concerns after the weekend," Anna said. I'd told the girls about Noah punching my dad when I'd returned to my room yesterday.

"Definitely," I agreed. I'd struggled to get over Noah, but when a guy punched your father and dated your nemesis, it made you wonder what you saw in him in the first place.

Cress grimaced as she looked his way. "I honestly don't know what's going on with him," she said, shooting me another worried look. I couldn't tell if she was more concerned about me or Noah.

“Seriously, stop worrying,” I said. “I’m with Wes now, and I’m happy.” Being with Wes was light and easy, like a breath of fresh air after everything I’d been through with Noah. I often felt like I didn’t deserve him.

“Yeah, we can tell,” Cress said, relaxing slightly. “You guys are really good together.”

“Speaking of good together,” I replied. “I haven’t asked you about your Ferris wheel ride with Kaden yet. How was it?” I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten. It had completely skipped my mind thanks to all the drama with Noah.

“It was okay,” Cress said. “There’s not much to tell. We just chatted.”

“Really?” I found that hard to believe. Especially after he’d been so sweet at the kiss or scare booth, kissing the back of her hand and inviting her to join him on the Ferris wheel. It was so romantic.

“Yeah, don’t get me wrong, it was really nice,” Cress continued. “I just thought he might try and kiss me.” She sounded so disappointed. “And then after we got off the Ferris wheel, it turned totally awkward. He got a phone call, and he said he had to go. He left pretty quickly, and it felt like he couldn’t get away from me fast enough.”

“I’m sure he didn’t want to go,” I said.

“And what about the lack of kissing?”

“I told you already,” Anna said. “It’s Kaden. He’s pretty reserved and doesn’t really date. He probably just wants to take things slow.”

“Or maybe it took one spin on the Ferris wheel for him to realize he doesn’t like me that much,” Cress replied.

"No way,” Anna gasped. “How could he not like you? You’re the most likable person I know.”

“He’d have to be crazy not to like you,” I agreed.

"So, I guess that means he’s crazy.” Cress shrugged.

Kaden was a hard guy to read, but he definitely wasn’t crazy. He didn’t say much, and he usually sat back and allowed his friends to do most of the talking. I had a feeling Anna was right, and if he hadn’t been more forward with Cress, it was simply because that wasn’t his nature. It didn’t seem to matter how much we tried to reassure Cress though. She seemed convinced Kaden wasn’t into her.

“We’ll just have to wait until he asks you out again,” I said.

“*Or* you could cut to the chase and ask him…” Anna suggested.

“I’m not asking *him* out,” Cress gasped. “Not when he pretty much ran away from me like I was the most terrifying thing at the carnival. No, I don’t want to waste any more of my time waiting around for a guy who’s just not that into me."

“I don’t think you should give up on Kaden completely,” I said. “He might surprise you.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But I’m not so sure.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and as I glanced up, I found Wes grinning down at me. He gave me a quick peck on the cheek before taking the spare seat at my side.

“How was practice this morning?” I asked.

“Hard.” He grimaced. “You’d think Coach would go easy on us since we won this weekend, but no such luck. My shoulders are killing me already. I’m probably going to be sore for days.”

“That’s what you get for exercising,” Anna said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Wes winked at her before focusing on me. “How was your night?” he asked. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “A little better after sleeping on it.” That wasn’t strictly true. After I left Wes’s room last night, Noah had reignited my anger to a whole new level, but I had calmed down a bit since then.

“That’s good.” He drew in a breath and looked like he was going to continue, but then he paused. I could tell there was something on his mind and he was carefully considering how to voice it.

“What is it?” I asked.

He exhaled loudly. “It’s Noah and Veronica. I didn’t know they were dating until this morning. I wanted to check how you’re feeling. Seeing them together, I mean.” He frowned as he spoke, and I could see how uncomfortable he was asking the question. I hated he felt he had to worry about how I might be feeling at the sight of my ex moving on.

“It’s news to all of us,” Anna said. I was relieved she’d been the one to speak first so I didn’t have to respond straightaway. I knew Wes was only asking me to be supportive. We’d both been through bad breakups recently, so he knew there was a chance it would be weird for me to see Noah and Veronica together. But the question felt loaded with pressure. There was only one way I could answer without hurting his feelings. Thankfully, after everything Noah had put me through, I didn’t have to lie.

“I’m okay,” I said. “We’re talking about a guy that punched my dad. Dating Veronica sounds like a suitable punishment for him.”

The tension released from Wes’ shoulders, and he smiled at me. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said. There was such a clear look of relief in his eyes it made me wonder just how anxious he was about my feelings toward Noah.

“So, I was thinking about our study session tonight,” Wes said, eager to get off the topic of my ex-boyfriend. “What do you think about ditching the library and coming to my room so we can get takeout delivered while we work? Sawyer’s got soccer practice, so we’ll have some peace.”

“Interesting. What kind of takeout are you thinking?”

“How about your favorite burgers…”

“Toddy’s?”

He grinned and nodded.

“I’m surprised you even had to ask.” I laughed. “That sounds perfect.”

The bell rang, and we started to gather our things to head to class. I said goodbye to Wes and Anna before heading off to English with Cress. I was looking forward to burgers for dinner, but I was most excited about getting some uninterrupted time with Wes. It was just what I needed.

“Are you sure you’re okay about Noah and Veronica?” Cress asked as we walked down the corridor to English. “It would be understandable if you weren’t.”

“I mean, I’m about as okay as I can be.” I let out a sigh. “Don’t get me wrong, it doesn’t sit right with me that he took her to the White Ball and said he didn’t have feelings for her. Clearly, he was lying about that. But I’m too mad at him for everything else to be upset by that.”

“I still don’t like it,” Cress said. “I just don’t understand why he’d start dating her now after rejecting her all these years.”

“It seems he’s fully embraced the dark side.” We walked a little farther down the hall before I continued. “Do you think it was weird that Wes asked me how I felt about Noah and Veronica?”

“I think he was just being thoughtful,” she said. “He knows what you’ve been through. He’s been through it too.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know, it’s just strange talking about my ex-boyfriend with my current boyfriend.”

“Totally,” Cress agreed. “Maybe because you and Wes were friends first, he felt like he could ask you.”

“Yeah.”

“He also probably needed to ask. For him, I mean. I think Wes finds it hard where Noah’s concerned.”

“What do you mean?”

“He hasn’t said anything to me, but I just wonder if he struggles a bit. You guys were close friends when you were going out with Noah, so he knows how much he meant to you. It must be hard not to be jealous.”

“You think Wes is jealous?”

“I’m not saying he’s jealous of Noah exactly. But maybe of the connection you two had.” She shook her head. “We all saw how strong it was. And you and Wes are just starting out. It must be hard for him not to make comparisons. Like, how would you feel if Sarah went to school with us?” Cress was starting to rush over her words, like she was desperate to make herself clearer so I didn’t misunderstand. “Do you know what I mean? I’m not sure if this is coming out right.”

“No, that makes sense.” I fell silent as I considered her words. My relationship with Wes was so different from the one I’d had with Noah. That didn’t mean it wasn’t as good. It was better in so many ways.

“Do you think I need to talk to him about it?” I asked. “Try to reassure him?”

“I don’t know, maybe just give it time,” Cress replied. “Wes knew you were slowly getting over Noah when you started dating. I think this is all to be expected. I’m sure he’ll relax once he sees you’re not going anywhere.”

I smiled and nodded, but everything Cress said stuck with me during class. Was Wes really jealous of what I’d had with Noah? And what did I have to do to prove he had nothing to worry about?



I WAS STILL WORRYING about Wes as I went to my next class. I entered the math classroom and made my way to the back of the room to find my usual seat next to Luther and Kaden. I’d given up trying to sit somewhere else in the room because the two of them always found a way to drag me back there.

When I reached my seat, I went to pull it out, but Luther’s hand clamped down on my arm, stopping me.

“This seat is taken,” he said.

I stilled as I glanced at him. Luther was looking up at me, his face stone-cold as he returned my gaze. He had to be joking, right?

“Very funny, Luther.” I went to grab the seat again, but his hand on my arm didn’t move.

“Like I said, this seat is taken. Find somewhere else to sit, Isobel.”

Hearing him say my name made me realize he wasn’t kidding around. Luther always called me newbie. I didn’t think he’d ever used my actual name.

“What’s wrong, Luther?” I lowered my voice as I spoke.

“Nothing’s wrong. You just can’t sit with us anymore. Isn’t that right, Kaden?”

Kaden nodded but his gaze remained fixed on the front of the classroom. He refused to look my way.

“I thought we were friends,” I replied. Luther had definitely talked and joked with me like we were friends ever since I’d started at this school. Even when Noah and I broke up, Luther had still been his usual cheeky self to me.

I wasn’t sure why I was surprised though. Luther’s friendship had always felt unusual. He was one of the most popular guys at school and the best friend of my ex-boyfriend. He had no reason to want to hang out with me. Still, I couldn’t seem to wrap my head around his sudden change of heart.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

Luther grew tense, his lips forming a hard line as he stared back at me. “We had to pick a side. And, well…”

“You didn’t choose me,” I finished for him. Now it all made sense. This was coming from Noah. His vindictive streak against me was continuing. This time, he was isolating me from his friends. My friends. A part of me had worried this might happen eventually now we weren’t together. Luther and Kaden were Noah’s closest friends, so of course, they would choose him. But this way just felt spiteful.

I could sense hurt flashing across my eyes. I didn’t want Luther to know how much this was affecting me, so I quickly turned and made my way to a seat at the front of the room.

I should have been happy. Finally, I’d be able to get some actual work done in my math class. It was hard not to feel upset though. My friendship with Luther might not have made much sense to me, but I liked it. And

Kaden had always been so kind to me. It almost hurt more to know that even he was following Noah's orders.

If there was a silver lining to this situation, it was that Veronica had not arrived in time to see my confrontation with Luther. It would have been so much worse if she'd been here to witness the embarrassment of my rejection.

Still, when she entered the room and found me sitting in a different seat than usual, there was a satisfied glint in her eyes. She was obviously well aware I'd fallen out of favor with Kaden and Luther.

My day only grew worse from there. When I entered my business management class, I found Noah seated at the far back corner of the room. He usually sat right behind me, but today he'd moved himself as far away as possible. His nearness in this class had been driving me crazy for weeks, but it was like a slap across the face to see he'd moved. It was further confirmation he'd finally put our relationship firmly behind us. But it felt like even more than that. He seemed to be doing everything he could to entirely erase what we had.

He'd attacked my father because of his insulting comments, but I wasn't sure what I'd done to turn him against me quite so completely. He was the one who deserved to be punished. Maybe seeing me go to my father's aid on the weekend had settled it for him. Maybe that night had settled things for me too.

Noah didn't acknowledge me as I sat down. Some guy who was wearing an overwhelming amount of aftershave had taken his regular spot. I spent most of class trying to breathe through my mouth to avoid the smell. Still, I preferred it to the constant tingles I used to get across the back of my neck whenever I felt Noah watching me in class.

I didn't feel them now. Not once. There were no longing gazes. No lasting looks. It was like I didn't exist to him anymore.

After class was over, Lily pulled me aside.

"So, Noah's not sitting behind you anymore…"

"Seems so," I agreed. "But, it's for the best. We're both moving on. It's easier if we keep our distance."

She frowned slightly. "Yeah, I guess."

"What?" She seemed like she was holding something back.

"It's nothing; this just feels so final, you know."

"Him moving seats?"

She shook her head. “Well, no, not just that. He’s with Veronica now, and you’re with Wes.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“I know,” she quickly rushed to say. “But the way Noah used to look at you… It was the kind of thing you’d only read about in fairy tales.”

“He didn’t look at me like that,” I muttered.

“He did. He looked at you like you where the very thing his universe revolved around. It was kind of epic.”

“Well, we must have been an epic tragedy rather than an epic fairy tale because we were never going to work.”

“I guess so,” Lily said, somewhat reluctantly. “It just seems weird that he could turn that off so quickly.” She paused and shook her head. “But it’s great you have Wes now. He’s such a nice guy. I don’t think he’ll mess you around like Noah did.”

“Yeah, I don’t think he will either.” I agreed. How could he? Unless he too went to war with my family. I’d seen his father talking happily with mine at the carnival though, so I liked to believe we were good on that front.

“Are you studying in the library tonight?” Lily asked.

I was there almost every Monday night with Wes but not tonight. “Actually, Wes invited me to study in his room so we could get takeout.”

“Sounds romantic,” Lily said with a suggestive smile.

“It’s just studying.”

She tilted her head at me, looking thoroughly unconvinced. “Uh-huh.”

My cheeks flushed. “It is.”

“Okay, well, I’m off to meet Amber. Have fun *studying* with Wes.” She winked at me before taking off in the other direction.

“I will,” I called after her, a flurry of anticipation prickling my skin.

Maybe she had a point, and tonight would be a little romantic. Wes and I hadn’t had a chance to go on a proper date yet, so maybe this would be our first. There’d been so much to distract us since we’d first got together. Not to mention Sawyer’s constant interruptions. We might not have been calling tonight a date, but there would be food and we would finally be alone—it certainly sounded like a date.

Besides, if it was just studying, why was I so excited about it?

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CHAPTER THREE

I knocked lightly on Wes's door, and it opened almost immediately. He looked relieved to see me standing there.

"Thank God," he said. "Sawyer's had girls banging on this door all afternoon."

"Oh no, why?" I laughed as I followed him into the room.

"My family throws a charity gala every Thanksgiving and, apparently, he's spread the word he's looking for a date. Girls are coming here looking for him."

"Why wouldn't he just ask someone?"

"I think he wants multiple options to choose from."

"That's terrible."

"That's Sawyer," Wes agreed. "Speaking of the gala. Would you like to be my date? It's in New York. Maybe you could visit your dad at the same time."

It sounded wonderful, but I found myself shaking my head. "I would love to, but I was thinking about planning a trip home for Thanksgiving to see my mom. I miss her so much, and I really want to spend the holiday with her."

"Maybe she'd like to come too?" Wes suggested. "She'd be more than welcome."

My cheeks warmed as I smiled at him. "That's really kind of you to offer, but Mom always hosts a big Thanksgiving feast at the café. It's a kind of a tradition."

“Say no more.” He gave me an understanding smile. “I thought you might have family plans. But I wanted to make sure you knew you were invited.”

“Thanks.” Wes was sweet like that. I could tell he really wanted me to be there, but he didn’t hesitate to reassure me it was okay if I wasn’t. I wondered if Noah would have been just as understanding, but then I quickly ignored the unwelcome thought. I didn’t want to compare the two boys.

“The burgers are on their way,” Wes said. "I hope it’s okay, but I went ahead and ordered your usual cheeseburger. No pickles and extra fries, right?”

“That sounds perfect.” I had no idea Wes knew what I normally ordered, let alone that he’d remember it.

“I’ll never understand how you can like burgers without pickles, but I guess you had to have one fault.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I’m sure that isn’t my only fault.”

“It’s the only one I’ve been able to find,” he said with a grin. “Now, do you want to get started on our homework or wait until we’ve eaten?”

He was stretching his arms as he spoke, and his face contorted in discomfort before he lifted a hand to rub his shoulder. He must have still been feeling sore after his early-morning rowing practice.

“We should probably start on our homework,” I said. “I have so many math problems to complete before class tomorrow. It’s almost like the teacher knew I had a study date with my boyfriend tonight and he wanted me to actually study. It was incredibly inconsiderate of him.”

“*So* rude.” Wes chuckled. “Okay, let’s get that out of the way then.”

I pulled out my books and sat on the bed next to Wes. I found it hard to focus on the equations though because Wes kept gripping and rubbing his shoulders. I could see he was uncomfortable, and I hated knowing he was in pain.

“How are your shoulders feeling?” I asked. “No better?”

“They are still ridiculously tight.” He winced again as he rolled his shoulders back and forth. “I could really do with a massage, but we don’t have a physio coming until Wednesday.”

“I could try to give them a massage, if you like…” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. Did I even know how to give a massage?

“Really?” Wes’s eyebrows lifted with surprise. “That would be amazing.”

“I mean, the key word here is *try*,” I said. “I have no idea how to give a proper massage. I might injure you further.”

He laughed. “I doubt that. I’m sure it will help.”

“Still, maybe I should get you to sign some kind of liability waiver first?”

“Don’t worry, I trust you.”

“I know you do, but I don’t want to be blamed for tragically ruining the career of a future Olympic rower in a freak massage accident.”

He chuckled again. “Surely you can’t be that bad.”

“Okay, well as long as you know the risks.”

“I do.” Wes nodded solemnly, like he was about to go into battle. “So, where do you want me?”

“Uh, maybe sitting on the edge of the bed?”

“Done.” He moved over to the edge of his bed, and I knelt on the mattress behind him.

I hesitated as I went to place my hands on his shoulders. I really didn’t know a thing about massages. I’d never even had one myself. I wasn’t sure what I’d been thinking by offering to give one to Wes. I supposed I’d just wanted to help him so he was no longer in pain. And I really hoped this did help. I’d feel terrible if it made his discomfort even worse.

My stomach dipped as I placed my hands on his shoulders. His body was warm to touch, and from this close, I could clearly smell the scent of his shampoo. It was a fresh and inviting smell with hints of peppermint. I hadn’t noticed when I’d first arrived, but soft music was drifting from a speaker on the other side of the room. The artist singing had a soothing voice, and the gentle thrumming of their guitar was perfectly relaxing.

Despite the calming atmosphere, I felt tense, and I was struggling to ignore the nerves thrumming through me. I closed my eyes, hoping that might help me scrounge up some unknown massage talent hidden deep within me. Unfortunately, I had no luck. I was certain I was doing it wrong. Wes’s shoulders were so firm and muscular it was hard to know if I was having any impact at all. It didn’t help that his shirt kept bunching in my grasp.

I let out a sigh and opened my eyes again, lowering my hands from him. “Your shirt is kind of getting in the way.” I had to think of some excuse for

my pathetic massage skills, and that seemed as good as any.

Wes turned to look at me. “Are you trying to undress me, Isobel?”

As if I wasn’t already embarrassed enough, my cheeks betrayed me and flashed bright red. “I just think I’d do a better job without it.”

He shrugged and released a soft laugh. “Well, it felt pretty good to me, but I’m not going to complain if you want to try and make it even better.”

I shook my head, convinced he was just being polite.

Before I could say anything else, he pulled his shirt up and over his head, and I swallowed hard as I looked at him. His chest was tanned, and his muscles were large and smooth. I knew Wes was strong and athletic, but seeing him now, I imagined he could lift me up over his head using only one arm. My mouth went completely dry, and I had no idea how I was going to bring myself to touch him again. He didn’t look real. First, I’d offered to give him a massage, and now I’d made him take off his shirt—who was I, and what had I done with the real Isobel?

Wes glanced at me again as I hesitated. “Is this okay?”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat. “Of course. Sorry, I was just trying to figure out what exactly they’ve been feeding you at this school.”

“Well, my coach would tell you I sneak too much dessert, and Sawyer would tell you I eat like I’m no fun.” He gave an awkward laugh, and I wondered if he was just as nervous about being topless around me as I was. It probably didn’t help I was kneeling on the bed staring at him like I’d never seen a boy without a shirt on before.

The idea that it wasn’t just me who was a little tense in this situation made it easier to lower my hands to Wes’s shoulders once more. It was Wes I was massaging, after all. I could be totally relaxed around him. I could trust him.

Still, it was hard to convince the butterflies fluttering inside me to settle. I still had no idea what I was doing. The closest I’d ever come to a massage was kneading a ball of dough in my mom’s kitchen. It was a useless comparison though as there was absolutely nothing doughy about Wes’s back. And when he let out a small groan, my stomach dropped again in response. The sound was low and gravelly and far more intimate than I’d been ready for.

“It’s not too bad, is it?” I asked.

“Pretty sure it’s the opposite of bad,” Wes said. “It’s…”

I jumped as a loud knock sounded at the door. My hands instinctively lifted off Wes's shoulders and hovered there for a second before dropping to my sides. He didn't immediately move to answer the door though.

"Should we see who's there?" I asked.

"I'm sure they'll take the hint and leave." Wes didn't sound too hopeful, and he was quickly proved wrong when the knock sounded again. After a few seconds of silence, there was yet another knock. Wes sighed and pushed himself off the bed and walked over to the door. As he pulled it open, a girl came into view. Her eyes widened as she was confronted by Wes's bare chest. The poor girl looked like she was about to have a heart attack. Me too, girl. Me too.

"Can I help you?" Wes asked.

"Oh, uh, yeah." The girl blushed, but just as she was about to continue, her eyes drifted past Wes to where I was perched on his bed. She glanced between me and the half-naked boy standing in front of her, and I could practically hear the cogs whirring in her head. Whatever she had come to the twins' room to say seemed to completely slip her mind when she saw me in the room with a shirtless Wes, and she stood there with her mouth hanging slightly open.

"Hello…?" Wes prompted the girl, and she seemed to snap out of her temporary trance with a shake of her head.

"Uh, I heard you were looking for a date to your family's Thanksgiving gala—"

Wes cut her off. "If you can't tell my brother and me apart, you're probably not the girl Sawyer's looking for," he said.

"Oh." Her eyebrows lifted. "You're Wes." Her eyes dragged longingly over his chest once more, and again she seemed to briefly forget why she had come to the room in the first place.

"Yep, I'm Wes. Sawyer's at soccer practice, so maybe try him there." Wes's response was a clear signal for the girl to leave. She nodded, but as he closed the door on her, her gaze flicked to meet mine once more. Just before it slammed shut, I could have sworn a wry smile was pulling at her lips.

"Sorry about that," Wes said, turning to face me.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry for you. Have they all been like that?"

"Pretty much," he said. "Though at least the others knew which twin they were talking to."

“And are you sending them all down to the soccer pitch?”

“Yeah.” He smirked. “It’s probably going to be mayhem there, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” I agreed. I could picture the crowd of girls standing on the sidelines waiting for Sawyer. It would probably be his dream come true.

“Maybe we should have met up in your room tonight,” Wes said as he came to join me on the bed once more. “It’s hard to relax with the constant interruptions. If it’s not Sawyer barging in, it’s one of his fangirls.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Although, I’m a little nervous about having a boy in our dorm these days. Our dorm mom warned us we’d have to clean the boys’ bathrooms for a week if any of you guys were caught in our rooms after curfew.”

“Really?” Wes looked genuinely shocked by the idea.

“Yeah. I know it’s not close to curfew now, but I really don’t want to clean the boys’ bathrooms.”

Wes laughed. “I wouldn’t want to do that either. But, just so you know, if that does ever happen, I’d do all the cleaning for you. No way am I letting you near the bathrooms in this place. They’re disgusting.”

“I wouldn’t make you do that.”

“It’s okay. I might have other motives.” He grinned. “Getting caught in your room after curfew wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

He leaned across to me and pressed his lips gently against mine. It was a soft kiss, but it was hard not to feel slightly lightheaded, and I rested my hands on his bare chest to help me keep my balance.

He pulled me closer, and our kiss became stronger as I slid my arms around him. I was suddenly very aware he was topless and we were on his bed. It felt like we were about to fall back against the pillows, and the idea made my heart flip.

A knock shook the door once again. Wes and I both turned on it and shouted at the same time. “He’s not in here!”

We listened in silence for a response and eventually heard whoever was out in the hall move away from the door. When we looked back at each other, we couldn’t help but laugh.

“Maybe this is a sign that we should just go to the library and do our homework,” I said.

Wes started to frown and then shook his head. “No, I’m not letting Sawyer ruin our night.”

He moved over to his desk and stared scribbling on a piece of paper before grabbing a roll of Scotch tape.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he pulled the door open and taped the paper across the front of it. I laughed when he stood back to reveal what he’d written. “Sawyer’s not here. You can find him on the soccer pitch,” I read out loud.

“Do you think it will work?” Wes asked.

“It’s pretty clear, so I hope so.” I smiled.

“I hope so too.” Wes closed the door and made his way back to the bed. “Where were we?”

He sat back down on the bed beside me and reached up a hand to lightly cup my face. My lips quivered in anticipation, and my head felt dizzy. He started to lean toward me, but the bedroom door rattled again as another visitor banged on it from outside.

“Read the sign,” Wes called out over his shoulder, his eyes still locked on to mine.

“Uh, Wes, it’s me.” A guy’s voice came from the hallway. “I’ve got those burgers you asked me to pick up…”

“Ah.” Wes’s shoulders fell slightly as he realized he needed to answer the door. This time, he grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head. My heart sank as it felt like the moment between us had definitely now passed.

When Wes reached the door he didn’t open it wide enough for me to see who was on the other side, but I could clearly hear them talking.

“Thanks for getting these, man,” Wes said.

“No problem. Like I told you, I was headed to Toddy’s anyway. I’ll see you at practice in the morning.”

“See you then.”

Wes closed the door and shrugged as he turned to show me the brown paper Toddy’s bag. “I guess that wasn’t the worst interruption. You hungry?”

“Sure.” I smiled, but it was hard not to be a little disappointed. With the taste of Wes still lingering on my lips after the kiss we hadn’t been able to finish, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to enjoy my Toddy’s burger quite as much as usual.

We sat on the bed with our burgers, and while I usually liked to savor Toddy’s food, tonight I was eating very quickly. The thought of getting to kiss Wes again was probably speeding me up, and I only hoped I wasn’t

making so much mess he'd be put off the idea of kissing me completely. In the end, it didn't matter, because by the time we were finished, Sawyer had returned from soccer practice. It seemed as though our kisses were done for the night.

"What's this on the door?" Sawyer laughed as he entered the room. "Is this why there was a cheer squad of hotties squealing my name at practice tonight?"

"There were too many girls calling on you here," Wes replied. "It got so annoying I figured I'd send them to find you."

"Good thinking." Sawyer grinned. "I've got a tough decision to make before the gala. Any advice, brother?"

"Yep," Wes replied. "Don't ask me."

Sawyer chuckled as he collapsed onto his bed and made himself comfortable.

"I guess you've already helped enough," he continued. "I can't say I didn't enjoy it, but dodging girls after training was harder than the session itself. I'm exhausted. What have you two been up to?"

Wes and I glanced at each other, not sure what to say. We'd been up to a few things I doubted Sawyer wanted to hear about.

"Uh, studying," I answered.

"Yeah, we were thinking about heading to the library," Wes added. He seemed annoyed with his brother for interrupting us yet again and, apparently, he had finally given up trying to ensure we had a bit of privacy.

I nodded. "Yeah, the library sounds great."

Wes and I gathered our things and were out the door before Sawyer could go into any more detail about the selection process for his gala date.

Neither of us spoke as we walked through the dorm, out into the courtyard and made our way to the library. The evening had been a bit of a roller coaster. I'd really enjoyed hanging out with Wes. I always did. But we didn't seem to be able to get more than a few minutes alone in this place. He seemed disappointed our study date hadn't been very successful. So was I.

Just as we reached the entrance to the library, I stopped, reached out to take Wes's hand and turned him to face me.

"What?" he asked

"I just wanted to say thanks for tonight. I know we didn't get to spend all that much time alone, but I liked getting to hang out just the two of us."

“I’m sorry we keep getting interrupted,” Wes said. “I didn’t get to kiss you nearly as much as I would have liked tonight.”

"There’s still time,” I said before I reached up and brushed my lips against his. He smiled as we kissed, and although it wasn’t quite as hot as the one we’d shared in his room, it still sent butterflies swirling in my stomach.

“Hmm.” Wes rumbled. “Maybe I should just go back and kick Sawyer out of our room.”

I laughed lightly and took his hand before leading him into the library. For a Monday night, it was pretty busy. It seemed like half the school was here trying to catch up on work. We were now well into the school year, so assignments and homework had been starting to build up. Still, Wes and I managed to find a spare study table. It was a quiet spot, but as I pulled my books out of my bag, the sound of whispering caused me to turn.

A group of girls sitting a few tables away were giggling about something. As I looked at them, I realized they were all watching me. One of the girls caught my eye, and I recognized her as the one who’d come to the twins’ room looking for Sawyer. The one who had seen Wes without his shirt on while I sat on his bed behind him. When she saw me watching her, she and all the girls quickly turned away, but I could still hear them whispering and giggling quietly.

I hadn’t been at Weybridge Academy long, but it had been enough time for me to learn how quickly gossip spread in this place. Clearly, this girl thought she’d stumbled upon some pretty juicy gossip after finding me on Wes’s bed. I tried my best to ignore her. Wes and I hadn’t been doing anything I should be embarrassed about. I knew that wouldn’t matter though. Once Weybridge Academy decided something was worth gossiping about, there was nothing you could do to stop it.

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CHAPTER FOUR

By the next morning, I was once again the talk of the school. Everyone was discussing how I'd been found in a compromising position in Wes's bedroom. I honestly couldn't understand why people cared, and the speed at which the gossip seemed to travel around the entire school was shocking. I also couldn't understand why I seemed to be the only one being judged for it. Girls gave me harsh looks and whispered about me behind my back while simultaneously talking openly about how good Wes looked without a shirt on. It was totally unfair.

A few people felt brave enough to ask me about it directly, and I bluntly told them nothing had happened even though it was none of their business. I'd also explained that to Cress and Anna and although I didn't ask them to, they'd told everyone they could that it was just a silly rumor. Unfortunately, that did little to help. Instead, the rumor seemed to morph and change, like it was resisting my attempts to kill it. The next day, people were instead talking about how the rumor couldn't be true because Wes and I lacked chemistry. I honestly felt like I couldn't win.

Thankfully, it all blew over quite fast, and by the weekend people mostly seemed to have forgotten there was anything to talk about in the first place. Still, I didn't think I was ever going to get used to the way people at Weybridge loved to talk.

The arrival of the weekend also meant it was time for my driving lesson. I was beginning to dread my Saturday mornings. Despite the handful of lessons I'd had so far with my instructor, I felt like my driving confidence was only plummeting lower. Today was no exception, and my

lesson had been another disaster. I hadn't even pulled the car out of the parking space.

I'd been far too nervous as the parking lot was so busy. There seemed to be a constant stream of cars coming and going or people walking through the lot. There was a minibus parked awkwardly in front of one building taking up half the road, and a couple of guys were standing in the middle of the tarmac throwing a football. How was I supposed to feel confident I wouldn't get into an accident when the place was crawling with hazards?

My poor instructor had spent the entire lesson trying to encourage me to take the car out of park. Whatever my father was paying the man, he probably needed to double it. He had the patience of a saint.

After my lesson, I walked from my car, trying my best not to cry. I didn't know why I freaked out so much when I tried to drive. It's not like my accident had been bad. My mom's car had barely been dented, and I'd thankfully missed the dog that had run out in front of me. But for some reason, my mind always jumbled and my whole body tensed whenever I fastened my seat belt and placed my hands on the wheel.

My spirits lifted slightly when I saw Wes at the far end of the parking lot standing by the minibus that had contributed to my terrible driving lesson. He was with the rest of the rowing team who had a regatta at another school that weekend. They were preparing to leave, and it looked like I was just in time to see him off.

When he saw me approaching, he tossed the bag he was carrying into the luggage hold and walked over to meet me.

"Hey, how was the lesson?"

"It was awful."

"That bad?"

"I didn't even take the handbrake off."

He drew me in for a hug and gently rubbed my arm. "I'm sure you'll do better next time. You just need more practice."

"Yeah, maybe." It was hard not to be disheartened though. Especially when it already felt like I was getting worse with each lesson. I didn't really want to keep talking about it though. Not when Wes was going to be gone all weekend. I stepped out of his grasp and attempted to sound a little more positive. "Are you ready for the regatta?"

"Yeah, the bus is about to leave."

"I can't believe you'll be gone all weekend."

“I know. I’m going to miss you.”

“Yeah, me too. I guess it gives me a chance to catch up on some homework."

“Are you calling me a bad influence?” He grinned.

“Maybe.”

“I’m crushed.” He held a hand to his chest but was still smiling. “Well, I’ll be back to influencing you badly tomorrow night.”

“Thank goodness.”

The minibus rumbled to life, and Wes glanced over his shoulder. “I should probably get going.”

I somehow managed to force out a smile even though I didn’t want him to leave. “Good luck with your race.”

“Thanks.” He leaned down to brush a quick kiss against my lips. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“See you then.”

He returned to his teammates, who were still loading bags into the luggage hold. I sighed as I watched him go. He would only be gone for one night, but I was going to miss having Wes around. Especially when my weekend had already started terribly.

I turned to leave but paused when I saw Noah on the path behind me. He was waiting by the curb, a large backpack slung over his shoulder as he stared out at the parking lot. He was close enough he easily could have overheard my conversation with Wes. But since he wasn’t focused on me, I hoped that meant he hadn’t been listening.

I straightened my spine as I went to walk past him. I didn’t want to be within a hundred feet of the guy, but I wasn’t going to go out of my way just to avoid him—I refused to let him have that power over me.

I assumed he wouldn’t even acknowledge my presence seeing as that seemed to be his mission in life at the moment. But as I approached, he glanced at me and smirked. The sight of that knowing smile on his lips made me shudder with agitation. I had no idea what had prompted his gloating look, and I didn’t want to know. Well, rather, I *shouldn’t* want to know.

I was supposed to be taking the high road where Noah was concerned. So, I tried my best to pretend I hadn’t noticed him. To act like my anger toward him wasn’t bubbling just under my skin. But the closer I got to him,

the more I found myself tormented by his stupid smile and questioning what had prompted it when he usually seemed so set on ignoring me.

I was about to walk past him. I was almost free. But as I thought about the relief I'd feel once I was far away from him, I realized it would only be short-lived. I was probably going to be thinking about what Noah's stupid smirk meant all weekend.

"What is it?" I turned on him before I'd fully thought it through. I should have been the bigger person. I should have ignored him. But I was now face-to-face with the guy I loathed with every part of my being, demanding he explain himself.

His smirk only grew. "I can give you some better driving advice if you want it."

So, he had been listening. "Thanks, but I'm okay."

He ignored me and continued anyway. "No amount of practice is going to help if you don't stop overthinking it. You should put some music on or something. Relax."

I couldn't tell what his angle was. It seemed like sound advice, but I knew I couldn't trust a word that came out of Noah's mouth. I also didn't want anything from him anymore—especially not his opinion. "I told you I don't need driving advice from you."

"Suit yourself." Noah shrugged.

I hated how he was so unaffected by me. Just weeks ago, the feelings between us had been so intense. Like nothing I'd experienced before. Mine had been replaced by anger and hurt. Noah, on the other hand, barely seemed to feel anything for me at all. It wasn't fair.

I found myself thinking about all the things he'd done this past week. He'd punched my father. He was dating my enemy and seemed to be rubbing it in my face. He'd even barred his friends from coming near me. Those weren't the actions of a guy who felt nothing at all for me. "Why did you force your friends to pick a side? That was a pretty obnoxious thing to do—even for you. Are you really so insecure?"

He lifted his eyebrows and mimicked my stance as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Liar."

His eyes glinted with barely contained delight, and it was all the indication I needed to know I was right.

"I really don't know what I ever saw in you," I said.

He shrugged. “I guess you can’t choose who you have *chemistry* with.”

My eyes narrowed. It was no surprise Noah had heard the rumors about Wes and me this week. And, clearly, he had thoroughly enjoyed them.

“*We* didn’t have chemistry.”

“Now who’s lying.”

“Whatever we had, it wasn’t chemistry.”

“Well, I’m not sure I trust your judgment when it comes to chemistry. The rumors were one thing, but I just saw you kiss your *boyfriend*, and now I’m quite certain you don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“Wes and I have plenty of chemistry.”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he just tilted his head and looked at me as though he was expecting me to suddenly realize he was right. That was never going to happen though.

Before I could protest further, a sleek black sedan pulled up to the curb. Noah turned from me without another word and walked toward it. I stood there scowling after him. If our confrontation was a contest, Noah had won it. He’d drawn me in with a simple smirk I couldn’t ignore. I’d taken the bait, and now I was fuming even more than before.

The need to prove him wrong itched beneath my skin. I didn’t want to lower myself to his level. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know he was getting to me. But right now, my anger was blind to rational thought, and I couldn’t bring myself to let him walk away victorious. He wasn’t the only one who had accused Wes and me of having no chemistry this week, and I’d been doing my best to ignore the rumors, but something about Noah commenting on it made me reach my limit.

I spun around and stormed back along the sidewalk toward the minibus slowly filling with the rowing team. Wes was about to climb up the stairs onto the bus, but I didn’t hesitate as I stormed up to him.

“Isobel?” There was confusion in Wes’s voice as I tugged him around to face me, but I silenced his question by pulling him to me and kissing him firmly.

He was tense at first, probably out of surprise. But it was only for a moment. Then he was kissing me like no one was watching. The kiss was good. No, it was *great.* It made my heart race and had my lips tingling. Noah had no idea what he was talking about.

When Wes pulled back from me, we were both smiling brightly.

“Where did that come from?” he asked. His cheeks were a soft shade of pink. Understandable, given we’d just made out in front of a bus filled with his rowing teammates.

Now I wasn’t lost in our kiss, I could hear them cheering, whistling, and banging on the windows of the bus as they looked down at us. My cheeks turned a similar color to Wes’s, and I began to wonder what the hell I’d been thinking. I’d been so exasperated by Noah I clearly hadn’t thought this through.

“Sorry.” I answered Wes’s question with a shrug. “Just wanted to give you a good luck kiss before you go.”

“No, I’m not complaining.” Wes chuckled, still seeming slightly embarrassed. “Seems like we put on a good show.”

Movement over Wes’s shoulder caught my eye, and I saw Noah standing by the open door of the sedan. I wondered if he’d seen the kiss. If he had, he didn’t look the least bit bothered by it. If anything, his expression was even more smug than before as though he felt I’d just proved he was right.

I smiled because my heart and my lips thoroughly disagreed with him. I felt like I’d pretty clearly established how good Wes and I were together. Noah simply shrugged before getting into the car, disappearing behind the black-tinted windows.

When I focused on Wes, he wasn’t looking at me. Instead, he was frowning in Noah’s direction. There was a questioning look in his eyes when he finally did turn his eyes back to me.

“Are you done, Mr. Montfort?” A low voice caused us both to turn toward the bus. Wes’s rowing coach was glaring at us from the door.

Wes swallowed and nodded at him. “Sorry, Coach. I’m coming.”

He turned back to me and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. It couldn’t have been more different than the heartwarming kiss we’d just shared. “I’ll see you later, Isobel.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

He didn’t look back as he got on the bus and found a seat. I felt a little queasy as I watched the door close and the bus pull away. Could Wes tell Noah was the reason behind my sudden urge to kiss him? I felt embarrassed for letting Noah get to me and causing such a scene as a result. Now I was worried I’d upset Wes when Noah was probably laughing proudly to himself. I knew Wes and I had chemistry, so why had I felt the need to

prove it? I didn’t care what anyone thought about us, least of all Noah. So why did he continue to elicit such a reaction out of me?

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CHAPTER FIVE

I was still agitated as I hurried from the parking lot and into the dining hall. I wished I could blame my irritation on the fact I hadn't eaten breakfast yet or my failed driving lesson. But, no. Surprise, surprise, it was Noah who had yet again gotten under my skin. For a boy I wanted nothing to do with, who seemingly wanted nothing to do with me, he sure was an expert at riling me up.

"What's wrong?" Cress asked as I sat at the table with them.

Considering how late in the morning it was, I was relieved to find her and Anna still at breakfast. "Am I that obvious?

"Uh, sort of," Anna said. "You should have seen the way you marched in here. What happened?"

I let out a sigh. "Noah happened."

Cress's expression fell while Anna rolled her eyes.

"What did he do this time?" she scoffed.

"He was trying to tell me Wes and I don't have chemistry."

"That's crazy," Anna gasped. "You and Wes are hot AF. Right, Cress?"

"Of course," Cress agreed. "I thought the school was over that stupid rumor."

"Apparently not." I sighed.

"Noah, of all people, should know better than to give oxygen to gossip like that," she continued. "Why is he being like this?"

"Yeah," Anna added. "Can't he just leave you alone?"

I had asked myself the same two questions many times since the Halloween carnival. One minute it felt like Noah wanted nothing to do with

me. The next minute, he seemed to be going out of his way to hurt me. I couldn't figure him out.

"That's not the only thing he's done recently," I said. "I swear he's purposely parading Veronica around in front of me, and he told Luther and Kaden not to talk to me."

Cress's mouth dropped open. "He did what?"

"He told them not to be friends with me," I explained. "They wouldn't let me sit with them in math."

"What the hell." Anna gasped, shooting a glare across the dining hall at the two boys who were sitting at their usual table. Neither of them seemed to notice. "Why would they agree with that?"

I shrugged. "They'd do anything for Noah."

"Still, it's ridiculous," Anna continued. "Anyone who forces you to do something like that is no true friend if you ask me." Anna looked like she was finding it hard not to stand up, walk over to Kaden and Luther, and give them a piece of her mind.

"Has Noah said anything to you, Cress?" I asked.

"He hasn't asked me to choose between you and him, if that's what you mean," Cress said, her voice surprisingly gentle. "Maybe because he knows I'd pick you."

My heart warmed at her words, and I felt like I could cry. It was stupid, but I'd needed to hear that. To know that Noah couldn't steal another person from my life. Especially not one I cared about so much.

"Well, of course, you'd pick her," Anna said, bristling at the idea that might be in doubt. "You'd have to be an idiot to pick someone as grumpy and irritable as Noah. He might be pretty to look at, but who would want to be friends with the guy?"

"He's not so bad once you get to know him." I came to his defense before I'd even realized. "At least, he wasn't…" I quickly corrected myself. Noah didn't deserve defending anymore.

"You're right; he's been different," Cress agreed. "He's been spending a lot more time with his grandfather recently. That doesn't usually have a positive impact on Noah."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"William has started flying Noah out to the company headquarters on weekends," she explained. "I think he wants Noah to take on more

responsibility there. And apparently, they are making a major announcement soon."

"What kind of announcement?" I wondered out loud.

"I'm not sure," Cress continued. "All I know is that spending more time with William can't be good for Noah."

"You think William could be the reason Noah got Luther and Kaden to cut ties with me?"

"Maybe. I wouldn't put it past him."

I cast my gaze over to where Kaden and Luther were sitting. Noah was almost always with them in the dining hall, but having seen him getting in a car with a large backpack, I assumed he was on his way to see his grandfather as Cress had explained.

I should have felt relieved my weekends would now be free of Noah. I'd hated seeing him at school this week. I'd despised sharing the same air as him. But even when I hated him, this place still felt oddly empty without him. Even now, my body felt strangely flat without the constant tension I experienced knowing he could enter the room at any moment. It was a little messed up.

As I watched Kaden and Luther, I almost felt grateful they had chosen Noah over me. He really needed those guys in his life. They grounded him and made him feel like he had a safe space in a world where everyone wanted something from him. I worried what his life would be like without them. His grandfather would have complete control over him, to mold him in his own twisted image. That was something I hoped to never witness, but from the way Noah had been acting lately, it felt like it was happening before my eyes.



IT RAINED ALL WEEKEND, so I spent most of my time inside. It was probably a good thing seeing as my English assignment on *Romeo and Juliet* was due next week. I'd missed the play when our class went to see it in New York, so it felt like I had to put in extra work to try to make sure my essay was up to standard.

I'd been looking forward to seeing Wes when he got back from his rowing regatta, but as Sunday evening neared, he sent me a message to say

they were delayed because the bus had broken down. He was going to arrive after curfew, so I wouldn't get to see him until Monday.

His text message had also seemed quite blunt. I was surprised he hadn't called me, and I was starting to worry he was still upset about the way I'd kissed him in front of his teammates. In front of Noah. It was a disappointing way to end an already crappy weekend.

As I headed back to my room after a long study session, my phone rang, and I was pleased to see it was my mom calling. I needed to hear a friendly voice right now, and even though I'd only just seen her last weekend, I was already starting to think about when I'd get to see her next.

"Oh, I'm so glad I caught you, Iz. I've missed you," Mom said. "Is it too soon to come back to Weybridge?"

"Maybe." I laughed. Other than our daily texts, we hadn't spoken since Halloween, and just hearing her voice made everything a little better. "But perhaps it's not too soon for me to come back to Rapid Bay? I was thinking for Thanksgiving…"

"Really?" Mom gasped on the other end of the phone. "You're coming home for Thanksgiving? That would be wonderful."

"Yep, I'm coming home." I hadn't fully decided until this moment. It was only a four-day break, but while Mom and I had discussed me coming home for the holiday, I'd been worried about taking too much time away from school when I had so many projects due and tests I needed to take in December. But I also needed to see my mom, and I couldn't let my life revolve around schoolwork. If I didn't take this opportunity, I might not see her again until Christmas, and I wasn't okay with that.

Mom sounded like she was over the moon. "This is the best news," she gushed. "Okay, I better start working on my pumpkin pie recipe now."

"Mom, every year you try to perfect your pumpkin pie, and every year I tell you it's already the best there is."

"No, there's still something missing. it will be even better this year."

I smiled, knowing there was no point arguing with her when it came to pumpkin pie.

"Also, I was thinking of inviting your father," she continued.

"You were?"

"Yeah. He was so welcoming to me over Halloween. I thought it would be nice for us all to spend the holiday together. But I wanted to check with you first. What do you think?"

I paused as I considered it. It had been nice hanging out with both Matthew and my mom over Halloween. Right up until my ex-boyfriend attacked my father. Inviting Matthew to our home felt like a big step. But I was surprised to find it felt like a step I was willing to take. I hadn't spoken to my father since the day after the carnival, and I suspected he was snowed under with work in New York.

"I don't have a problem with it," I said. "But Matthew is always so busy. He might not be able to make it."

"We'll see," Mom said. I got the impression she'd already been in touch with Matthew and invited him because she quickly changed the subject.

"How's school going?" she asked. "Have you seen Noah after what he did last weekend?"

"School's fine. And let's not talk about Noah."

"That bad, huh?"

"Well, he refused to apologize for punching Matthew. He seems to want nothing to do with me. Oh, and he's dating Veronica."

"Is that the girl who was so mean to you?"

I loved how that part shocked my mom the most. "Yeah." I sighed. "But it's fine. I'm fine."

"It's okay if you're not," she continued. "Even after everything that's happened between you and Noah, I know how hard it can be to turn off your feelings. It's not like there's some switch you can just flick, and they're gone."

"I know."

"I mean, even after all these years, I still felt something when I saw your dad again."

"Wait, you felt something for him? Like, romantically?"

"No, no, not like that." My mom said the words a little too quickly. "I just mean that familiarity was still there. It was good to see him. I didn't realize I'd feel that way especially when we haven't seen or heard from each other in seventeen years."

"Well, I'm glad you guys got along."

"Me too," she agreed. "Which is why I think it'll be nice if we all spend time together at Thanksgiving. We have a lot of missed time to make up for. I know Matthew certainly feels that way."

"Yeah, that does sound nice." I had to wonder what Matthew would think of our Thanksgiving meal. It wasn't exactly conventional. Mom

usually closed the café, and all the staff and a few of our favorite customers joined us there for lunch. It was always an eclectic group of people, so it was never boring. Sometimes I invited friends as well, but I guessed that part of the tradition was over now.

“You should ask if your new school friends want to come,” Mom said. It was almost as if she could read my mind.

“Really?”

“Of course. If they don’t already have plans with their families, that is.”

“But where would they stay?” Our apartment was hardly big enough for my mom and I, let alone any others.

“We’ll make it work,” Mom said.

I wasn’t as optimistic as her. “I’m sure they already have plans…”

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to ask.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.”

“Excellent.” I could feel Mom’s smile in her voice. “Now, I better run. Frank hasn’t been in for his usual coffee for a couple of days, so Norma is sulking. She’s been handing out prophecies of doom with every coffee she serves. I can’t trust her with the customers for too long.”

I laughed. “Why hasn’t Frank been in?”

“I think he’s on vacation.”

“Ah.” It was probably the first time in years Frank had gone more than one morning without visiting the café.

“I wish the two of them would just get together already.”

“Yes, well, if they haven’t both realized they’re in love with each other by now, maybe they never will.”

“Well, maybe they need a little push in the right direction,” I suggested.

“Maybe they do.” My mom laughed, but then she swore under her breath. “Norma just warned someone they should check their fire alarms."

"Jeez, that’s gloomy.” I laughed. “Go, stop her already.”

“Okay, have a good weekend.”

“You too.”

Mom hung up the phone, and I let out a sigh. Our conversations were always over way too quickly. We were both so busy and our schedules seemed completely at odds with one another. I missed talking to her every day, but the thought of going home for Thanksgiving made me feel like the weekend was finally turning around.

~

CRESS AND ANNA were both hanging out in our room when I returned. It wasn't hard to tell they were excited about something.

Cress was grinning and bouncing up and down on her bed when I walked in the door. "You're back!" she squealed. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"Kaden just asked me out."

"Oh my God!" I gasped and ran over to sit on her bed beside her. "Really?"

"Uh-huh. He caught up to me after I left the dining hall at lunch and asked if I want to go see a movie with him."

"That's so exciting. So, when's the date?"

"There isn't one."

"What? But you just said—"

"I told Kaden to ask me again once he's stopped ignoring my friend."

"You didn't."

"She did." Anna gave an approving nod. Apparently, she was completely onboard with Cress turning down the guy of her dreams just because he and I were having a little falling-out.

"Of course, I did," Cress said. "I really like Kaden, but there's no way I'm going on a date with him if he's being mean to you."

"Cress, that's crazy. You've liked him forever. You don't want to miss this opportunity because of me."

She scoffed. "I'm not dating a guy who ditched my friend just because my cousin told him to."

"Yeah," Anna agreed. "Besties before testes"

"Anna!" I gasped.

"What?" she replied with a shrug. "You know what I mean…"

I shook my head and focused back on Cress. "Seriously though, Cress. That's really sweet of you, but it's okay if you want to date him. I don't want to come between you and Kaden."

"I'm not changing my mind," she said. "He can ask me again once he's come to his senses."

She sounded so certain about her decision, but I couldn't work out why she still seemed so excited by the whole thing. I would have expected her to be upset.

“Okay, but why are you this happy after you just had to turn down your crush?”

Her grin grew wider. “Because it means I was wrong. He does like me.”

I laughed. “Well, of course, he does. I still can’t believe you didn’t say yes.”

“Well, hopefully he’ll start talking to you again soon. But if he doesn’t, I’ll just have to find a new crush.”

She was being very rational about all of this, which was surprising because Cress was usually led by her heart rather than her head.

“I still think you should have said yes,” I replied.

Cress’s expression turned more serious. “I’m never going to do anything to jeopardize our friendship, Isobel. Especially not over a boy.”

“Yeah, you’re stuck with us for life,” Anna added.

I was so touched by their words, and I struggled to contain my emotions. “I really don’t deserve friends like you.”

“Bah, stop, you’re going to make me cry.” Cress jokingly averted her eyes from me, and I smiled.

All this talk of friendship got me thinking about my conversation with my mom and how she’d told me to invite the girls to spend Thanksgiving with us. Part of the reason I hadn’t immediately agreed with her suggestion was because I was nervous about what the girls would think of my home.

I was still slightly nervous, but talking with them now only made me realize I was falling into old habits. These girls were my friends, and they truly cared about me. They weren’t going to change how they felt simply because I grew up differently than they did.

“So, I talked with my mom on the way here,” I said. “And I wanted to ask you both if you’d like to have Thanksgiving with us in Rapid Bay.”

“Really?” Cress squealed. Her whole face lit up, and she clapped her hands together. “That sounds so fun.”

“So fun,” Anna agreed. “Count me in.”

It was not the response I’d expected from either of them. “I thought you’d both have plans with your families.” Despite knowing I could trust my friends, my nerves returned with a vengeance. Cress and Anna were both so used to living in luxury. How were they going to feel about staying in such simple accommodations? What if they hated it?

“My family are back home,” Anna said. “I won’t see them until Christmas. I was planning to just hang here over the Thanksgiving break.”

“Me too,” Cress said. “My parents aren’t coming back until December, so I was going to be stranded at school as well. This sounds much better.”

I was still so shocked they’d both agreed it took me a moment to gather my thoughts. “I should probably warn you both that someone will likely have to sleep on an air mattress, and my mom’s Thanksgiving lunch can be a bit chaotic. There’s always some sort of drama. I think there’s something in the turkey.”

Anna and Cress waved away my concern. “I’m sure it will be great,” Cress said.

“It’s got to be better than being stuck here,” Anna agreed.

“I guess that’s settled then.” I slowly started to smile and did my best to ignore the unease that had surfaced when they had actually accepted. Anna and Cress might not be used to the kind of cramped living I’d grown up with, but I knew my Thanksgiving would be a whole lot more fun if they were with me. “I’ll let Mom know.”

I spent the evening happily chatting with the girls. And despite Cress’s earlier excitement about Kaden asking her out, she didn’t bring him up again. It was only once we were in bed with the lights turned out that she mentioned it.

“Isobel?”

“Yeah?”

“How long do you think it will take before Kaden comes to his senses?” she asked. Given the anxious tone to her voice, it sounded like she’d been worrying about this all night.

“He’ll come around eventually,” I said. “I know it.”

“Yeah, but how long is *eventually*?”

“Not long if he’s smart.”

“Well, he’s the closest thing to a genius I’ve ever met, so hopefully that means really soon.”

“Yeah, hopefully,” I agreed.

I only worried about what this might end up meaning for Noah and Kaden’s friendship. I didn’t agree with a lot of what Noah had done lately, but I knew how much he needed his friends. I hoped Noah wasn’t selfish enough to hold it against Kaden if he did decide to be friendly with me again. Especially when it meant he’d be hurting his own cousin if he did. But if felt like I barely knew Noah these days, so, unfortunately, anything was possible.

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CHAPTER SIX

I woke the next morning to the sound of thundering bangs against our bedroom door. I gasped as I was wrenched from sleep, and Cress and I bolted upright in our beds. I glanced at the clock and was horrified to see it was only 4:00 A.M.

“What’s going on?” I asked as Cress flicked the light on, and we clambered from our beds. My heart was racing as we rushed for the door. Was there some kind of emergency?

Cress must have had a similar thought because she shared a worried look with me before she pulled the door open. To my surprise, there was no one standing in the entrance. When we leaned out of the room and looked down the hallway though, we saw a group of boys dressed entirely in black running for the exit. It suddenly all started to make sense.

We weren’t the only ones to suffer a rude awakening. Some girls were standing in their doorways, and others were still opening their doors to see what all the noise was about. We all filtered into the hallway as we watched the boys escape.

“You better run!” one of the girls shouted after them.

“Way to be original!” another girl called out.

We could clearly hear the boys’ laughter as they hurried through the door at the end of the hallway and down the stairs.

“Ugh, they do this every year,” Cress said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s usually sometime in the first semester. But we never know when it’s going to be. You’d think they’d be bored with it by now.”

Anna slowly made her way over to us from down the hall. She was rubbing sleep from her eyes and was clearly exhausted like the rest of us. Yet she somehow still managed to look glamorous in her pink silk pajamas.

“Can you believe these prats?” she groaned. “I was having the best dream about finding a gorgeous pair of stilettos.”

“You dream about shoes?” I asked.

“You don’t?”

“I’m so sick of it,” Lily said, coming to join us. “I have a test this morning, and I really needed to get a good night’s sleep.”

“It’s so annoying.” Amber was still leaning against the wall near her and Lily’s room. “They always get away with it as well. Their dorm dad just doesn’t seem to care.”

The boys’ prank seemed to have woken up every girl on this floor, and everyone looked as though they felt the same way as Amber.

“Maybe it’s finally time we get revenge.”

I glanced over my shoulder, surprised to find Veronica had been the one to make the suggestion. There were a few other girls surrounding her, and they nodded in agreement.

“How?” one girl asked her.

“We give them a taste of their own medicine,” she said. “No one pranks me and gets away with it.”

There were more murmurs of agreement and many thoughtful faces as everyone began to dream up a suitable act of revenge. We were all pulled from our thoughts by the sound of yelling at the far end of the corridor.

“Girls!” We all turned as our dorm mom came marching toward us. “It’s four in the morning. Everyone get back to bed before I start handing out detentions.”

The girls groaned, and a few tried to explain what the boys had done, but Lisa didn’t seem to want to hear it. We all trudged back to our rooms to try and get a little more sleep before our actual alarm clocks woke us up.

My heart was still racing though, and I knew the chances of getting any more sleep tonight were slim. It left me feeling exhausted and annoyed. I might not have had a test this morning like Lily, but I still wanted a good night’s sleep. Lisa had put a stop to talk of a revenge prank before it had really started. But even if we weren’t getting revenge on the boys right now, I had a feeling no one was prepared to let their rude wakeup call go unpunished.

~

CRESS, Anna, and I were scowling when the twins joined us at breakfast.

"You guys suck," Anna said. "How dare you interrupt my beauty sleep. We should banish you from our table."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Sawyer said. His cheeky grin suggested otherwise.

We rolled our eyes. We hadn't seen any of the boys' faces last night, but I was certain Sawyer was involved. He wouldn't have missed an opportunity to prank us girls. He was probably the mastermind behind the whole thing.

"You could have warned me," I murmured to Wes, giving him a playful nudge as he took the seat beside me.

He simply shrugged, making me frown. This was the first time we'd seen each other all weekend, yet he hadn't tried to kiss me or give me a hug in greeting—he hadn't touched me at all. He was barely even making eye contact with me, and I got a sinking feeling something must be wrong.

"I missed you this weekend," I said.

"Yeah, me too." He finally glanced at me and gave me a soft smile, which put my mind a little more at ease.

I still didn't like the distance between us. When we sat together, he usually slung his arm across the back of my chair or stole my hand to hold under the table. He hadn't even pulled his chair closer to mine so we were brushing against each other.

"Is everything okay?" I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

"Yeah, I'm just a little tired from the regatta." Wes tried to stifle a yawn, and I noticed there were bags beneath his eyes. He looked exhausted. He probably should have been sleeping this morning instead of sneaking into the girls' dorm.

"Join the club, Wesley," Anna replied. "You'll get no sympathy here."

"Yeah, Wes," Cress added, folding her arms over her chest as she glared at him. "You can't complain about being tired when you helped wake us up in the middle of the night."

"I did no such thing." He grinned at Cress, and I was relieved to see his smile return. He seemed to be relaxing. Maybe he was just tired, and it was taking a while for his coffee to kick in.

“Yeah, Cress,” Sawyer said. “I don’t know about you, but I slept like a baby all night.”

Cress threw her hands in the air with frustration, and I shook my head at the twins. Clearly, they weren’t even going to admit they were involved, let alone apologize for waking us up. It only made the thought of a revenge prank more appealing.

We weren’t the only girls who were annoyed with the boys. Most senior girls were dragging their feet around the school like they needed to go back to bed, and I saw more than a few girls reprimanding their guy friends in the hallway. Most of the boys looked a little more contrite than Sawyer and Wes had been while they were getting told off, but it didn’t last long before they were laughing about it once again. It seemed like pranking the girls was a tradition they were very proud of.

As I entered my math class, all thoughts of the prank fled my mind when I saw Kaden. He wasn’t sitting in his usual spot at the back of the room. Instead, he had taken the desk next to the one I’d been sitting at since he and Luther had started ignoring me. There was no sign of Luther yet though, and the classroom was half empty.

I slowly approached my desk, reluctant to sit down. Was I allowed to sit there? Or was this part of some malicious new plan Noah had devised to get to me?

“Kaden?” It was hard to keep the questioning tone from my voice. As I considered him a little further, I wondered if this had something to do with Cress. She had grilled him yesterday about the way he’d treated me, and she had told him there was no way she’d date him when he was ignoring me. Maybe this was his attempt to right that wrong. I knew he liked Cress, but I wasn’t sure if he’d be willing to risk his friendship with Noah for her—and definitely not so fast.

“Hey, Isobel,” he said, giving me a small and nervous smile. “Do you want to sit down?”

“Am I allowed to?” I sounded a little snarky, but it was only days ago that Kaden had stayed quiet while Luther banished me to the other side of the classroom.

“Please?” He pulled out the chair next to him and looked up at me with pleading eyes. I hesitated but then slowly put down my backpack and lowered myself onto the seat next to him

“So, you’re talking to me now?” I asked.

He shifted slightly in his seat as he nodded. “I never wanted to ignore you in the first place,” he said. “And I’ve realized that it was a bit of a jerk move. I’m really sorry. I want us to be friends.”

I was silent as I considered him.

“I never wanted to choose,” he added.

“But you did.”

He glanced at the door as a few students entered the classroom. They stopped their conversation when they saw us and watched with interest as they found their seats. It was understandable. They must have noticed I’d been shunned by Kaden and Luther last week, and seeing Kaden now sitting next to me would have alerted their gossip radars. I’m sure they were all dying to know what was going on.

Kaden was idolized almost as much as Noah. His family’s wealth rivaled that of Luther’s and Noah’s, but he was much quieter than them, which gave him an air of mystery. Even I didn’t know much about him, and I used to sit with him in class several times a week. It was probably part of the reason Cress was so intrigued by him. He was an enigma.

“It was a mistake. I’m sorry, Isobel. I really do want us to continue being friends.”

I slowly nodded. I was still pissed at him for bailing on me, and it was hard to disregard the fact he only decided to make up with me after getting a talking-to from Cress. But that was also what made this mean so much more. He must really care about Cress to risk Noah’s ire. I wanted Cress to be with someone who liked her that much.

I blew out a breath. “It’s okay. I forgive you.”

“Just like that?”

“I’m not big on holding grudges unless they’re well deserved.” I tilted my head as I looked at him. "Just tell me why.”

“Why what?”

“Why did Noah suddenly make you pick a side?”

“He didn’t really say.” Kaden shrugged. “He just asked us to trust him. Luther and I know he would only ask something like that of us if he had a good reason.”

“But what reason could he have other than the fact he hates me?”

“I don’t think he hates you.”

“Oh no,” I said sarcastically. “Telling my friends not to talk to me must have been an act of true love.”

Kaden laughed softly. “I just mean that I think there’s more to it than that. Maybe it’s got something to do with his grandfather and the rivalry with your families. Or maybe he felt like he had to do it because he’s seeing Veronica now. Noah is like a brother to me, but that doesn’t mean I know what goes on inside his head that often. Or that I agree with it.”

I’d seen Noah and Veronica together all week, and I’d speculated with my friends that they were together. It was one thing to guess but another to hear it stated so matter-of-factly by one of his closest friends. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit it hurt. I nodded at Kaden’s explanation but decided to move the conversation away from Noah.

“So, what could possibly have sparked this change of heart from you?” I smiled so he knew I was joking.

He swallowed nervously, and his cheeks flushed. “I mean, I always knew deep down it was wrong to ignore you. Cress just knocked some sense into me.”

"Good,” I nodded. “It’s about time you two got together.”

He smiled. “I know. I’ve liked her for the longest time, but she’s always had a boyfriend. I finally decided to man up on Halloween, but then I was totally awkward on the Ferris wheel and felt like I’d blown my chance. Then when I asked her on a date yesterday, she turned me down because of the way I was treating you, and I really thought I’d messed it up for good. But in a way, that only made me like her more. Anyone who would put their friend first like she did has to be pretty special.”

“Yeah, she really is.” I smiled.

“So, do you think you could put in a good word for me? Maybe I can make the third time lucky.” He looked so hopeful I knew I couldn’t say no.

“Yeah, I’ll tell her that you and me are all good. She really likes you, Kaden, so that should be more than enough.”

He grinned brightly, and when he smiled that way, I could definitely see why Cress liked him so much. Kaden’s smile was a rare but powerful thing, and when you saw it, you naturally found yourself smiling in return.

“Thanks for being so cool about all this,” he said.

“It’s no problem.”

He glanced at the doorway over my shoulder and his face fell. I turned to see Luther entering the room.

His gaze went straight to Kaden, and there was a confused look in his eyes. He glanced between us and his regular seat at the back of the class,

and I wondered if perhaps Kaden's actions would give Luther the courage to forget Noah's demands as well.

But he seemed torn, and eventually his expression hardened. He drew his shoulders back and continued past us without a word to take a seat at his usual desk.

I released a sigh, revealing my disappointment.

"I guess we just need someone to knock some sense into Luther now too," I said.

Kaden didn't look very optimistic. "I'm not sure there's anyone who can," he said with a wince. "He wasn't happy about being made to choose. But he's very protective of Noah. He won't want to risk upsetting him."

"And you don't mind upsetting him?"

"I don't want to hurt him," he said. "But Cress made me realize that his family's rivalry with yours isn't my battle to fight. I'm always going to be there for him, but as far as I'm concerned, you've done nothing wrong. I guess he's just going to have to understand."

I wasn't confident Noah would understand. He had been acting so strangely lately when it came to me, and I didn't share Kaden's faith Noah would be okay with him talking to me again.

The teacher entered the room and called the class to order, bringing our conversation to an end. Unlike Luther, Kaden actually liked to listen in class, so while I was disappointed I wasn't sitting with both the boys, at least I'd be able to get some work done today.

When class was over, Kaden and I walked to lunch together. Unsurprisingly, Noah spotted the two of us together as soon as we entered the dining hall. He gave Kaden a hard look making him grimace.

"Why do I feel like you're about to have the world's most awkward lunch?" I asked Kaden.

He swallowed. "Yeah, I better go talk with him. Enjoy the rest of your day, Isobel."

"You too. And good luck."

He gave me a parting smile before he walked over to his usual table. He sat at Noah's side, and the two of them fell into quiet conversation. I would have loved to hear exactly what they were saying, and it looked incredibly serious. I really hoped Noah would be as understanding as Kaden expected.

"Why are you staring at Noah like that?" Cress asked as she stopped at my side. "He's not being rude to you again, is he? You know I'm happy to

talk to him…”

I realized I’d been watching his table for far too long, and I quickly dragged my gaze away. “Well, if you think it’ll be as effective as your talk with Kaden, then maybe you should.”

“What do you mean?”

“Guess who just made up with me?”

Her eyes widened as she looked between Noah’s table and me. Luther had joined his friends there now, and Veronica was also sitting with them. But Cress only had eyes for one boy. “Please tell me it was Kaden.”

“It was Kaden.”

She squealed so loudly several girls at a nearby table looked over in concern. They probably thought there was something wrong with her. I took her by the arm and guided her to our table.

“Seriously?” she asked as we took a seat.

“Yeah. I guess he acts fast when he’s going after something he wants.”

Her cheeks turned bright pink. “So, what did he say?”

“Just that he never wanted to ignore me, and he apologized.”

“Oh, that’s great.” She smiled softly and glanced down at her hands. I could see how much it meant to her that Kaden had made up with me.

“He also mentioned that he’s liked you for a while.”

“Really?” Her eyes darted up with surprise.

“Yeah. I knew there was no reason to doubt him. He said he was just nervous on the Ferris wheel at the carnival. So, I guess that explains why he didn’t throw himself at you. You make him nervous.”

She laughed quietly. “I think it might be the other way around.” There was a dreamy look in Cress’s eyes, and she couldn’t keep the grin off her lips, but her face suddenly grew more thoughtful. “So, what now? Do you think I should approach him or wait for him to approach me?”

“Maybe give him a chance,” I said. “I don’t think you’ll have to wait long.”

She blushed again and glanced at his table.

I followed her gaze, but instead of seeking out Kaden, my eyes were drawn to Noah. Veronica was Velcroed to his side as always, and something about the way she was grinning up at him felt forced. Noah had been so quick to accuse Wes and I of lacking chemistry, but I wondered if he’d considered how his relationship with Veronica compared.

His arm was around her, sure, and they were trading smiles, but I honestly didn't feel like I could sense much attraction between them. Neither of them had the excited glow about them that shone from Cress at the mere mention of Kaden. And I was certain I couldn't see the same intensity of feeling that had flowed between Noah and me when we were together. I wasn't sure if it was wishful thinking or some baser instinct, but a part of me wondered if his relationship with her was just another way he was attempting to please his grandfather. Or another way to get to me.

Sawyer's arrival at the table snapped me from my thoughts and drew my attention from Noah.

"Where's Wes?" I asked once he'd said hello and sat down with us.

"School nurse," he replied.

"What?" I gasped. "Is he okay?"

"I think he's got some bug. He faded pretty fast this morning."

"Oh no."

"Yeah, it usually takes a lot to get my brother to admit he's unwell, so he must be feeling pretty crap."

"He didn't look too good this morning," Cress agreed. "He probably picked something up at the regatta."

"I should go check on him," I said.

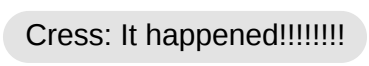
"Unless you're sick, I wouldn't bother," Sawyer replied. "Cress is right. Half the rowing team is down there. Miss Ludwell was kicking out anyone who didn't need to see her."

"Oh."

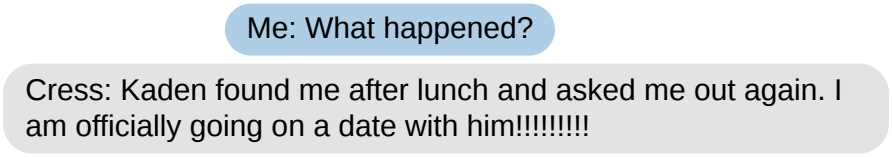
"I'm sure Wes will text you with an update."

"Yeah, okay." Sawyer was right, but I still pulled out my phone and sent a message to Wes telling him to let me know if he needed anything. I hated that he wasn't feeling well, but I felt a little relieved his sickness was probably to blame for the way he acted earlier today. He obviously wasn't feeling his usual self.

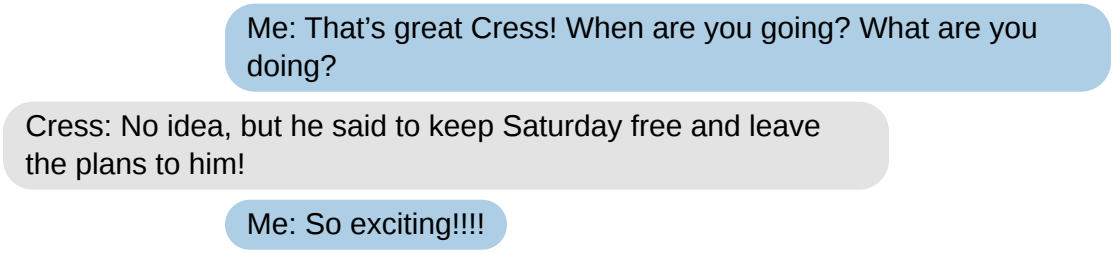
It wasn't until after lunch, when I'd left my friends to walk to class, that my phone vibrated with the arrival of a message. I quickly whipped my phone from my pocket, but I was slightly disappointed to see it wasn't from Wes. The text was from Cress.



I'D LEFT her barely five minutes ago. My fingers flew across the keyboard as I responded.



I LAUGHED because I felt like I could almost hear her squeals of delight through the phone.



I COULDN'T KEEP the grin off my face as I made my way to my business management class, and not even the scowl Noah shot my way as I entered the room could bring me down. He might not have been happy Kaden and I were talking again, but I really didn't care what he thought. It had been a turbulent week since Halloween, but today made me wonder if perhaps things were starting to turn around for me.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Weybridge Academy pretty much went into lockdown for the rest of the week. Wes was one of many who got sick, so classes were half empty, and the dining hall was quiet most days as people rested and recovered in their rooms.

Wes's cold kept him out of school all week, and even when the weekend came around, he wasn't feeling well enough to get out of bed. Anna refused to leave her room because she was convinced she looked like a snotty mess, even though she didn't seem that unwell, while Cress kept trying to convince us all she was fine despite the fact she couldn't stop sneezing and sounded like she'd swallowed a bee.

She was supposed to have her date with Kaden on Saturday, so I think she was playing down her symptoms because she desperately wanted to go. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—he got sick too and was smart enough to cancel. Somehow, I'd managed to avoid picking up any of the symptoms, and I was doing my best to help my friends feel better while keeping my distance as much as I could.

"Maybe I do feel a little unwell," Cress eventually conceded on Saturday morning as she snuggled under her covers. She'd just received the text from Kaden saying he needed to cancel their date, and she was taking the news remarkably well. I suspected it was because she was feeling horrible, and so she was slightly relieved she didn't have to get out of bed.

"This is what I've been saying for days, Cress. You're sick."

"I know, I know. I think I was in denial."

"Major denial."

She sighed and gave me a reluctant smile.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked.

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I could make you a hot lemon and honey drink? My mom makes them for me when I’m sick. It always makes me feel better.”

“Hmm, that actually sounds amazing,” Cress replied.

“Done,” I answered with a grin. It was a miracle I’d avoided getting sick so far, but I was more than happy to play nurse until my friends felt a little better.

I left Cress in our room and started for the dorm kitchen. I was heading down the stairs when my phone buzzed with an incoming call from my dad. We’d both been busy so we’d barely talked since Halloween. There was no one else around, so I sat on the stairs and answered the phone.

“Hey, Matthew.”

“Good morning, Isobel,” he replied. “I heard there’s a terrible bug going around the school. How are you feeling?”

It wasn’t all that surprising he’d heard about the cold doing the rounds at school. He always seemed to know everything that was going on here.

“Yeah, everyone seems to be getting sick,” I said. “But I’m fine. I’ve somehow managed to avoid it so far.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“How are you?” I asked. “Is your eye looking any better?” The last I’d seen Matthew was the morning after Noah had punched him, and the skin around his eye was starting to bruise. He hadn’t wanted to talk much about it at the time, and I got the impression he preferred to pretend the confrontation with Noah and his grandfather hadn’t happened at all. It had happened though, and I wasn’t going to act otherwise.

“It’s on the mend. Thank you.”

“Good.” I let out a sigh. “I still can’t believe Noah punched you.” Even now, the memory still shocked me.

“Yes, well, I could have behaved better that night myself,” he replied. “It’s probably best we all try to put it behind us and move on.”

“I guess.” Noah didn’t appear to be losing any sleep over the incident, and if he was upset about it, he seemed to be taking it out on me rather than my father. As for Matthew, I was surprised he was so willing to let it go. He clearly had the means to send a team of lawyers after Noah for assault if he

wanted to. But maybe he genuinely thought he was in the wrong and deserved the punch.

“Well, it’s good to hear you’re well,” Matthew said. “I can’t talk long as I’m between meetings, but I’ll see you in a couple of weeks at Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, you’re coming to Rapid Bay?” My mom had told me she was planning to invite Matthew, but this was the first time I’d heard he was actually coming, so I couldn’t keep the surprise from my voice.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” He sounded genuinely excited about being with us for the holiday.

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

I found myself smiling as I hung up the phone. I was surprised how pleased I was to hear Matthew was coming to Rapid Bay for Thanksgiving. It also felt nice he’d called for no reason other than to check whether I was sick. It was a very fatherly thing to do, and while I was still getting used to the fact I now had two parents who wanted to look after me, I was growing to like it.

I stood and continued on my way to the kitchen. It was usually bustling with students raiding the pantry or hanging out, but today the room was empty. Most people were stuck in bed and probably feeling too sick to even come down for snacks.

I stepped into the large walk-in pantry where the kettle was kept and searched for the lemon and honey I needed to make Cress’s drink, ensuring I had enough of both to make a drink for Anna as well. She didn’t get along with her roommate, so I couldn’t imagine she was receiving much help today. Once the water was boiled, I poured it into two mugs, squeezed lemon juice into both, and then stirred in some honey.

As I let the drinks brew, I heard someone enter the kitchen. I couldn’t see who it was because the door to the pantry had swung in and was almost fully closed. I could hear the person clearly though. It sounded like they were on the phone.

“Yes, Mother, I understand.” I wasn’t listening too closely, but my ears perked up slightly when I realized it was Veronica’s voice.

I didn’t particularly feel like running into her this morning. Ever since she’d officially gotten together with Noah, she seemed to be throwing smug looks my way at every possible opportunity. It was unbearable. I could hear her rummaging through the fridge as she spoke on the phone, so I decided

to stay hidden in the pantry. Hopefully, she would get what she needed and leave the kitchen before I was done making the teas.

“Mother, I told you I get it. And yes, I am planning on coming to Noah’s birthday in New York, but that’s weeks away. How do you know we’ll still be together?”

I stilled. Noah and Veronica had only just started dating, and already she sounded unsure they’d make it more than a few weeks. I couldn’t deny I was intrigued. She paused to listen to her mother’s response before letting out a sigh.

“Yes, we’re finally together, but maybe it won’t work out. Maybe we’re not meant to be together.”

There was another pause before Veronica gasped, her voice becoming a low whisper.

“Well, maybe it matters to me, Mother.”

My eyebrows shot up. I didn’t feel comfortable listening to this conversation. I couldn’t leave the kitchen without Veronica seeing me though. Then she’d know I’d overheard everything she’d been saying. And while a part of me thought about covering my ears and tuning it out, another part of me was listening with bated breath.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll speak to you later.” It sounded like Veronica had ended the conversation. Maybe she would leave now. I kept my back to the pantry door and stared down at the two mugs on the counter in front of me.

“You know, it’s pretty rude to eavesdrop on private conversations, Isobel.”

I tensed at the sound of Veronica’s voice and slowly turned to face her. She was standing in the pantry doorway, her arms crossed and her eyes narrowed. She looked like hell. Her skin was so pale it was nearly translucent, and her nose was red. Like almost everyone else, she must have caught the cold that was sweeping the school.

“I’m just making some drinks,” I said. “I didn’t mean to overhear.”

Veronica looked ready to argue with me, but she sighed and stepped into the panty, leaning against the countertop just inside the doorway. She must have been feeling too tired to give me her usual verbal lashing.

“But you did overhear?” she asked. “How much?”

“Everything you said since you entered the kitchen.” There was no point in lying.

“Great.” She sighed. “You’re the last person I’d want overhearing that conversation.”

“Well, I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“No, I suppose not.”

We fell silent, and the only sound in the room was the light tapping of Veronica’s foot on the floor. She seemed anxious and was gently chewing on her bottom lip.

“Is everything okay?” I asked her

She glanced at me and looked me up and down as though she was trying to decide whether I could be trusted with the answer. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Okay,” I said, turning back to the counter to pick up my friends’ drinks. Before I could turn and leave, Veronica spoke again.

“It’s just my mom,” she started. “I can never do anything right in her eyes.”

“Oh, that must be hard.” I didn’t know what else to say. Veronica was probably right. I rarely understood the dramas and dilemmas people faced in this wealthy and privileged world. But Veronica seemed like she wanted to vent all the same.

“I’m just tired of pretending to be who she wants me to be all the time. To do what she wants me to. Be *with* who she wants me to.”

“Are you talking about Noah?”

“Uh, no.” She responded a little too quickly. Given the conversation I’d heard her having with her mother, I couldn’t imagine who else she would have been talking about. Before I could say anything else, her eyes landed on the two mugs I was holding, and a crease crinkled her brow.

“What is that?” she asked. “It smells good.”

“Uh, it’s honey and lemon tea. For Anna and Cress. They aren’t feeling well.”

Veronica lifted her chin slightly and closed her eyes like she was breathing in the citrusy aroma that was starting to fill the pantry.

“Do you want one?” I asked. “You look like you could use it.”

I was surprised when she started to nod.

“If you don’t mind.”

I turned back to the counter and fetched another mug from the shelf.

“I’ve been sick for a couple of days now,” Veronica said. “None of my friends have even offered to get me some tissues.”

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. She seemed confused, or hurt, by the idea her friends hadn’t offered to help her. I would have thought I was the last person in the world Veronica would want to accept help from, but then again, she’d just confided in me about her issues with her mother. Maybe there wasn’t anyone else she could talk to about it. Just like there wasn’t anyone to make her honey and lemon tea.

“Maybe they just don’t think you need it,” I said. “You always come across as such a strong person. Not the kind of person that needs looking after.”

“Yes, well, things aren’t always what they seem,” she said.

“True,” I agreed.

We stood in silence as I finished making Veronica’s drink. When I handed it to her, she gave me a suspicious look.

“You haven’t poisoned this, have you?”

“What? I would nev—"

“I’m joking.” She smiled and took the mug. “Thank you.”

It was the most genuine expression I’d ever seen on Veronica’s face, and I smiled back. “You’re welcome.”

I picked up the other two mugs of tea, and we made our way out of the pantry. Just as we were about to leave the kitchen, Veronica paused. “Thanks again for the tea. And for listening to me rant.”

“No problem,” I replied. “I hope everything works out for you.”

“It will.” She flicked her hand as she spoke. “I was just being silly. This cold is messing with my head.”

I nodded, but Veronica stayed where she was, blocking the way out of the kitchen. She was looking down at her mug and biting her bottom lip again as though she wasn’t quite finished.

“I don’t hate you, you know,” she said. “I know I made fun of you for being a charity case, but I’ve got nothing against the scholarship students at Weybridge.”

"Really?" The way she’d treated me and picked on Lily so far this year suggested otherwise. “Then why—

“Because I have to maintain certain appearances,” she said. “More than ever right now.”

“What do you mean? Why now?”

“Look, I’m just saying that I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you, but like I said, things aren’t always what they seem.”

She turned and walked away before I could respond, and I stood there frowning after her. I was completely baffled by our conversation. Veronica had opened up to me and accepted my help, and now she had actually apologized to me. Maybe that cold really was messing with her head. After all that though, one thing she had said was stuck at the front of my mind. Had she been talking about Noah with her mom? Did she really suggest he wasn't the person she wanted to be with? And if he wasn't, could it be because there was someone else?

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CHAPTER EIGHT

By the following week, things were starting to get back to normal. The school corridors were crowded once more, and it seemed like the bug that had taken everyone down had mostly run its course. I still counted myself as one of the lucky few who avoided it completely.

I hadn't seen Veronica since our encounter on Saturday, but I was intrigued to see if anything had changed between her and Noah. When I'd overheard her phone conversation in the kitchen, it really had seemed like she wasn't all that into their relationship. But when Monday morning came, she was still sitting at his side during breakfast.

Nothing was different, and I had to wonder if she'd only said those things to her mom and to me because she'd been in some kind of sickness-induced delirium. Still, I found myself keeping a closer eye on her. I wasn't sure why she'd opened up to me, but I was beginning to realize there was more to Veronica Cordeaux than I first thought.

It was probably silly, but I started noticing her more in class. I began to analyze her interactions with other students. I found myself wondering what she was thinking. It felt like so many questions had been raised on the weekend, and I couldn't let it go until I got some answers. Veronica was like a little puzzle box I needed to solve.

She wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary though, and I wondered if perhaps I'd lost my mind and had imagined our entire conversation. I was questioning her every move—I really needed to get a better hobby.

But, even on Tuesday, when she was slow to pack her books up at the end of math class, I was asking myself why. She seemed to be waiting for

something and kept giving surreptitious looks around the room as she watched everyone leave. Was there a reason she wanted to be the last person out the door? What was she waiting for? Or was I just searching for answers in places there weren't any?

Once Veronica had finally left the room, I gathered my stuff. But as I went to leave my desk, I tripped over the leg of my chair, and my books went sprawling across the ground.

I swore under my breath and knelt to pick them up. Maybe this was my karma for turning into a stalker.

"Hey, Isobel, do you need a hand?" I glanced up as a guy bent down to help me. He hadn't been in math with me, so he must have just entered the room for the next class.

"Thanks, uh…"

"Eric." He introduced himself with a grin. We'd never spoken before, but when I looked at him properly, I realized I recognized him from my economics class. He was quiet and studious, and he always seemed to have the answers when called upon.

"Sorry, I probably should have known that. I'm still learning everyone's names," I said as he helped me pick up my books.

He gave me a wonky smile that pulled a dimple from his cheek. He was cute when he smiled, and he had kind eyes. "That's okay," he said as he ran a hand through his shaggy dark hair. "You'll get to know everyone eventually. I guess I'm one less person now."

"I guess you are." I smiled. He passed me the books he'd retrieved from the floor, and I gathered them in a pile in my arms as I stood up. "Thanks for your help. I'm not normally so klutzy."

"I tend to get butter fingers after math too."

"Maybe it's a universal condition."

"Oh, I'm sure of it."

I laughed. "Okay, well, I'll see you around, Eric. It was nice to officially meet you."

"You too, Isobel."

I left the class with a smile on my face. Eric seemed sweet, and given how difficult I found economics, he probably wasn't the worst person to have met from that class. I guessed my Veronica stalking hadn't been a total waste of time.



THAT NIGHT, right before light's out, Anna came to our bedroom. She cracked the door open and poked her head in. "It's happening tonight," she whispered.

"What's happening?" I asked as I lay on my bed.

Anna checked up and down the hallway before she snuck into the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Why are you acting so stealthy?" Cress asked.

"Because it's happening," Anna repeated. "Operation: Revenge Prank is on tonight."

"Really?" Cress sat up a little straighter in bed.

"Yep. So, set your alarms for 3:30 A.M., dress in black, and be ready to meet outside at 3:45. Then it's revenge time." Anna's eyes were dancing with anticipation.

"That's so early," Cress groaned.

A little of Anna's enthusiasm dimmed too. "I know, but it'll be worth it." Anna started to open the door again. "Remember, we're meeting outside the boys' dorm at 3:45. Don't be late."

"Okay, but what's the actual plan?" I asked.

Anna simply smiled though. "Just be there," she replied before dashing out into the hallway.

Cress and I turned to look at each other before we shook our heads and laughed.

"Why do I feel like Anna gets a kick out of being mysterious?" I asked.

"Probably because she does."

"What do you think the prank is?"

"No idea," Cress replied. "But if we're waking up at 3:30 A.M., there's no time to worry about it. I need to get some sleep."

I nodded in agreement.

"Whatever it is," she said as we turned out the lights, "I just hope it gives those boys the payback they deserve."



WHEN OUR ALARMS buzzed at 3:30 A.M, Cress and I forced ourselves to climb out of bed and dress all in black as Anna had instructed. Cress was moving about like a zombie, and I wasn't doing much better. I'd always been a morning person, but this was too early even for me. I sincerely hoped we became a little more alert before the prank. Whatever the plan was, I felt certain we'd need our wits about us.

We crept out of our room and made our way along the hallway and down the stairs, staying as quiet as possible so we wouldn't risk waking up our dorm mom, Lisa. When we got outside, we could just about see the group of girls huddled by the entrance to the boys' dorm. It was dark out, but as we got closer, I realized how many people were involved in this prank. It wasn't quite every girl in the senior class, but it couldn't have been far off. The boys had clearly made a lot of enemies with their prank this year.

Anna bounded over to us as we reached the group. She was brimming with excitement. Now I was outside in the fresh air, I was much more awake, and I found I felt the same way.

"Isn't this fun?" Anna whispered.

"I guess so, but we still don't know what we're doing," I said.

"Oh, yeah," Anna replied with a laugh. "Gather round. Veronica is about to explain."

Anna led us through the group of waiting girls until we reached the front. Veronica was standing before the crowd next to two large boxes. When she cleared her throat, everyone turned to listen to her. It seemed she wasn't just the queen of our school; she had also delegated herself as the captain of our revenge team.

"Okay, listen up, everyone," she said, keeping her voice low. "It's time to give the boys a taste of their own medicine."

She pointed to one of the boxes. "All these alarm clocks are set to go off at the exact time the boys woke us up—4:00 A.M. That gives us plenty of time to sneak into their dorm, hide as many of these alarms as possible, and get out before they go off. The clocks might look small, but trust me, they're loud, so you don't want to be nearby when they go off, or you'll be caught for sure."

Veronica sounded like she was preparing a bomb disposal unit for a dangerous mission rather than a high-school prank. As murmurs of approval vibrated around the group, I was distracted by the other box next to her. On

second glance, I realized it was larger than the other one and covered by a dark sheet. What could she be hiding in there?

As if she could read my mind, Veronica stepped closer to the mystery box and picked up a corner of the sheet. “If any of the boys don’t get woken up by the alarm clocks, Barry will take care of the rest,” she said before she whipped away the covering to reveal a metal cage. Inside was the biggest rooster I’d ever seen.

“Barry…is a rooster?” I whispered to no one in particular.

“Yep,” Anna laughed. “Hopefully, he’ll give the boys an even ruder awakening than they gave us.”

“It’s brilliant,” I agreed. “But…he’s called Barry? Really?”

“Well, I didn’t name him.” Anna shrugged.

“Where did we even find a rooster?”

“From the kitchen garden,” she explained. “The school keeps chickens down there. And Barry, of course.”

“Of course,” I replied with a shake of my head. Was there anything this school didn’t have?

Veronica snapped her fingers to put an end to our conversation. She was really serious about this whole thing. “Okay, let’s go,” she ordered “Get your alarm clocks, make sure you hide them somewhere those boys will never think of looking, and don’t get caught.”

She waved us toward the dorm like a commander leading her troops into battle. One by one we all hurriedly plucked an alarm clock from the box and followed her. A few of Veronica’s friends picked up Barry’s cage and carried him inside.

“Veronica sure did go to a lot of effort for our revenge prank,” Cress said as we made our way up the stairs. “There must have been a hundred clocks in that box.”

“Uh, have you met Veronica?” Anna scoffed. “I’m pretty sure revenge is her middle name.”

“True.” Cress laughed. “I guess I’m impressed. Do you guys know where you’re going to hide your clocks?”

“Outside the twins’ room for sure,” Anna immediately replied.

“Yeah, those boys need some payback,” I agreed, grinning as Anna lifted her hand to give me a soft and silent high-five.

“I’m going to put mine outside Kaden’s room,” Cress said. “He’s down this way, so I’ll find you guys after.”

“Okay, good luck,” I said.

“Don’t get caught,” she added before taking off down one of the corridors.

Anna and I continued together, and when we reached the hallway the twins’ room was in, we found a few girls were already there as well as Veronica’s friends with Barry’s cage. The place was only dimly lit by a few low-hanging lights on the ceiling, but we could see the girls slowly carrying the cage to the far end of the corridor, doing their best not to giggle when the rooster flapped his wings or made soft noises.

"Perfect.” Anna grinned when she saw the rooster. “I really hope Barry wakes up the twins.”

“They’re going to hate us,” I said with a soft laugh.

We made our way to Wes and Sawyer’s bedroom door and looked for a place to hide our clocks. There wasn’t much in the corridor, so it wasn’t easy even though the clocks were only about the size of my palm. I glanced around to see what other girls were doing. One dropped theirs into a trash can while another hid hers behind a heater on the wall. I wished we could have snuck into the twins’ room and found somewhere to hide them in there, but I wasn’t nearly brave enough.

The girls managing Barry at the end of the hallway started laughing a little harder as they tried to release him from the cage. They weren’t doing a very good job of keeping quiet, and Barry didn’t seem to be cooperating. I really hoped they weren’t going to get us all caught.

“Okay, I’m done,” Anna announced as I turned to see her burying her clock in the soil of a leafy pot plant. “We better go, Isobel.”

“Okay, I’ll be one more minute…” I scanned my surroundings for a suitable hiding place and smiled when I looked up. The low-hanging lights in the corridor were protected by semi-translucent shades in the shape of a shallow bowl. If I was accurate enough, I might be able to throw my alarm clock up so it landed right inside.

“Oh no, what are they doing?” Anna hissed, and I followed her gaze to the end of the hallway. Barry was starting to flap and squawk as the girls tried to coax him from his cage. They weren’t giggling anymore and were starting to look a little worried the rooster was going to blow our cover.

“I’ll go and help them,” Anna said. “You hurry up and hide that clock. We’ve got to go.”

“Okay.” I nodded and returned my attention to the light fitting above me. I swung my arm back and forth a few times in preparation and then gently tossed the alarm clock up into the air. I smiled as it came down right inside the light fitting. Mission accomplished.

I looked down the corridor and laughed as I saw Barry strutting around on the carpet, finally free from his cage. All the girls were looking at Anna in awe, so she must have taken charge of the situation.

I was just about to walk toward them when the sound of shouting echoed from somewhere in the building. It seemed like it was coming from the floor above.

One of the girls swore. “That sounds like a teacher. Let’s get out of here.” The girls turned and rushed past Barry’s cage and out the door that led to the stairs.

“Isobel, hurry up, someone’s coming!” Anna was waving to me from the door. I sprinted after her as she slipped out of the hallway and into the stairwell.

When I reached the door, I burst through it but then stopped in my tracks on the landing. There were stairs leading up to the next level and down to the exit in front of me. Anna was already halfway down the stairs, and almost to the ground floor. But she’d stopped to look back at me, and her eyes were wide with panic. She was waving her hands and pointing upward.

I looked up and saw a set of slippered feet coming down from the floor above. When the man came fully into view, I realized it was the boys’ dorm dad, Adam. He had his back to me, but in a few seconds, he would reach the landing, turn around, and see me.

“Go back,” Anna mouthed to me.

I nodded and quietly slipped through the door and back into the hallway.

“Anyone else I find out of bed is in serious trouble.” Adam’s voice boomed through the building. He sounded far closer than I expected, and my heart began to race. He must have already caught some of the girls on the floor above, and I didn’t want to be among them. Lisa had said she’d make us clean the boys’ bathroom for sneaking a boy into the girls’ dorm. I dreaded to think what Adam would do if we were found in their dorm after curfew.

I started to race down the corridor as quickly and quietly as I could. There was another exit at the far end of it, so if I could just make it there

without being seen, I would hopefully be able to escape. I'd only taken a few steps when I heard the door open behind me.

Adam had been headed this way, so I knew it must be him. There was no way I could make it to the other exit in time. I was screwed. I frantically looked around me for somewhere, anywhere, to hide. But there was nowhere to go. I glared at the tiny alarm clock I could see nestled safely in the light fitting.

In a moment of desperation, just as Adam was about to step into the hallway, I reached out and tried the handle on the nearest door. To my surprise and relief, it was unlocked. I threw myself into the bedroom and closed the door quickly behind me.

I held my breath and squeezed my eyes tightly shut as I listened to the sounds in the corridor. I prayed Adam hadn't seen me. That he hadn't heard me open and shut the door.

"What are you doing in here?" A low voice growled behind me, and I slowly turned to look into the room. It was almost pitch-black, but as my eyes adjusted, I saw a boy standing by the bed. He was shirtless, and his gray sweatpants slumped low around his waist. Through the darkness, I could see his intense green eyes narrowed on me. I'd stumbled into Noah's room.

"Isobel?" His eyes widened with shock. It lasted only a second before he quickly suppressed it. "You can't be in here."

Noah strode toward me and reached for the door handle, but I pressed myself against the door, stopping him. I was probably better off out in the corridor and facing Adam's punishment than in this room with Noah. But despite everything, for some reason, I felt like I could trust him to help me.

"Don't," I said. "Your dorm dad is in the hallway. I'll get caught."

Noah glared down at me. I was just inches from his bare chest, and I could see how tense he was by the way his arm flexed as his hand gripped the door handle.

"How is that my problem?" His voice rumbled through me.

"It's not," I snapped back. "Trust me, I didn't mean to come in here. But surely you can stand to be around me for a few seconds. I'll go when the coast is clear."

He briefly looked me up and down. With my back forced up against the door and Noah's arm stretched out beside me, I felt encased in his presence. If he really wanted me gone, it wouldn't have taken much for his strong

arms to ease me out of the way so he could open the door and kick me out. Instead, he released the handle, but he didn't step back.

"Clearly you don't understand how difficult it is for me to be around you," he muttered, his eyes flicking back to meet mine. But he didn't move to throw me out.

I stared up and into his eyes, wondering what he was thinking. I knew he wanted nothing to do with me, but why did it feel like there was more to his animosity than he wanted me to know? Why was the air between us thick with tension? And why, if he hated me, were his eyes on my lips?

I gasped as the high-pitched ringing of the alarm clocks pierced the air, and Barry's squawks echoed down the hallway. I could hear growing commotion outside the room as doors opened and boys spilled into the hallway to see what was going on. Thankfully, Noah looked away, abruptly breaking the brief but intense focus he'd held on me.

Noah moved slightly closer as he went to wrap his hand around the door handle again. I felt my breath catch in my throat when his familiar scent hit me. There was barely any space between us, and when he spoke the vibrations from his low voice sent a shiver dancing up my neck. "I'll check there are no teachers, then you need to get out."

I edged myself out from the small space between Noah and the door, allowing him to open it a crack so he could look into the corridor. The noise of the rooster and the ringing alarm bells became so much louder especially when combined with the yelling from the boys as they emerged from their rooms

"They're distracted by the rooster," Noah said. "You can go." His voice wasn't quite as harsh or demanding as I'd expected. As our eyes met once more, I found myself questioning both of us. Why hadn't he kicked me out of here immediately? Why hadn't I turned and left as soon as I realized where I was? I held his gaze for a second that stretched longer and longer as I tried to find some answers in his swirling green eyes. But then the cold expression he usually reserved for me shuttered back into place, and he gestured for me to leave.

I ripped my eyes from his and quickly pushed through the narrow opening in the doorway. As I stepped back out into the hallway, the door slammed shut behind me. None of the boys gave me a second glance as they rummaged around looking for the ringing alarm clocks. A few boys,

along with Adam, were trying to get hold of Barry, but the bird was flapping around them and dodging their attempts to grab him with ease.

Amid all the chaos, it was the perfect time to slip out. I hurried along the corridor, down the stairs, and out into the brisk night. I rubbed my arms, trying to warm myself up as I ran across the courtyard and back to my dorm. I couldn’t be sure if the tingling on my skin was caused by the wintery air or the memory of my brief intrusion into Noah’s room and the lingering sensation of his closeness as I pressed my back against his bedroom door. I hoped it was just the cold.

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CHAPTER NINE

"I still can't believe we managed to get away with pranking the boys," Anna said, smiling as she looked down at her phone. She turned it in my direction and showed me a picture of a guy being chased by Barry the rooster on Instagram.

He was dressed in his pajamas, and the picture captured him mid-scream as he ran from the rooster, which flapped its wings behind him. Barry looked like he was having the time of his life, but the poor guy looked terrified. I couldn't stop myself from laughing.

"He looks traumatized."

"Yeah, seems like Joel is going to have nightmares about being chased by Barry for life." Anna grinned, leaned back on the bed, and kept scrolling through her phone.

It was Saturday afternoon, and we were working on our college application essays—at least, I was trying to. It was hard to put my heart and soul into it when I wasn't sure if I'd even be submitting it.

It had always been my dream to go to college and study medicine or sciences, but I'd given up on that idea last year so I could stay in Rapid Bay and help my mom run the café. I knew we couldn't afford college and she needed my help. But that had all changed the day I met my father.

Matthew had offered to pay for me to go to any college I wanted the first day I met him. When he'd told me that, I'd flat-out refused and stormed out of his office. At the time, I didn't want anything to do with him. Soon after though, my mom made it clear she didn't want me to give up my dream for her and that I should let Matthew help. It was all so confusing, so

I’d been avoiding thoughts of college ever since. But, with everyone else at school getting prepped to apply for schools, I’d begun to realize I couldn’t keep putting it off.

Matthew’s offer didn’t suddenly make everything simple though. If anything, I just felt more uncertain. If I was going to go to college, where would I go? Did I really know what I wanted to do with my life and career? Even though things were better with my father, I still didn’t really know if I could bring myself to accept his offer. My warring thoughts made filling out applications with any enthusiasm impossible.

Anna was supposed to be working on her college application too, but she was struggling even more than I was. When she wasn’t flicking through TikToks on her phone or asking me if I was done working yet, she was bugging me about a party Luther was throwing for his birthday tonight. She was incredibly distracting, but I’d promised to hang out and watch Netflix with her once I was done. Cress was on her big date with Kaden, so it was just the two of us.

“Are you sure you won’t come to the party tonight?” Anna pleaded with me once again. “It’ll be fun. I promise.”

I’d thought she’d have given up by now, but it seemed she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I replied. “It’s not happening”

“Please.” She batted her lashes at me, but she was barking up the wrong tree. I wasn’t turning up to Luther’s party when he was set on ignoring me. Especially not if it was his birthday.

“You know it’s a miracle we didn’t all get caught and sentenced to jail time because of our prank, right? We should be celebrating our freedom,” she argued.

It *was* a miracle we hadn’t been caught. I doubted there had been a risk of jail time, but the school did call an assembly to warn us that anyone caught taking part in further pranks would be suspended. Either way, it didn’t change my thoughts about Luther’s party.

“Luther doesn’t want me there,” I said. “He’s been ignoring me since Halloween. It would be weird if I showed up.”

“It wouldn’t be weird. You know what Luther’s parties are like. Everyone from school will be there, and you probably won’t even see him.”

“I always run into him at his parties.”

“Yes, well, it’s not like he wants to ignore you. We both know he’s only doing it because of Noah.”

"Another good reason not to go.”

“I doubt Noah will even be there,” Anna said. “He’s never here on weekends anymore.”

Anna was right. Although I found it difficult to believe he’d miss his best friend’s birthday, Noah had been leaving school every weekend to spend time with his grandfather at his family’s company. But, I had to admit, the party might be bearable if Noah wasn’t there and I could stay out of Luther’s way.

“Please come,” Anna continued. “We haven’t gone out in ages, and Cress is going to meet us there after her date. Don’t you want to hear about it?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Plus, Wes will be there.”

“He will?”

“Why wouldn’t he? No one misses Luther’s parties.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head but then let out a sigh. “Fine, I guess I could make an appearance.”

“Really?”

I laughed at her surprise. “What? Did I give in too easily?”

“I mean, I’ve been laying out my most convincing arguments for so long I was just about to give up hope.”

“Well, I’ll remember to hold out a little longer next time.”

She poked out her tongue, but then she smiled. “So, what convinced you? My pleading eyes or the boyfriend card? I need to know for next time…”

I shrugged. “I quite enjoyed Luther’s last party.”

“Because you spent the whole night snuggling by the bonfire with Wes?”

“That, and because there was no dancing,” I joked. “But you’re right. I want to hear about Cress’s date. And maybe Luther won’t notice me if I keep a low profile. I really don’t think Noah will miss the party, but he pretty much ignores me anyway, so I’m sure he won’t be a problem.”

“He won’t,” Anna said with a firm nod. “And if he is, I’ll deal with him.”

Given the steely look that glinted in her eyes, I had no doubt she would be happy to follow through on that promise.

"So, how do you think Cress and Kaden are doing on their date?" I asked.

"I'm sure they're already planning a spring wedding."

"Probably." I grinned. "They both seem smitten with each other."

"Totally smitten," Anna agreed. "Now, please tell me you're done with your college stuff so we can actually enjoy a relaxing Saturday afternoon."

I was nowhere close to finished, but she looked so hopeful and had waited around for me all day, so I knew I had to give in. "Okay, I'm done."

"Yes, finally!" She clapped her hands and grabbed the TV controls.



WE SPENT the afternoon watching reruns of *Sex & the City*. It passed the time quickly, and before we knew it, it was time to get ready for Luther's party.

I still wasn't truly convinced it was a good idea for me to go, but there was no way Anna would let me back out now. We got a ride to the party with Wes, and he held my hand as we made our way up Luther's driveway. It was nice to be out with him. Thanks to his rowing regatta and then everyone being sick, it had been weeks since we'd been able to do anything together. It also felt good to have him at my side as it made me a little more confident about attending the party. I knew Wes wouldn't let anyone make me feel bad for coming.

Luther's parties were normally held in the woods behind the grand, old villa his family owned in town. But, tonight, I was surprised to see the house was lit up and music was coming from within.

"I thought Luther didn't host parties in the house?" I said.

Wes shrugged. "Yeah, he normally doesn't. Maybe he wanted to change things up."

"But why change a winning formula?" Anna said. "The forest parties are legendary."

As we got closer to the house, we could see a massive "Happy Birthday, Luther" sign sprawled across the front of the house.

"A sign as big as his ego," Anna groaned.

She shook her head at the sign before she headed into the house. We all followed her, and the moment I walked through the front door, I wondered if we'd come to the wrong party. The entrance foyer was filled with adults. They were all dressed in smart suits and cocktail dresses that seemed far too formal for guests at a typical Luther party.

A server wearing a white shirt and a black apron greeted us at the door with champagne glasses on a silver platter, and I noticed him briefly cast his eyes over our outfits. We were totally underdressed.

"Uh, are you sure we're in the right place?" Wes asked, scanning the room as the gazes of a few guests fell on us.

"Of course," Anna said, seemingly unbothered by the fact we looked totally out of place. "Maybe the real party is out back."

She swiped a glass of champagne from the server and casually strode down the wide main hallway to the back of the house. Wes and I shared a confused look before we followed somewhat reluctantly behind her.

We made our way through the groups of finely dressed guests until we found a large entertaining area at the back of the house. The crowd was much younger here, and I began to recognize people from school, but everyone was still wearing suits and dresses. This was not Luther's normal style.

"Anna, are you sure we haven't missed something?" I said, starting to feel increasingly embarrassed about the ripped jeans and sweatshirt I was wearing. I'd dressed for a cold night in the woods, and even Anna was starting to look a little uncertain.

"I'm going to go ask around," Wes said, letting go of my hand. "I'll be back soon." He headed over to some of his rowing friends while Anna knocked back her champagne.

"Cress should be here by now," Anna said. "I'm sure she can fill us in on why everyone's so dressed up. Come on, let's go find her."

She grabbed my arm and pulled me deeper into the crowd. Anna had been right about the fact that the whole class would be here. The back area of the house was packed with kids from school, and people were turning to gawk at us as we searched for Cress.

"There she is," Anna said, pointing to a long table at the back of the room laden with drinks and food. Kaden was at her side, and she had a huge smile on her lips. There was a sparkle in her eyes, and I could tell she'd had an amazing first date, but my face fell as I saw they were both dressed as

beautifully as everyone else at the party, Kaden in a suit and Cress in a sparkling silver dress that dipped low across her back.

When she saw us approaching, she waved excitedly before she whispered something in Kaden's ear and then made her way through the crowd toward us.

"Finally! You guys are here," she exclaimed as she reached us. "I have so much to talk to you about—wait, why are you dressed like that?"

Anna took her by the arm and led her out of the back room and into a quieter hallway. I hurried after them.

When we were out of sight, Anna answered Cress. "Why are we dressed like this?" she repeated. "Why are *you* dressed like *that?"*

"The dress code on the invitation was pretty clear—semi-formal." Cress shrugged.

"What invitation?" Anna hissed.

"Luther gave out invitations last week. You didn't get one?"

"*That's* what he was giving out?" Anna asked. "He tried to give me something, and I told him to get lost." She shook her head. "How was I supposed to know it was a party invite? His parties never have formal invites."

"Yeah, but I think his dad organized this one for his birthday. Why do you think there are so many parents here?"

Anna's eyes narrowed on Cress. "Why didn't you say anything about the dress code when we talked about the party this week?"

"I just assumed you knew," Cress protested. "I thought the whole class was invited. I even showed you what I was going to wear tonight. Didn't you wonder why it was so formal?"

"I just thought that was what you were wearing for your date with Kaden!"

"You think I'd wear *this* for a date?"

"Why not?" Anna shrugged. "I would."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Cress grunted.

"I didn't get an invite at all," I murmured, causing both girls to fall silent. It was hardly surprising given that Luther wasn't talking to me these days. He seemed to have neglected to invite Wes too, and I was guessing that was because of me. "Luther obviously doesn't want me here. I think I should leave."

“I’m sure he wants you here,” Cress said. “It’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

But I shook my head. We all knew that wasn’t true. “I’m going to find Wes.”

“You don’t have to go,” Cress objected.

“No, I feel uncomfortable.” I glanced down at my clothes. “And I clearly don’t fit in.”

“Well, we’ll come with you,” Cress said.

Anna nodded. “Yeah, this party seems stuffy and boring anyway.”

“I really don’t expect you guys to.” I started to make my way back out to the main entertaining area, but as soon as I stepped out of the hallway, I stopped dead. Noah was standing right in front of me.

He was dressed in a fine navy suit that was offset by black lapels, and his eyes filled with surprise when he saw me. He glanced over his shoulder as though he was looking for someone, but then he focused on me and marched forward. He grabbed my arm and guided me back into the hallway, so I was once again hidden from the eyes of the rest of the party.

“What are you doing here?” It was the second time in a week he’d asked me that question. But this time when he growled the words, he seemed much more frantic and concerned than he had been when I’d barged into his room. Still, his tone made it clear that he didn’t want me here either.

I shook my arm free and took a step back from him. I knew Noah didn’t like me very much, but his apparent desperation to rid me from his presence right now was surprising.

“Leave her alone, Noah,” Cress said.

“Yeah, Noah, what the hell?” Anna agreed.

He ignored the two of them though, his eyes fixed on me. “You need to leave.”

Even though I agreed with him, I felt frozen to the spot. His voice was a little quiet, almost pained, and there was an unmistakable urgency in his tone.

“Now, Isobel,” he added when I didn’t move.

“This isn’t your house. You can’t just kick her out,” Anna said.

“I can, and I will,” Noah shot back. “She wasn’t invited.”

“Yeah, we just found out,” Cress said. “Why not?”

“Because she’s not wanted here.” Noah flashed his anxious eyes at his cousin and then back to me. “You have to go.”

“It’s fine,” I said to the girls. “I was going anyway. I shouldn’t have come in the first place.”

“We’re coming with you,” Cress said.

“Yeah, screw you, Noah,” Anna snapped.

We made our way back out of the hallway, and I hurried through the crowd of students. Many of them gave me confused looks, and I felt like it was as much due to the stunned and embarrassed look on my face as it was to do with the casual outfit I was wearing. Eventually, I found Wes standing close to the spot we’d left him, chatting with some of his friends.

Concern covered Wes’s face when he saw me rushing to him. “Isobel, what’s wrong?”

“Turns out we’re not invited to this party,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Noah’s being a dick,” Anna added as she joined us. She was almost as flustered as me. “He’s kicking Isobel out.”

“He’s what?” Wes’s eyes narrowed, and his worried expression was replaced with a look of anger I hadn’t seen in him before.

“It’s nothing,” I said, shooting Anna a subtle glare. “We’re just not supposed to be here. I think we should go.”

I glanced over my shoulder and found Noah watching us through the crowd from the other side of the room. His jaw was tight, and his eyes were locked on us as though he was refusing to look away until he was sure we’d left.

Wes was staring right back at him. Judging by the tension in his shoulders, he looked like he was trying his best not to march across the room and confront Noah face-to-face.

“Wes, can you drive us home?” I asked softly. He was still having a stare down with Noah, and I gently touched his arm to pull him out of it. “Please?”

He glanced down at me and then slowly nodded. “Yeah, of course. Let’s get out of here.”

We walked back through the house, and although I relaxed slightly when I knew I was out of Noah’s view, being surrounded by the formally dressed adults in the front of the house did nothing to make me change my mind about leaving.

Wes opened the front door, standing back as he allowed Cress and Anna to walk through. I was about to go after them when I felt a prickling

sensation against the back of my neck. Slowly, I glanced over my shoulder and found William Hastings glaring at me.

He was standing in the lounge area, surrounded by Luther's guests. Someone was talking to him, but he didn't seem to be listening. Instead, he was watching me with a look of pure loathing, which forced my stomach to dip and my heart to beat fast. I'd hoped to never see him again after the Halloween carnival, but here I was, only weeks later, being confronted by his hatred for me once again. He slowly lifted his drink to his lips, but he didn't pull his eyes from me as he swallowed it down.

He looked so tense I was worried the glass was going to shatter in his hand. The events of Halloween only seemed to have intensified his animosity toward me, and I didn't want to stick around to see what he might do, so I quickly turned away and hurried out the front door.

The air around me felt thick as though William's disgust for me was following me down the driveway. I'd wanted to forget all about him now that Noah and I were done, but judging by the look in his eyes, William Hastings had not forgotten about me.

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CHAPTER TEN

"I'm going to miss you over Thanksgiving," Wes said. His arms were wrapped tightly around me, making it very difficult for me to finish packing for my trip home. I'd left it until the last minute, so it was a miracle I had anything in my bag at all. Still, I couldn't bring myself to step from his grasp. Cress had gone to check on Anna, so these were probably the last few moments Wes and I would get alone before we both left for the break.

"I'm going to miss you too," I said. "You sure I can't convince you to come to Rapid Bay instead?"

He gave me a sad smile and shook his head. "I don't think my parents would forgive me if I bailed on the gala. It's a big deal for them."

"No, of course," I replied. "You should be with your family. It's just going to be weird spending such a long time without you."

I hadn't gone more than a couple of days without seeing Wes since I'd arrived at Weybridge Academy, and while we were only going to be apart for a few days, right now it felt like forever. I couldn't deny how excited I was to be heading home though. It had been a hectic few weeks topped off by the previous weekend's drama at Luther's house. If there was anything more embarrassing than turning up at a high-school party you weren't invited to, it was being totally underdressed at said party and your ex-boyfriend kicking you out. A short break from this school was just what I needed. Of course, I was mostly excited about the trip because I would soon be reunited with my mom.

"We'll FaceTime," Wes said. "And speak on the phone every day."

“We better,” I replied.

His arms loosened around me as the sound of Anna’s voice shattered the moment. “I’m going to miss *you* more. No, I’m going to miss *you* more,” she cooed as she came through the door. She was dragging two large suitcases behind her and grinning broadly at us. “You guys are so loved up it’s sickening. You’re lucky I’m the one walking in on this and not Sawyer, or you’d never hear the end of it.”

I wasn’t sure Anna’s reaction was all that much better than Sawyer’s would have been, but I decided to ignore her and focus on Wes. I lifted myself up on my tiptoes to give him a kiss goodbye.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” he said as he slowly drew his arms from around me. “Need a hand with your bags?”

I shook my head. “Unlike Anna, I’ve packed light.”

“Hey!” she complained. “This is light for me. I’m always ready for all possible weather and occasions. I don’t like to get caught out when I’m on a trip.”

The door opened again, and Cress came into the room, lugging another bag along with her.

“Please tell me that’s not also for Anna?” I asked.

Anna and Cress looked at each other.

“Okay, so maybe I overpacked,” Anna said, facing me. “But, I swear, it’s harder to pack light than it is to pack heavy.”

“I think you should ditch a bag,” Cress agreed. “Maybe this one. We won’t need cocktail dresses for this trip, right, Isobel?”

“A whole suitcase just for cocktail dresses?” I gasped.

“Ugh, fine, I’ll leave it here,” Anna huffed. “I guess I can buy something in Rapid Bay if I get desperate.”

I laughed to myself. Anna was going to be sorely disappointed if she was expecting an array of shopping options in my hometown. It wasn’t like Rapid Bay had a Fifth Avenue.

“Wes, could you be a darling and return that bag to my room on your way out?” she continued. “My roommate is in there, so it’ll be open.”

“Sure.” He grinned. “Have fun, girls. I’ll see you next week.”

Once Wes had left the room, I threw a few final items into my bag and zipped it closed. I didn’t really need to pack much because I had a closet full of clothes back home. But I’d grown attached to some of the cozy sweaters I had here, and my jeans at Weybridge all fit me far better than the

ones at home. I guessed that was the benefit of having your clothes chosen for you by a stylist with your exact measurements rather than raiding the local charity store for every outfit and wearing them well beyond their lifespan.

I helped Anna by carrying her second suitcase down the stairs and out the front door while Cress dealt with her own luggage. The girls were buzzing with excitement as we made our way to the parking lot.

“I can’t wait to see your home,” Cress said.

“Me too,” Anna agreed. “I Googled photos of it, and the beach looks so beautiful. I wish the weather were a little warmer so we could go swimming. I packed my bikini just in case, but I think that was wishful thinking.”

I smiled. Of course, Anna had packed her bikini.

There was a large black SUV waiting for us in the parking lot. As we approached, the driver got out of the car and stepped toward us. Matthew had offered to organize all our transport back to Rapid Bay. I still felt a little uneasy about accepting such an offer from him because I knew it would likely involve private jets and personal chauffeurs. But I couldn’t deny how convenient it made everything, not to mention the extra time I would get with my mom as a result. I’d told him we didn’t need anything extravagant, but he and I had very different definitions of the word.

“Isobel?” the driver asked.

“That’s me.”

“Great. Let me take your bags.” The poor guy seemed to regret the offer as soon as he started lifting Anna’s bags into the car. He grimaced as he heaved the first suitcase, then the second, into the trunk, but he didn’t utter one ounce of complaint.

“Seriously, Anna, you need to learn to pack better,” Cress said as she opened the side door so Anna and I could climb into the car. “My mom has a packing list for every occasion. I’m going to send it to you next time we go somewhere, or you’ll spend your whole life breaking unsuspecting drivers’ backs.”

“I guess I could take a look at it,” Anna said. “But I’m not making any promises.”

Cress was about to jump into the car after us when a shout sounded behind her. “Cress, wait up!”

I looked across the parking lot and saw Kaden jogging over to us. He skidded to a halt when he reached Cress, and her face lit up with a smile while her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink.

“I wanted to see you before you headed off for the break.” Kaden smiled back at her.

“We’ll leave you guys to chat,” I said, reaching out to pull the door closed. “Have a good Thanksgiving, Kaden.”

“You too, Isobel.” He struggled to pull his eyes from Cress as he spoke. When he was around her, it was like she was the only girl he could see.

As I closed the door, Anna let out a frustrated groan from beside me. “Now we can’t hear them,” she said. “Crack the window a bit.”

“I’m not going to crack the window.” I laughed. “Give them a minute.”

“Screw that.” She leaned over me and practically pressed her nose to the glass. Luckily though, she managed to resist the urge to open the window.

“Ooh, she’s tucking her hair behind her ear,” Anna said. “That’s like the Cress version of flashing some cleavage.”

“Anna.” I laughed. “Let them have some privacy.”

“He’s going in for the kiss,” she squealed as quietly as she could. She’d either not heard me or simply decided to ignore me. It was probably the latter. “Yep, they’re kissing. I think she likes it. Kaden looks like he gives good kisses.”

“Anna,” I groaned.

“What?” She finally turned to me.

“I don’t need a play-by-play of their make-out session.” Her running commentary was making this all much more awkward than it needed to be, but it made me curious enough to sneak a glance out the window from the corner of my eye.

She scoffed and pulled herself away from the window. “Don’t worry, they’ve finished.”

I turned my head as Cress stepped toward the car. I could see Kaden over her shoulder. There was a goofy smile on his face, and he was staring after her like a lovesick puppy.

Cress looked back and flashed him one more smile before she opened the door and got in next to me. She released a happy sigh and sank into her seat as the car started down the driveway. I glanced over my shoulder and out the window. Kaden was still standing where Cress had left him, watching the departing SUV.

I was both relieved and a little sad to see the school disappearing behind us. I couldn't wait to get home. I was so excited to see my mom and spend Thanksgiving with her. And I was surprised to admit I was looking forward to seeing Matthew too. But Weybridge Academy had become like a second home to me and, despite all the drama, part of me was going to miss it over the break.

"I take it things are going well with you and Kaden then?" I said, turning back to face Cress. They'd been spending more and more time together this week, and I'd seen them walking between classes together.

"Kind of," she replied. "I think I'm in love."

"Love!" Anna gasped. "Cress, you've been on one date."

"Two," she said. "He took me out for breakfast on Sunday, so it's two."

"Sorry, *two* dates," Anna replied with a roll of her eyes. "That's not enough to know you're in love."

"Why not? When you know, you know. Isn't that right, Isobel?"

The question took me by surprise, and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Why was she asking me? I didn't know any more about love than either of my friends. Had I even been in love before? I wasn't sure. I'd thought I was in love with Levi, but looking back now, I was certain I had been mistaken.

The things Noah had made me feel were on another level compared to Levi. But that relationship had ended even quicker, passing over me like an unexpected and devastating tornado. I hadn't had time to think about love. Now I was with Wes, and I liked him so much, but I wasn't sure I was ready to declare my love for him. It seemed like such a big word. I didn't want to use it lightly, especially after the heartbreaks I'd recently endured.

"Isobel?" Cress nudged me from my thoughts.

"Uh, yeah." I didn't want to dampen her excitement with my internal confusion, so I nodded. "Sometimes, you just know."

"See," Cress said to Anna, who simply shrugged.

The car didn't drive far from the school before it pulled off the main road. I recognized the long wire fence it turned toward immediately. We were going to the same small airstrip Noah had brought me to on our first date, when he'd used his family's private plane to fly us to Rapid Bay. It felt like a lifetime ago now. So much had changed. The way Noah had treated me at Luther's party was clear evidence of that.

This time, it wasn’t Noah’s family jet that was waiting on the tarmac—it was my father’s. As the car slowed beside the pristine white plane, I could see his name printed in bold letters across the side of it and up the tail. I really wasn’t sure I’d ever get used to the sheer ridiculousness of his wealth.

Matthew’s plane was just as luxurious as the Hastings family’s jet although Matthew’s felt slightly bigger and more spacious. Cress and Anna commented on how nice the plane was, but neither of them seemed at all overawed by it like I had been on my date with Noah. I guessed they’d both been on trips like this before.

Cress spent most of the flight gushing about Kaden. She seemed to be missing him already. They hadn’t been apart for more than an hour, but she kept glancing at her phone like she was struggling not to call or message him.

She wasn’t the only one constantly looking at her phone, and it felt like I was lifting mine to check the time every couple of minutes. I couldn’t wait to get home and was practically counting the seconds until the plane would touch down and I’d see my mom again.

Once the flight attendant announced we’d started our descent, I was pretty much useless at holding a conversation with my friends. I was excited and distracted, and I bounced on my seat as I looked out the window to see if I could recognize any landmarks.

Anna and Cress kept laughing at how eager I was, and even though neither of them had been anywhere near Rapid Bay before, they both looked out the window with me and tried to help me spot home.

When the plane finally landed and came to a stop on the runway, I looked out the window and saw my mom jumping up and down on the tarmac, waving her arms in the air.

I smiled brightly at her excitement, which was even more obvious than mine. When the stairs lowered and the three of us got off the plane, I raced over and threw myself into my mom’s arms. We squeezed each other tightly, and it felt so good to be wrapped in her embrace again. She felt small in my arms, and I remembered thinking the same thing when she’d come to visit for Halloween.

I really hoped she wasn’t still stressed and overworked at the café. She sometimes got so caught up in work she forgot to eat. It was like the world’s worst diet, and I hated I wasn’t around to make sure she was taking care of herself.

She didn’t show any other signs of fatigue though as she greeted Cress and Anna, giving them both a warm and enthusiastic hug.

“I’m so glad you’re all here,” she said. “How was the flight? Can I help you with your bags?”

She didn’t hesitate as she grabbed one from the steward who was carting them over to us, but she immediately gasped and dropped it to the floor.

“Did someone pack a ton of bricks?”

Anna blushed. Apparently, she was finally feeling embarrassed about packing too much.

“That would be Anna,” I said.

“Anna…” My mom shook her head. “You’re going to break someone’s back with that bag, sweetie.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told.” Anna shot stern looks at Cress and me.

We started walking over to my mom’s car, and a wave of nerves hit me as my friends took their first look at it. The beaten-up sedan was older than me, and I imagined neither Cress nor Anna had ever driven in something made before they were born.

I’d grown comfortable at Weybridge, despite all the wealth and privilege that had made me feel so out of place when I’d first arrived, and that was mostly because of Cress and Anna. But I feared the jarring contrast of going from a luxury private plane to a rickety old car would be a stark reminder I wasn’t from their world. I chewed on my bottom lip as I waited for their reaction, but neither of them said anything. In fact, they barely seemed to notice the car’s peeling paint and rusted edges as they happily made themselves comfortable in the back seat.

As my mom started the car and the engine spluttered to life, I glanced at the girls from the front seat, waiting to see if they might finally react. Still, they remained unbothered. They were both too busy laughing at one of my mom’s jokes, and when the radio came on and one of their favorite songs started playing, they began to belt out the tune at the top of their lungs.

When we arrived at the café, the girls gushed over how adorable it was, and they didn’t bat an eyelash when they were shown upstairs to our small apartment. Cress and Anna had never treated me any differently after finding out I didn’t come from money like most of the kids at school, but a part of me had been worried they might feel differently when they experienced my simple upbringing firsthand. Seeing how comfortable they

were in my home made me truly appreciate just how little it mattered to them, and I felt slightly guilty for ever having any doubts.

It was getting late when we arrived home, so my mom made us all hot chocolates, and we drank them while we sat around the small kitchen counter. I got the feeling my mom would have kept us chatting all night if she could, but we were tired from traveling, and everyone decided it would be best to get an early night and be fresh for the Thanksgiving festivities the next day.

Cress and Anna slept in my room and agreed to rotate each night between my single bed and the air mattress my mom had set up on the floor. I shared a bed with my mom. I fully expected her to keep me up half the night as she tossed and turned worrying about my father arriving tomorrow and the big day of cooking she had ahead of her. But, instead, she fell straight into a deep slumber.

She seemed so settled as she slept, looking far more at peace than she had when I'd last come back to Rapid Bay. She was normally so stressed by work and finances, but right now I couldn't see any hint of those usual worries.

As I lay back and closed my eyes, a feeling of genuine contentment washed over me. It had been a dramatic few weeks, but there was nothing more calming than the feeling of being back where I belonged, at home with my mom, and I soon fell into peaceful sleep myself.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I see a handsome man in your future…"

"Go on," Anna said. Her eyes were wide, and she leaned forward as she clung to every word coming out of Norma's mouth.

We were having breakfast in the café, and Norma had sat down with us immediately. She'd wasted no time in giving me a crushing hug before turning to Cress and Anna. She'd barely learned their names before she was telling their fortune. Cress hadn't stopped smiling since Norma told her that her heart was in the right place for love and, if she was open to it, there would be "many pleasures" ahead. Anna had been sitting on the edge of her seat ever since, desperate to hear Norma's predictions for her own future.

"He's tall and muscular with hair the color of sand."

Anna grinned and started rubbing her hands together. "Just my type."

"Yes," Norma agreed. "But I foresee a bumpy road for you as a couple."

"Wait, what?" Anna's shoulders slouched. "What does that mean?"

"It probably means you're going to torment the poor boy, whoever he is," Cress said with a laugh.

"That sounds about right," Anna grumbled before turning to Norma once more. "Why couldn't you tell me some sexy man is going to sweep me off my stilettos and carry me off into the sunset?"

Norma lifted an eyebrow at her. "I didn't say that's *not* what's going to happen, did I?"

Anna's lips twisted in a sly smirk. "Good. Do Isobel next."

"Uh, I don't think I need my fortune told today," I said. "I'm quite happy in the present."

Norma smiled and nodded. “I can see that. I will tell you one thing though…”

“Which is…” I asked.

“Always trust your heart.” She gave me a smile and sighed. “All this talk of love’s got me wishing I had a little of my own.”

“You don’t have someone special?” Cress asked.

Norma shook her head.

“But what about in your future?” Anna said. “Surely you can see that.”

“Oh, well,” Norma replied. “The future’s a different matter. I’ll have love. He’s just taking his sweet time realizing I’m the one.” She was clearly talking about Frank.

“Well, make him realize,” Anna replied. “You can’t wait around for a guy forever. For all you know, he’ll never figure it out. Maybe he’ll even move on with someone else.”

“Move on?” Norma’s voice was alarmed, and she started to frown. “He wouldn’t, would he?” She looked thoughtful as she murmured to herself. It might have been the first time she’d ever considered that her love for Frank might go unrequited forever.

Her attention was pulled away as she glanced up at some customers who’d just entered the café. “I better go take their orders. I’ll see you girls later.”

Anna watched with awe as Norma walked away from the table. “She. Is. Awesome!” she gasped. “I can’t believe there’s a real psychic working at your mom’s café.”

“Real psychic?” I repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Norma doesn’t really have a history of accurate predictions.”

“They sounded totally legit to me,” Anna said. “What do you think, Cress?”

“Well, I definitely liked the sound of my future.” Cress smiled, but she wasn’t looking at Anna. Instead, her focus was on the cup of coffee she had her hands wrapped around. She was staring into it as though it might somehow confirm or disprove Norma’s predictions.

“Do you think she was talking about Kaden? She has to be talking about Kaden, right?” Cress asked when she looked at us again.

“Definitely,” Anna agreed. “I’m pretty jealous of the *many pleasures* that lie ahead of you.” She gave Cress a wink, and Cress’s cheeks went bright pink.

“Get your head out of the gutter, Anna.”

“What? I may not be a psychic, but Norma was definitely alluding to a future of hot, steamy—"

“Uh, what do you think she meant with your prediction, Isobel?” Cress quickly asked, raising her voice as she cut Anna off. She was suddenly desperate to get off the subject of her and Kaden.

“I’m not really sure you could call mine a prediction.”

Anna shook her head. “No, it totally means something.”

It sounded to me like the kind of advice you found in a fortune cookie, but I didn’t say that to the girls because they both seemed very excited by Norma’s “abilities.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I let out a sigh. Whether Norma had been giving me a so-called psychic prediction or just honest advice, I wasn’t quite sure I was capable of following it. My heart had already led me astray multiple times before and proven itself thoroughly untrustworthy. “Anyway, we should be talking less and eating more,” I said. “The waffles are going to get cold.”

I started to dig into the food before us, and the girls begrudgingly followed suit. I could tell they wanted to keep chatting about our predictions, but I was worried they were getting their hopes up. Norma wasn’t exactly a reliable psychic.

As we were eating, the little bell above the entrance to the café chimed, and the front door swung open. My heart skipped a beat as I realized it was Matthew. I almost hadn’t recognized him. For once, my father wasn’t dressed in one of his fine suits, and instead, he was wearing a pair of casual chinos and a pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It was strange to see him looking so relaxed.

I hadn’t seen him since Halloween, but we’d talked briefly on the phone once since then. That night at the carnival had brought out a side of Matthew I didn’t know existed. He had been emotional. Angry and aggressive toward Noah and William but defensive and protective of me when he felt I was being threatened. It was a stark contrast to the calm and composed man I’d first met in the office of his Weybridge mansion.

It wasn’t the first time I’d seen a crack in his stoic personality though. He’d let the mask fall and been honest and vulnerable at the White Ball when he revealed the truth about why he’d been missing from my life all these years. And again in New York when he’d explained his history with the Hastings family and opened up about the death of his sister. Today

though, there was a hint of a smile on his face and a lightness to his steps that suggested those serious issues were far from his mind. One of the only times I'd seen this side of Matthew was when he was strolling through the Halloween carnival with my mom next to him.

When he caught my gaze across the room, his smile broadened, and he walked over to our table. "Hello, Isobel," he said.

I had thought I'd never get used to my father's polished English accent, but it was actually starting to feel familiar to me.

"Hey, Matthew," I said. "How are you? I'm glad to see your eye is looking better."

The last time I saw my father, his eye was starting to swell and his cheek was bruised, thanks to Noah's fist. There was no sign of the injury now, but I still felt like the damage Noah had done when he punched Matthew was a wound that would never heal.

"Yes, me too," Matthew replied. "It was all rather unpleasant."

Unpleasant felt like a bit of an understatement, but I didn't feel the need to go into any more detail. It seemed like my father was just as relieved as I was to be in Rapid Bay, far away from memories of that night.

"You remember my friends, Cress and Anna?"

"Of course." He turned his attention to my friends. "It's lovely to see you both again."

Cress and Anna both had their mouths full, so their responses were muffled, but it sounded like they said something along the lines of "You too."

"Thanks for organizing the flight here for us," I said. "The plane was really too much."

"It was no problem at all," he replied. "It's just nice that we could all be here."

I smiled and nodded in agreement. "Do you want to sit and have some breakfast with us?" I gestured toward the free seat at my side.

Matthew shook his head and straightened his back slightly as he glanced around the café. "Thank you, but I ate on my trip here. I should go and say hello to your mother. Is she here?" He didn't look at me as he spoke, his eyes instead still scanning the café as though he was eager to catch sight of her.

"Yep, she's in the kitchen."

“Excellent. Maybe I’ll see if I can do anything to help prepare for lunch.”

“You can ask, but Mom takes her hosting duties on Thanksgiving very seriously, and she’s a bit of a perfectionist. She doesn’t even ask me for help.”

Another smile formed on his face as he glanced down at me. “Well, I’ll try my best not to get in the way.”

I grinned back at him and gestured to the swing door that led to the kitchen. “It’s through there. Good luck.”

Matthew nodded before turning to head toward the kitchen.

“Was that your father?” Norma asked, returning to our table just as he disappeared out back.

“Yeah, he just arrived. He’s gone to see if Mom needs any help.”

“Did you warn him?” Norma chuckled. “You know how she likes to do everything herself on Thanksgiving.”

“Yep, I warned him. He went in anyway.”

“Well, maybe she’ll make an exception for him.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I think it’s more likely that he’ll see how hectic it is back there and then think twice before offering to help next year.”

The words were out of my mouth before I knew what I’d said. It was only after I heard them that I realized I actually thought Matthew would be here with us for Thanksgiving next year. That he was actually going to be a real part of my life from now on. The most surprising thing was I didn’t totally hate the idea.

“I guess we’ll have to see,” Norma said, a knowing smile on her lips. “Now, I’m going to sneak a peek in the back and see if he’s as handsome as your momma says.”

“Oh, he is,” Anna said.

I shot her a glare.

“What?” she protested. “I’ve told you before he’s hot for an older guy.”

Norma let out a full-bellied laugh and was still shaking her head as she started toward the kitchen.

“I think Norma likes you, Anna, even if I don’t right now,” I said.

She simply smiled. “Don’t be silly; you love me too.”

After we finished breakfast, we went to check on Mom in the kitchen. We cautiously offered to help, but she predictably refused, insisting I show the girls around Rapid Bay and not return until it was time for lunch.

She didn’t seem to have the same problem with my dad being in the kitchen. Norma was right; she had made an exception for him. He’d been assigned to peeling potatoes, and he looked so awkward I had to wonder if he’d ever even chopped a vegetable himself. Probably not, at least in recent years. He caught my eye and waved nervously with the peeler in his hand, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I did as Mom suggested and took the girls for a tour of Rapid Bay. Most of the shops were closed because of the holiday, so we couldn’t do any shopping, much to Anna’s disappointment. Instead, I took them to the beach. It was a cool day but pleasant enough when the sun broke out from behind the clouds. When we reached the sand, they gasped at the glistening turquoise water stretched out before them.

It was strange being here with them and having them in my home. I’d worried they wouldn’t like it here, that perhaps they’d secretly judge me for the way I’d been brought up once they saw the stark differences between their world and mine. If anything, I actually felt even closer to my friends. They knew all of me now and had never treated me any different.

As I peered up at the large houses that lined the foreshore, I wondered if perhaps I was the one who no longer fit in here. At least, not the way I used to. Once upon a time, I’d looked up at the grand holiday homes owned by the rich and elite visitors who vacationed here in the summer—and they’d made me feel so small. They’d reminded me of all the things I would never have. The things that felt out of my reach.

These days, it felt like I could achieve almost anything. Rapid Bay was what felt small. I’d grown so much in the short time I’d been away. I’d moved to a new school, made new friends, overcome heartache, and met my father for the first time. This place was always going to be my home, and I was still the same girl, but for the first time, I felt okay with the fact my life would take me beyond Rapid Bay and deliver unexpected twists.

But I also wondered if that was part of reason why I had been struggling so much with my college applications lately. My future was so much broader now. I had options. It was easier when college was just a dream—a fantasy in my head that would never come true. Now that it could, I worried I might screw it up.

“I can’t believe you grew up here,” Cress said, drawing my attention back to the beach. “That you got to see this view every day.”

“And your mom’s so great,” Anna added. “I wish I was as close with my parents as you are with her.”

I smiled and nodded as I looked out at the water. “Yeah, I feel pretty lucky.” I’d always appreciated my mom, but it was only once I started at Weybridge Academy that I realized just how special the relationship we had truly was.

“My parents haven’t even sent me a text to wish me a happy Thanksgiving,” Cress said. “Knowing them, they’ve probably forgotten what day it is.”

"Yeah, I haven’t heard from mine either,” Anna said. “But they don’t celebrate it in England, so I guess it’s not that big of a surprise.”

“When do you guys think you’ll see your families again?” I asked.

“My parents will be back in New York in a week or so and then back again at Christmas,” Cress replied. “At least, that’s the plan. They’re always changing their minds.”

“I’ll be heading back home for Christmas,” Anna said. “Though I’m going to try and spend as little time there as possible. My mom is completely overbearing, and my dad takes way too much interest in trying to dictate my life. If you ever meet them, you’ll see why I was happy to go to school on the other side of the world.”

“What about your brother?” Cress said. “It’ll be nice to see him, right?”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Dev’s a little punk. He recently decided he wants to be a rapper, so he’ll be even more unbearable than both my parents combined.” From the slight smile on her lips though, I got the feeling she was more excited about a reunion with her brother than she let on.

Eventually, we reached a small, secluded section of the beach that could only be accessed when the tide was out or by a hidden path none of the tourists knew about. My stomach twisted as I realized I’d brought the girls to the place Noah and I had shared our first kiss. My trip to Rapid Bay with him had been so perfect, and even now, I still struggled to believe he’d gone to so much effort for our first date.

I tried my best not to think about that day, that moment. How it had felt like the world stopped when Noah looked in my eyes, and how I’d wanted our kiss to last forever. The feel of the sand under my feet and the light breeze against my face caused the memories to flow through me.

I didn’t want to miss Noah. I didn’t want to think about him at all. But standing in the place where I’d first accepted my feelings for him, just

weeks ago, made it so much harder to pretend they were truly gone.

I wasn't listening as the girls kept happily chatting. Both were completely oblivious to the inner turmoil I felt. I continued walking alongside them, listening to the ocean crashing against the beach, and tried my best to erase the memories of Noah like the waves washed away the footprints we left behind us.

I was finally beginning to put him from my mind when I saw a figure jogging toward us. The girl must have been running from the other end of the beach, but I had only just noticed her. As she neared us, she came to a sudden stop, and my gaze instinctively drifted to look at her. When I saw her face, I too became frozen in place. Recognition flared in her eyes, and my insides began to churn.

"Nina." Her name tumbled from my lips unbidden, but she was standing far enough away she couldn't have heard.

She looked so shocked to see me, but there was clear sadness in her eyes that couldn't be faked. She was the last person I wanted to see while I was in town, and I could think of nothing worse than having to talk with her.

"Did you say something, Isobel?" Anna asked. She and Cress had stopped a couple of steps in front of me and were looking back.

I tore my gaze from the girl who was once my best friend. The girl who had betrayed me and stolen my boyfriend. The girl who had made the thought of running away from Rapid Bay so appealing.

"We should head back for lunch," I said.

Anna and Cress looked slightly confused, so I stepped forward and took them both by the arm, steering them back the way we'd come before they could ask any questions.

"Come on, let's go," I said. "I don't want to be late. I told you something crazy always seems to happen during my mom's Thanksgiving lunches. You won't want to miss a moment."

The girls followed without protest, but I was sure they were surprised by my sudden urgency to get home. I was worried Nina might come after me. She might want to talk. I had no idea what I'd say to her or what she'd say to me. But either way, I couldn't imagine it would be a pleasant experience. Thankfully, she let me walk away without saying a word.

I just hoped seeing Nina wasn't a sign I was going to be the center of this year's Thanksgiving drama.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

My mom's Thanksgiving meal was just as frantic and chaotic as always. The café tables were all drawn together to form one long dining table, and mountains of food were laid out on top of it. As well as me, my friends, and my family, Norma was there along with some of the café staff and their families. There were also a few of our loyal regulars, like Norma's not-so-secret crush, Frank.

Her cheeks turned a shade of bright red I thought was only reserved for cars when he came in through the front doors. She'd been in love with him for as long as I could remember, but Frank, of course, had no clue. My mom intentionally sat them next to each other. I wasn't sure why she thought one lunch would make a difference. Frank and Norma saw each other every day, and nothing had happened yet.

My mom sat next to my dad, and I was on his other side. I had been anxious about what my friends would think of Rapid Bay and equally unsure how my father would react to seeing my home life. But having him here with us felt surprisingly natural. He seemed more relaxed and content than I'd ever seen him, and I felt a little sad we'd missed his presence all these years.

When it was time to go around the table and say what we were thankful for, Mom invited Matthew to go first.

"Family," he said, smiling nervously at my mom and me. The word caused a lump to form in my throat, and I returned his smile. I found I couldn't hold his gaze for very long though. Our relationship had come such a long way since the first day when I'd stormed out of his office and

told him I wanted nothing to do with him. Back then, I never could have pictured him sitting between me and my mom at Thanksgiving lunch.

Now it felt like he was here to stay, but a small part of me was also aware he'd come into my life so quickly, and he could leave just as fast. I didn't want to go through that. And I didn't want my mom to experience it for a second time.

"Agreed," my mom said, also returning Matthew's smile. Their eyes locked for several long seconds before she quickly glanced away to continue. "I'm especially thankful to have my daughter home and all of you here with us today."

"Well, I'm thankful to be here," I said. I wasn't sure what else to say. I was too distracted by the way my mom and dad kept smiling at each other. But eventually, I managed to turn to Cress, who was sitting beside me.

"What about you, Cress?"

"Friends," she replied, grinning at Anna and me. "Both new and old."

"Oh," Anna said, a look of mock surprise on her face. "I thought you'd be thankful for a future filled with *many pleasures*. I know I am."

"Anna," Cress hissed, but Norma burst out laughing from the other side of the table.

"I second that," she chuckled.

The rest of the table looked on in confusion as Cress's cheeks grew pinker by the second. Most people around the table seemed to be waiting for an explanation, but luckily my mom started speaking before Anna could tell everyone about Norma's prediction for Cress's love life.

"How about you, Frank?" she asked. "What are you thankful for."

"I'm thankful you guys have the best coffee in town," he said with a soft smile. "I don't know what I'd do without it."

"You say that every year," Norma gently chided him.

"Well, it's true!" he replied

Once everyone had their turn, it was finally time to get stuck into the feast my mom had prepared. As I piled food onto my plate, I began to regret having such a large breakfast. An amateur mistake. My mom's Thanksgiving food was so good I wanted to try a bit of everything. I just hoped I didn't get full too fast.

"How was the beach, girls?" my mom asked.

"It was beautiful," Cress replied. "I just wish the weather was nice enough so we could swim while we're here."

“At least it’s not as cold as it is back in Weybridge,” Anna said. “I think it’s going to snow there early this year.”

I repressed a shudder at the thought. I couldn’t remember the last time it had snowed in Rapid Bay, so I wasn’t sure how I was going to handle winter in Weybridge if it was cold enough to be a regular occurrence there.

“You’ll both have to come back in the summer,” Mom said. “It’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, we’d really like that,” Cress replied. “Does it snow here in Rapid Bay?”

“Rarely,” Mom said. “It never really gets quite cold enough.”

“Still too cold for my old bones in winter,” Frank said. “I’m beginning to wonder if I need to move further south.”

Norma gasped and her fork clattered to her plate. “What do you mean?”

Frank returned her shocked stare with a shrug.

“I’m just saying I’ve considered it. My holiday in Florida a few weeks back sure was convincing.”

“You’ve been thinking about moving away?”

All eyes at the table were on Norma. Her face had paled, and her hands grasped the arms of her chair tightly. Frank seemed oblivious to the alarm in her voice. He also didn’t seem to notice how the entire table was watching, waiting for his response.

“I haven’t made any plans,” he said calmly as he lifted his fork to take a bite of turkey. “I just think it would be nice to be somewhere warmer.”

“Warmer? But it’s plenty warm here,” Norma protested.

“Maybe for now, but I’m not getting any younger, and my arthritis always plays up in the winter. I think year-round sunshine would do me good.”

“So, what? You’re just going to leave me…uh, I mean, us?” Norma seemed to be freaking out, and I had a feeling Anna’s comment earlier about Frank potentially moving on had gotten to her.

Frank lowered his fork to the table. He was looking at Norma, a hint of concern now on his face. “Like I said, I’m not going anywhere yet.”

“Yet,” she repeated. “*Yet*. So now we just have to sit and wait with this dark cloud hanging over our heads…”

Frank opened his mouth to respond, but Norma cut him off before he had a chance.

“You can’t leave me. You just can’t.”

“Norma…” He tried to console her, but she was too worked up.

“Damn it, Frank, can’t you see I’m in love with you?” she gasped.

The whole table remained still and silent, and neither Frank nor Norma seemed to notice there was anyone else in the room. I couldn’t believe she’d finally laid her feelings for him bare like that. Given Frank’s blank and completely shocked expression, it was a surprise to him too.

Norma looked ready to storm off, but Frank reached out and grabbed her hands.

“Norma, darlin’, can’t you tell I’ve been in love with you since the day I met you?” he replied.

“What?” She sounded breathless, and she kept opening and closing her mouth as she struggled to form a response. It must have been the first time in her life she’d been close to speechless.

Frank slowly stood from his chair, still holding Norma’s hands. “The coffee isn’t the only reason I come here every day. Norma, I love you.”

“Oh, you fool,” she said. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t know whether you’d feel the same way.”

“Well, now you do. Frank, I love you too.”

A second later they stepped into each other’s arms and kissed.

The table erupted with cheers and whistles, but the two of them still barely noticed us as they lost themselves in a kiss years in the making. It was impossible not to be overwhelmed with joy at the sight of the pair finally together. I turned to look at my mom, and she winked at me as she clapped along.

“Wow, I guess you were right about your mom’s turkey,” Cress murmured to me.

“Yeah, looks like it’s struck its magic again,” I agreed.

“If that’s how powerful it is, I need seconds,” Anna said, reaching out to grab the turkey platter and slide it closer to her plate.

Norma and Frank eventually pulled themselves apart and laughed when they finally realized the whole room was watching and applauding them. They nervously took their seats and focused on their meals, but as we all continued eating, I noticed they were sitting a little closer to each other, and I suspected they were holding hands under the table.

Once it looked like everyone had finished, my mom stood up. “Right, I think it’s time for dessert,” she announced. “Could you give me a hand, Iz?”

“Sure.” I stood up and went to follow her to the kitchen, but when I looked at my mom, her eyes were focused on something behind me.

“Uh, Isobel,” she said. “Look.”

She nodded past me, and I glanced over my shoulder to look out the window. Through the glass, I could see Nina. She was standing on the sidewalk, looking into the café.

The blood drained from my skin at the sight of her. She looked nervous and instinctively glanced away when my eyes met hers, but then she turned back to meet my gaze and slowly raised a hand to wave. The last time I’d seen her at the café, she had waltzed in with my ex-boyfriend on her arm and her head held high. Today was different. She was alone, and her expression was much gentler. There was no sign she was looking for a confrontation similar to last time, but I got the sense she was here to talk. Maybe Mom’s crazy turkey magic hadn’t run its course yet.

“I’ll just be a minute, Mom,” I said before I slowly walked outside to meet Nina.

“You’re home,” she said as I stepped onto the sidewalk. She was still standing in the same spot, but now she was facing the entrance to the café. I stayed close to the door, a few feet away from her with my arms folded.

Nina had always been so sure of herself and confident to the point where it often came across as patronizing. But as I looked at her now, I could see none of that conviction. Her head was hung low, and her shoulders were slumped, like something heavy was weighing them down. She scuffed one shoe against the concrete as she waited for my response.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I couldn’t miss Thanksgiving.”

She nodded. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be coming back, but I hoped.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been meaning to call you or text you, but I just didn’t know if you’d answer,” she continued. “Then when I saw you on the beach this morning, I was too shocked to say anything, but, well, I couldn’t let you leave without talking to you.”

I frowned and shook my head, rubbing my hands across my arms to try to combat the sudden chill of the wind. It had been so cozy inside the café, but the sun had just crept behind a cloud, taking its warmth with it.

“I’m surprised to hear that,” I said. “I didn’t think you cared about me anymore.” She’d more than proven that when she stole my boyfriend. The last I’d heard from Norma, Nina and Levi had ended things, but that didn’t

change the fact Nina hadn't cared enough about me as a friend in the first place.

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Nina let out a long breath. "You don't realize how much something meant to you until it's gone."

She took a step toward me. There was a more determined look in her eyes now, like she was intent on taking this opportunity to say whatever it was she needed to say.

"Iz, when you left, I fell apart," she said. "I know I was horrible to you, and I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I was wrong. I thought I was in love. I got caught up in the moment. But everything with Levi was a big mistake. It didn't take me long to realize I'd messed up. I've been desperate to tell you how sorry I am, and I've been wishing and hoping you'd come back home so I could tell you just how badly I miss our friendship."

Nina's emotion was clear as she spoke. She was rambling and nervous; nothing like the brazen girl I'd once been friends with. I didn't doubt the legitimacy of her words, and I knew she was being sincere. That didn't make it any easier to forgive her.

As I stared at her though, I was surprised to find the memory of what Nina and Levi had done to me was no longer an open wound in my heart. It had long scabbed over, and all that was left was the faintest of scars. Nina had been a terrible friend, but I didn't feel the same anger toward her that I once had.

"I'm not sure we can ever be friends again, Nina," I said. "Not like we once were."

She nodded, and her gaze fell back to the floor as she continued to brush her feet across the ground. "Yeah, of course," she said. "I understand. That's all I came here to say. I guess I'll see you around, Iz."

She went to leave, but I shocked myself by calling out to stop her. "Nina, wait."

She stopped and turned back to look at me. I wasn't sure I could forgive her, but I knew I couldn't watch her walk away like this after she'd just apologized. We'd once been so close, and while I'd moved on from my disastrous relationship with Levi, accepted what happened, and was feeling stronger for it, Nina was clearly still hurting. She and I didn't have to be best friends, but we didn't have to be enemies either.

“My mom’s about to bring out her pumpkin pie,” I said. “Do you want to come in for a slice?”

“Really?” Surprise lit her eyes.

“Yeah.” I felt a little more certain as I responded. This trip home had made me realize that leaving Rapid Bay had helped me grow, but could I truly be doing that if I was leaving such a big part of my life here unresolved?

“I’d love that,” she said, a small, optimistic smile forming on her lips. “Do you think your mom’s nailed the recipe this year?”

“Oh, I’m sure she has,” I replied. “But I’m also sure she’ll still be working on it next year.”

I opened the door to the café and walked inside with Nina at my side before pulling up a chair so she could sit beside me.

“Seriously,” Anna said to my mom, who had brought out the pie and was busy slicing it up. “Where do I get a magic turkey from?”

As Mom passed around the pie, I introduced Nina to Cress, Anna, and my dad. Understandably, she was especially surprised to meet Matthew, considering I didn’t have a father last time we’d seen each other. I could tell she was bursting with questions, but she still seemed a little apprehensive, so she didn’t pry. Instead, she asked me about my new school and filled me in on the latest gossip from Rapid Bay High. It felt strange to have her sitting here sharing Thanksgiving with us after everything that had happened, but it also felt right. I was glad I’d decided to let go of the past. It made me feel like it was easier to start building a new and improved future.

Lunch continued for hours. After dessert, there were more drinks and coffee and talking, and night was beginning to descend by the time everyone started heading home. I walked Nina out and gave her a hug goodbye. She looked much happier than when I’d first seen her looking through the window, and she smiled brightly as she walked off down the street, her shoulders seeming significantly lighter. We’d repaired a little of the rift between us, and I had to admit I felt somewhat lighter myself.

As I watched her go, I heard the door to the café open behind me.

“You should be very proud of yourself,” my father said as he stepped out to stand beside me.

“Should I?” I didn’t think he knew about what had happened between Nina and I, so I wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

“Of course.” He nodded and looked down at me. “You’ve been through a lot recently, and you’ve done it with such grace and maturity. It can’t have been easy.”

He was right. It hadn’t been easy. But I just shrugged. “I guess so.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Well, I hope you know how proud your mother is of you. And how proud I am. I’m very happy to have been here with you both today.”

“Thanks.” I glanced up at him and smiled. “It was nice having you here. How long can you stay?”

“I’m afraid I have to leave tonight. I was hoping to stay for the weekend, but I received a call about an hour ago. Something’s come up with work. I’ve got to be back in the city for an early meeting tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay.” I was slightly disappointed, but I understood.

“How are you getting on at school?

“School’s fine,” I replied. “It’s been busy.”

"Have you given much thought to your college applications?”

The question caught me by surprise, but it probably shouldn’t have. Everyone around me was working hard on their applications and some kids had already finished them. Deadlines were coming up in the new year, and I knew I was running out of time. I *should* have been giving a lot of thought to college applications, but every time I went to work on them, I seemed to freeze up.

“Uh, not really,” I admitted.

“Because I’m happy to organize someone to help you with your applications if you need.”

“Thanks, but it’s not just the applications I’m worried about,” I murmured.

“Then what is it? You don’t know where you want to go?”

“Sure, that too, but…”

Matthew’s eyes weighed my expression. “Isobel, my offer to pay for your college degree still stands. It always will. And it’s meant to help you, not hinder you.”

I nodded, but Matthew seemed to sense I still wasn’t wholly on board.

“You don’t have to accept my offer,” he continued. “Your future is yours to shape. I’ll support you however I can. Whether that’s financially or with any connections that I have. And if all you want is a bit of advice or someone to talk to about it, then that’s okay too.”

I studied my father as he spoke. He was barely recognizable from the man who I'd first met in his office at his Weybridge mansion. The man who had spoken about the expectation that came with the LaFleur name. It had felt like he was trying to change me before he even knew me. But now he was being supportive and nurturing as though what I wanted was now the most important thing.

He was doing his best to help me, so I felt like I should be honest. "I just feel guilty letting you pay for college for me," I admitted.

He let out a soft laugh. "I probably shouldn't be surprised. You are your mother's daughter."

"Apparently so," I muttered. Mom was proud to a fault, and it seemed I'd taken right after her. "It's not just that though," I continued. "I always wanted to go to college, but a part of me knew it would never happen. I even killed the idea completely last year. But now that it's a possibility again, I don't feel prepared. I'm worried I'm going to make the wrong choice. And I'd be even more worried about that if I took your money to do it."

He nodded and gave me an understanding smile. "No choice is the wrong choice," he replied. "You don't need to have it all figured out right now. Everything will work out in the end. I know it did for me, and I changed schools halfway through my first year."

"Really?"

He nodded. "So, believe me, you'll figure it out along the way."

The tightness in my chest seemed to loosen at his words. In my head, everything about college had been in absolutes. It felt like such a big deal. But Matthew's words had relieved some of the pressure. He made me feel as though, even if I didn't accept his offer to help, I wouldn't let him down. I wouldn't let myself down.

"Look, why don't you keep working on your applications and do a bit of research on a few colleges. We can discuss them the next time we talk, and you have nothing to lose by applying."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "I think I can do that."

"Good." He smiled, but then his expression sobered somewhat. "While we're speaking of your future, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Okay…"

“It’s about my company.” His voice sounded more serious, and I got the feeling this wasn’t going to be a straightforward conversation. “I know you told me when we first met that you don’t want me to map out your life and that you’re not interested in The LaFleur Corporation. And if that’s what you want, I fully support you. But I wondered if any of that has changed since we first spoke.”

“To be honest, I haven’t thought about it.”

“Do you still feel as strongly about not being a part of the company as you once did?” he asked.

“No, not really,” I murmured. “I mean, I don’t feel as strongly against it as I was then. But I also don’t feel strongly for it either. I always pictured a future in medicine, but I don’t know exactly what that looks like.”

“I understand.” He pursed his lips as he processed what I’d said.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m making some changes,” he replied. He ran a hand through his hair and blew out a breath, like just thinking about it exhausted him. “I’m considering taking a step back from the company in the next few years, and I need to determine what the future of The LaFleur Corporation looks like,” he continued. “There are some decisions I need to make in preparation for that. And the choices I make now may affect you if you ever decided you did want to follow in my footsteps.”

“Right.” It was nice Matthew was considering me in his decisions, but I’d always expected I’d have to build my own future from the ground up. I’d never imagined I’d be handed an entire company. I didn’t know if I’d ever have the skills to do what Matthew did or whether it was something I even wanted.

“I don’t even know where I want to go to college next year, let alone what I want to do with my life,” I said. “You should do what’s best for you and The LaFleur Corporation. Don’t worry about me. If your decisions now mean I might not have a future there, then I’m not going to hold that against you.”

“You will always have a future there,” he murmured. “But, thank you. I didn’t want to make any decisions without consulting you.”

I thought he’d be relieved I was making his job easier for him, but from the look in his eyes, I could see he was still feeling torn about whatever decisions he needed to make. “So, what’s brought this on?” I asked. “Why are you looking to make changes now?”

“An opportunity presented itself,” he replied. “And I’d be unwise to ignore it.”

“But are you really thinking of taking a step back so soon? I thought you’d only been running the company a few years.”

“I have, but over these last few months, I’ve begun to reevaluate my priorities. I have more in my life now than I did when I first started working for my father. I don’t want to spend all my time working myself into the ground. I still want to be a part of The LaFleur Corporation, but I don’t want it sucking the life out of me anymore.”

“But you’ve always talked about the LaFleur family’s legacy.”

“I did, yes, but *someone* made me realize that family is more important than any legacy will be…” From the way he was looking into my eyes, I knew he was talking about me. He wanted to take a step back because of me.

“There was one other thing I wanted to ask you,” he said.

“Oh, man,” I let out an exaggerated gasp. “You’ve already grilled me on my college and career plans. I hope we’re not covering marriage and kids next?”

“No, no,” he chuckled. “Nothing like that. There’s an event in New York coming up, and I was hoping you’d join me for it.”

My cheeks warmed. “An event? What kind of event?”

“Just something I have to go to for work,” he said with a wince. “It’s in a few weeks, and by then, I should have made some more concrete decisions about the company, and I’ll be making an announcement. We can spend the rest of the weekend seeing the city. All the Christmas decorations will be up. It’s a really magical time to be in New York. Of course, you’re welcome to say no, but I’d really like for you to be there.”

“No. I mean, yes,” I quickly corrected myself. “I’d love to come see the city in all its Christmas glory.” I felt like I’d only scraped the surface of New York on my last visit, and I couldn’t wait to go back. I liked the thought of spending some more time with my father as well. We seemed to be making more and more progress. It also sounded like it was important to him I was there to hear his announcement about the company, whatever it was.

“Great.” He smiled brightly. “I’ll make the arrangements for you to come.”

“Great.” I agreed.

The bell above the café door chimed, and we turned to see my mom standing in the entrance. She was smiling at us, and I could see how much it meant to her that I was developing a relationship with Matthew. But I wasn't the only one who seemed to be forming an attachment with him. Matthew and my mom had barely looked at anyone else over lunch and had been completely absorbed in conversation with one another.

Even now my father was mirroring my mom's smile. They just seemed so at ease in each other's presence. It was something I hadn't expected. Especially knowing what my mom had been through because of Matthew, however unintentionally, and when I knew how different they were. Still, my heart warmed to see them getting along so well.

"What are you two doing out here?" she asked. "It's getting cold."

"Just talking," I said. "But it is a little cold." I turned to my dad. "Have you got time to come inside for a bit before you go."

He grinned. "I think I've got just enough time for another slice of pumpkin pie."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A long weekend at home was exactly what I'd needed, and when we returned to school on Sunday night, I felt totally recharged for the rest of the semester. At least, as recharged as I could feel when we'd been traveling for hours.

It was late by the time our car pulled up in front of the school, and Anna and Cress were doing their best to stifle yawns. It was after curfew, so there were no other students about, and the school felt oddly empty as we made our way back to the girls' dorm.

"I'm going to sleep so well tonight," Anna said as she lugged her two suitcases behind her.

I was tired, but at the same time, I felt wide-awake. I was excited to be back at school, mainly because I couldn't wait to see Wes again. Last night he'd sent me pictures of him wearing his tuxedo at his family's gala. He'd looked so incredibly hot. I hadn't stopped thinking about him ever since.

"Do you think I'd get in trouble if I snuck over to see Wes?" I asked.

"Probably," Cress replied. "Lisa usually checks students in when they return from weekends away, and you know they've been cracking down on curfew since the pranks."

My shoulders slouched in disappointment. "Yeah, I really don't want to clean the boys' bathroom."

"We could cover for you though," Anna suggested. "You'd have to be quick, but we could tell her you needed to run back to the car for something."

"That could work," I said.

“You’d have to be *super* quick,” Cress added. “And even then, she might be a hard ass…”

I glanced toward the boys’ dorm. “I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I said with a grin. Right now, seeing Wes felt like it was worth the risk. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

Cress took my duffel bag for me, and I started over to the boys’ dorm at a jog, taking out my phone to call Wes as I went.

"Isobel?” He sounded sleepy as he answered, and I had a feeling I’d woken him up. It was close to midnight, but he’d been texting me on the drive back to school, so I’d thought he’d be awake.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“No, I wasn’t asleep,” he said. “What’s up?”

I still wasn’t sure if I believed him. “I just got back to school. I was going to see if you wanted to sneak out front to meet up quickly.”

“You’re back now?”

“Yeah. I’m just coming across the courtyard. But if you’re in bed, we can just see each other tomorrow.”

“No, no. I’ll come down.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, you have to be quick though. The girls are covering for me with Lisa.”

I could hear movement in the background. “I’ll be right there.”

He hung up the phone just as I reached the entrance to the boys’ dorm. I waited in the shadow of the building, pacing as the seconds dragged by and there was still no sign of Wes. I‘d only been a couple of minutes, and already the girls were messaging me.

ANNA: Lisa bought it. You have maybe five minutes. Tops!!!

Cress: Hurry!!

I RELEASED a breath and glanced over at the door. I hoped Wes wasn’t far off because we really didn’t have long. He had his own dorm dad he’d have to sneak past, so there was a chance he might not make it at all.

Another minute went by, and finally the door creaked opened as Wes stepped outside. He was dressed in a pair of checkered pajama bottoms with

a dark Henley that stretched across his muscles, and his hair was mussed with sleep. He looked just as hot now as he did in the photo he'd sent of him wearing a tuxedo—maybe better.

A wide smile lit up his features as he spotted me, and he closed the distance between us with long, powerful strides.

He grabbed me up in his arms, and I sank happily into his embrace. We'd only been apart a few days, but it felt like much longer. I was so at ease in his arms and knew this was exactly where I was supposed to be—curfew or not.

"I missed you," he said.

"Me too. I didn't want to go another night without seeing you."

I lifted my lips to his, and he pulled me close, pressing our bodies together as he deepened the kiss. It was filled with passion and yearning; it was the kind of kiss you could lose yourself in. If this was the way Wes kissed me when we'd been parted for a few days, maybe I needed to spend some more time away from him.

"You're never going away without me again," he said as we finally separated.

I laughed and slowly pulled back a little so I could look him in the eyes. "I was just thinking the opposite. You're an extra enthusiastic kisser when we've been apart."

Wes rolled his eyes. "I'm always enthusiastic."

"I did say *extra*," I replied with a smile. "How was your weekend?"

"Dull until this moment."

I raised an eyebrow. "You were at your parents' party last night. I'm sure that was far from dull."

"It was the dullest party of my life without you there."

I laughed and glanced down at my phone. There were several new messages from Cress and Anna. I didn't need to open them to know they would be telling me to hurry up. I could have stayed out in the courtyard with Wes all night, but I knew I needed to get back or I'd be in trouble.

I lifted my eyes back to Wes. "Cress and Anna are probably getting worried. I should go."

"Okay, good luck with Lisa. I'll see you in the morning."

He leaned down and pressed another kiss to my lips, which I struggled to pull myself away from.

“See you in the morning,” I said before I turned and hurried off in the direction of the girls’ building.

As I barreled through the entrance, I came to a screeching halt. Lisa was waiting for me in the front foyer. She was dressed casually, and her eyebrows were raised as she looked me over.

“Sorry, I had to go back to the car,” I said, trying to calm my puffing breaths.

Cress and Anna were nowhere to be seen, so I was guessing they were already back in their rooms.

“I’ve been told,” she replied, folding her arms as she looked me over. “What did you need to go back to the car for?”

“Uhh…” I paused as I realized I hadn’t actually brought anything with me. Cress had my duffel bag, and my hands were empty. “I went to get my bag, but I forgot to take the car keys.” It was worth a shot.

“You didn’t take a detour via the boys’ dormitory?”

“Um, of course not.”

“Because I just received a call from Adam to say that one of the boys was found sneaking outside.”

I could feel the blood draining from my skin, and I wanted to swear. I felt so stupid. I’d gotten Wes in trouble too.

“Wesley Montfort,” Lisa continued. “I believe you are friends with him?”

I grimaced, knowing there was no way out of this. “I just wanted to see him for five minutes,” I said, the words spewing out of me in a rush. “We haven’t seen each other in days. I—”

Lisa lifted a hand to stop me. I was somewhat grateful because I didn’t think my word vomit was doing me any favors.

“Isobel, you had permission to arrive back at school after curfew tonight on the condition you made your way straight to your rooms, not the boys’ dorm.”

“I know,” I replied, my whole body sinking. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll attend detention this Friday night, and your privileges to leave school grounds are suspended until next week.”

“But, Lisa—”

She shook her head, cutting me off. “I’m sorry, Isobel, but rules are rules. And with the pranks that have been taking place in the middle of the

night recently, we won't be making any exceptions. I don't care who your father is."

I released a breath and slowly nodded. I hadn't been planning to play the father card. Did she really think I was that entitled? Or was that just the way she expected all students at Weybridge to respond when they were given detention?

I'd never had a detention in my life, but in the grand scheme of things, it wasn't so bad. At least she wasn't expecting me to clean the boys' bathrooms like she'd threatened everyone in the dorm just a few weeks ago.

"Now, off to bed with you." Her tone was stern and left no room for further discussion. I left quickly before she could reconsider my punishment.

Cress was sitting on the edge of her bed when I arrived. She took one look at me and let out a sigh. "Oh no, you got in trouble, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Grounded until next week, and detention on Friday."

"That sucks. I told you to be quick."

"I was, but Wes took a while to come out." I blushed. "He got caught too. I should probably check he's okay." I pulled out my phone to see he'd already sent me a text.

Wes: So, I might have gotten caught. It was totally worth it though. Want to sneak out again?

I LAUGHED and quickly texted him back.

Me: No!!!! Are you crazy?

Wes: Crazy for you.

Me: Ha, ha. Very funny. I got caught too. I'm grounded till next week and have detention on Friday.

Wes: Same, but I have a meeting with my rowing coach Friday after school, so my detention is Saturday morning. Still worth it.

"YOU LOOK VERY happy for someone who just got detention," Cress said, noticing my smile as I looked at my phone.

“Wes is so sweet,” I replied. “And his kisses were definitely worthy of detention.”

“That good?”

“I guess what they say about absence making the heart grow fonder is true.”

Cress looked thoughtful and then smiled. “If that’s the case, maybe I should sneak out and find Kaden.”

“Maybe.” I laughed as I started to get ready for bed.

“Oh, man, there’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep now.” Cress sighed.

“Yeah, me neither.”

CRESS and I stayed up late chatting, so it wasn’t all that surprising when Anna burst into our room the following morning and we’d both slept through our alarms.

“You guys aren’t up yet?” Anna asked with surprise. She walked over and threw open the curtain.

“Neither of us could get to sleep,” I said, pushing down a groan as sunlight filtered into the room, while Cress threw her pillow over her face. I must have been truly exhausted because it was rare for me to sleep much past sunrise. It had been a busy weekend though, and the excitement of last night probably hadn’t helped.

Anna didn’t seem to be listening as she came and sat on my bed beside me, pulling out her phone. “Now, don’t freak out, but there’s something you need to see…”

“Okay…” Her voice was serious, and I suddenly felt more awake. “Why do I feel like you’re about to deliver bad news?”

She winced slightly, and her hand seemed to clutch her phone a little tighter. “There’s a picture of Wes at his parents’ charity gala in the society pages.”

“And…?”

She gave me a tense smile before she continued. “And he’s with his ex.”

She turned the phone so I could see the screen. I had to blink my tired eyes several times to be sure I wasn’t imagining it. I was looking at a photo of Wes dressed in his tuxedo, and he was standing next to the most gorgeous girl I’d ever seen. She had long dark hair falling over her shoulders and was wearing a stunning green sparkly dress. Her brown eyes

were glancing up at Wes, and he appeared to be laughing at something she'd said. His arm was lightly wrapped around her back, and they looked every bit a happy and glamourous couple.

"Are you sure that's her?" I asked, swallowing as I tried to calm the nerves building in my stomach.

"Yeah, that's Sarah," Cress said. She'd moved off her bed and was peering over my shoulder at Anna's phone. "But maybe that's Sawyer with her." She said it more with hope than confidence.

"No, it's definitely Wes," I replied, and Anna nodded in agreement.

I swallowed again. "I know you said not to freak out, Anna, but I'm finding that a little hard right now. They look so…" I paused as I searched for the word that best described how perfect Wes and Sarah looked in the photo. "They look so *together."* The word I'd landed on stung my mouth as I said it.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Cress said, trying to reassure me. "He wouldn't have snuck out to see you last night if something was going on with Sarah."

"And he wouldn't have been constantly calling and texting you the whole weekend either," Anna added.

"No," I agreed. But then my doubts took over, and I started to speculate. "Unless he felt guilty about something…" I placed my head in my hands. This was not the news I wanted to wake up to. Especially not when things with Wes had felt so good before I fell asleep last night.

"I'm sure it's not that," Cress said.

I didn't share her optimism. "Then why didn't he tell me he saw her?" I asked. "We've been in touch all weekend, and we saw each other last night. He could have said something if he wanted to."

Neither girl had an answer for me.

I tried my best to ignore the churning in my gut as I got ready for school. I looked at myself in the mirror as I put on my makeup and told myself there was no reason to get upset. There was probably nothing to worry about. I trusted Wes completely, and he deserved the benefit of the doubt. But the more I thought about it, the worse my anxiety became. I'd trusted Levi, and that had come back to bite me. Everything had been perfect with Noah, and then something totally unexpected had blown it to pieces. History was not on my side here.

I tried to shake the photo from my mind as Cress and I made our way to breakfast, but my uneasiness rushed right back to me when I saw Wes

coming out of the boys' dorm. His face lit up when he saw me, and he made a beeline for us. But I struggled to form a smile in response. I knew the only way to stop my worrying was to talk to Wes about it. But the thought of that just made me even more nervous.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said when he reached us.

He went to give me a kiss on the cheek, but I couldn't seem to contain all the anxiety I'd been bottling up. "Can we talk?"

Wes froze, and his brow puckered as he pulled back to look at me. "Uh, yeah…"

He was clearly confused, which didn't make this any easier. Was he simply playing dumb, or did he really not know why I was upset?

"Uh, I'll leave you guys to it," Cress said before hurrying away. I didn't blame her for running—if I could have run from this situation, I would have. But there was no avoiding it. I needed to know the truth.

"What's wrong?" he slowly asked.

"Is there something going on with you and your ex-girlfriend?" I wished I'd sounded more rational. I hadn't planned to accuse him of anything, but my emotions had gotten the better of me. It was hard not to imagine the worst when every other relationship I'd been in had failed so dramatically.

"No, of course, there's nothing going on," Wes said. "Why would you even think that?"

"Because of this." I pulled out my phone and showed him the picture of him and Sarah that Anna had sent me.

Wes's frown grew more pronounced as he stared at the picture. He didn't say anything for a few seconds, but it felt like an age, which really didn't help my anxiety.

"Well?"

"Sarah was at the gala on Saturday night," he said, finally looking back at me. "But we barely spoke."

"Wes, it looks like she was your date."

"Of course, she wasn't," he replied before stepping closer to me and taking my hands in his. "Look, her family works closely with my parents on this charity. She was always going to be there. It would have been rude of me to completely ignore her. And there were photographers doing the rounds all night."

I stared at him as I allowed his words to sink in. What he was saying made total sense, but I still couldn't ignore the way he and Sarah were

looking at each other in the photo. How happy they seemed. “You don’t still have feelings for her? You don’t want to get back together with her?”

“Isobel, I’m with you. Getting back with Sarah never even crossed my mind.” He clasped my hands a little tighter. “I would never do anything to hurt you,” he said. “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

As I looked into his eyes, I knew he was telling the truth. Wes was too kindhearted, and I honestly couldn’t picture him cheating on me. Even if he did, I couldn’t imagine he would lie about it on top of that.

“Sorry.” I shook my head. “It’s just hard for me not to jump to conclusions. You know I’ve been cheated on before.”

“I know,” he said. “And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I saw Sarah. I just didn’t think to say anything because we barely spoke.”

“What was it like seeing her?” I asked, my voice far quieter than I’d intended. My nerves were obviously still simmering. “Did you feel—”

“I honestly felt nothing,” he said. “She felt like a stranger to me. Being with you has only made me realize how much better we are for each other. Sarah and I were never going to work. I know now that I’d been holding on to the relationship when it had died a long time ago.”

I let him pull me into a hug. If I’d seen Levi over Thanksgiving, I probably would have felt the same. I hated I’d questioned Wes and that I’d so quickly jumped to the wrong conclusion. I knew I could trust him, and yet my gut hadn’t wanted to listen. Still, I was glad we’d talked about it even if I was a little disappointed by the way I’d reacted.

The whole situation made me think about Norma’s prediction for me. She had told me to trust my heart, and while I might not believe in her psychic powers, I did believe she knew what I needed to hear. She’d seen my breakup with Levi and heard all about how things with Noah ended. Maybe she was trying to encourage me to be open to love again. And Wes was the perfect guy. Exactly the kind of guy I needed. I wanted to trust him with all my heart—but why was that so much easier said than done?

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It had been a stressful morning, and my day didn't get much better as it progressed. A few girls made snide comments about my boyfriend being pictured in the paper with his ex-girlfriend, and it made my stomach dip every time.

Sawyer was quick to defend Wes when I saw him at breakfast and wasted no time reassuring me nothing was going on between Sarah and his brother. Anna kept saying she should never have shown me the photo in the first place and that it was no big deal, and Cress also started to dismiss it as nothing to worry about.

I kind of just wanted to forget about it now. I felt silly for reacting the way I did, and I knew Wes was being honest with me about Sarah. Every time someone mentioned it though, the image of him with his arm wrapped around her as they smiled at the camera flashed in my mind. They looked so beautiful together and so comfortable at the extravagant gala under the flashing lights of photographers. I felt like I couldn't compete.

If things couldn't get any worse, I had to face my business management class with Noah after lunch. He was still choosing to sit on the far side of the room, but even that didn't feel far enough away. It was almost like I could sense the way he refused to look at me or even acknowledge my presence. Maybe I was being ridiculous, but it made my skin prickle with irritation.

I had to wonder how someone so set on ignoring you could be so distracting. And even though my focus was on the teacher, I barely heard a

word he said. I only started paying attention when he began to hand out sheets of paper.

“The assignment will be done in pairs,” the teacher said as he walked down the aisles passing out the assignment. I’d completely missed the start of his explanation, but the thought of working with a partner made me want to groan. I was skeptical of group work. There was always the risk someone wouldn’t pull their weight, and in pairs, you were totally reliant on the other person doing their bit.

I felt a little better when I turned to my side and Lily was looking at me hopefully.

“Partners?” she whispered.

“Heck yes.” I nodded with obvious enthusiasm. Lily took her schoolwork very seriously because she was at Weybridge on a scholarship and had to make sure her grades were consistently strong. There was no way she’d slack off and leave me with all the work.

She grinned, apparently as happy with the suggestion as I was. She knew I took my grades seriously too. It seemed we weren’t the only ones with the same idea because the class was filled with whispers as other students tried to pair themselves up.

“Not so fast,” Mr. Brenner said, silencing the class. “I will be organizing the partners.”

Everyone started to grumble in complaint.

“We’ll be pairing up according to surnames.” He didn’t hesitate before he started listing off names. “Abbott, Alcott you’ll be together. Booth and Cooper...”

Nerves fluttered through me as I glanced around the room, trying to recall my classmate’s surnames and predict who I might be paired with. I couldn’t be sure, but there was one thing I did know that had me seriously concerned. Noah’s surname was dangerously close in the alphabet to my own. I could think of nothing worse than being paired with him. How could we work together when he so clearly hated me?

“Grace,” Brenner called out. “And Hastings.”

My stomach dropped through the floor, down three flights, and into the basement of the building. This was my nightmare. I would have preferred a partner who did no work at all over Noah. I couldn’t bring myself to look his way to see his reaction. I knew it wouldn’t be good.

As it turned out, I didn’t need to look at him to know exactly how he felt because he spoke up in front of the whole class.

“That doesn’t work for me,” Noah said.

“Excuse me,” Brenner replied.

“That pairing doesn’t work for me,” Noah repeated. “I think I’d be better off with a different partner.”

The room murmured with gasps and whispers. I could feel every eye in the class fall on me, and my cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment. I knew Noah didn’t want to work with me. I didn’t want to work with him either. But did he really have to call me out in front of the entire class?

“But, sir, I don’t think you fully understand—"

“Mr. Hastings. This is a business management class,” Mr. Brenner cut him off. “In the real world, you won’t always get to choose who you partner with in a professional capacity. If there’s a communication issue, you find a way to make it work.”

Everyone in the class turned to Noah, seemingly holding their breaths as they waited for his response. Noah was set to take over a billion-dollar business empire when he left school. It would look pretty bad if he admitted to the teacher that he couldn’t even handle working with me.

Noah seemed to realize that fact pretty quickly because his eyes hardened, and he grumbled his reply through gritted teeth. “I’m sure I can make it work.”

“Good,” Brenner said before he continued listing the pairings. He then handed out the assignment sheets as he described what was required of us.

“You’ll be creating a proposal for a business you want to start,” he explained. “I want to see a full business plan including all the elements listed on the worksheet. The assignment is due the last day before Christmas break. You may use the rest of this class to get started.”

Lily shared a sympathetic look with me. The partner she’d been assigned was almost as bad as mine. She was stuck with a girl who had spent all semester chatting in class. I doubted the girl had learned a single thing. Still, I would have taken her over Noah any day.

I let out a sigh before glancing over at him. He was looking at his phone, showing no indication he was interested in getting started on the assignment like Brenner wanted. I huffed and turned back to my desk. Other students were already sitting in their pairs and getting down to work

while I stared at the worksheet, refusing to give in to the temptation to hazard another glance in Noah's direction.

After pretending to read through the assignment instructions for what felt like the hundredth time, I knew I was going to have to take the first step if I wanted any chance of ever completing this project. Noah sure as hell wasn't going to come over to me, and I wasn't going to let him prevent me from passing this class.

Drawing a deep breath in, I gathered my things and walked over to his table. I hesitated when I reached him. Noah didn't even pull his eyes from his phone to so much as acknowledge my existence.

"We'll split the work half and half," he said, still refusing to look at me. "I don't care what the business is, so you come up with the idea and do the mission statement. I'll do the rest. You can email me your part when it's done. I'll send the finished proposal to Brenner."

Heat crept up my neck at how easily he dismissed me. I didn't want to spend any time with Noah, but there was no way we could complete this assignment adequately without collaborating. It was like he hadn't even bothered to listen to Brenner explain the task.

"We're supposed to come up with a business proposal together," I said. "It's not as simple as just lumping it all on one document and calling it a day."

"I'm sure you can figure it out."

He still hadn't looked up at me, and I opened my mouth to argue, but the bell rang signaling the end of class. Noah stood up, moved past me, and was out the door before the ringing had even stopped. I stared after him, anger bubbling beneath the surface of my skin. This assignment was the worst thing to happen to me all day, and that was really saying something.



I WAS STILL BRIMMING with annoyance as I made my way to dinner that night. Time and distance from Noah had done nothing to calm me down. I'd been recalling his refusal to work with me over and over in my mind all afternoon. And each time, I only felt more agitated.

"It's been a rough day," I said as I sat down at dinner with my friends. "You guys need to tell me something to cheer me up."

Wes threw me a concerned look, and I could see he was worried I was still upset about the photograph. I quickly explained what had happened.

“I got paired with the worst partner for my business management assignment, so I’m probably going to fail that class.”

“Surely they can’t be that bad,” Anna said. “Who are you with?”

“Noah.” I groaned.

A look of surprise fluttered through Wes’s eyes, but then he started to frown. “How did you end up paired with him?” He cleared his throat after he spoke as though he wasn’t happy with the way the words had come out.

“Brenner picked our partners.”

“Ah, let me guess, he went through the alphabet…” Sawyer said. “He always does that.”

“That’s exactly what he did,” I replied. “I’m beginning to wish I’d changed my surname to LaFleur. Seriously, anyone got some good news?”

Sawyer traded a look with his brother, and the crease on Wes’s forehead diminished slightly. He nodded and Sawyer turned back to us, a wide smile on his face. “I might have just the thing,” he said. “Our parents told us over the weekend that we can have the ski lodge for a few days when we break for Christmas,” he said. “And there’s room enough for a few guests.”

Anna and Cress squealed with excitement. “Really?” they asked in unison.

“Yep.” Sawyer was still grinning. “Time to get your snow gear out of the closet because we’re going to Aspen.”

Anna and Cress squealed again, and I glanced around the table. Everyone had eager looks on their faces. It sounded like good news, but I wasn’t so sure.

“Uh, but I don’t know how to ski,” I murmured.

“Oh, don’t stress about that,” Anna said, waving a hand at me. “I usually spend the whole trip hanging out in the chalet or eating in the amazing restaurants in the village."

“Yeah, skiing’s only part of the trip,” Cress added. “Wes and Sawyer’s chalet is amazing. We stay inside and relax in front of the log fire, watch movies, and drink our body weight in hot chocolate. It’s beautiful there too. You’ll have a blast even if you can’t ski.”

“I’d also be happy to teach you to ski if you like,” Wes added. “But, Cress is right; you don’t have to hit the slopes if you don’t want. It’ll still be fun.”

It sounded pretty great. I was reluctant to miss any time with my mom over the holiday, but I'd be back in Rapid Bay for Christmas, and I was sure she'd understand if I decided to go. Besides, Wes and I struggled to get any privacy at school. Maybe a trip like this was exactly what we needed.

"Okay." I started nodding. "I'll have to check with my mom. But as long as she says yes, then I'd love to come."

Cress and Anna cheered, and Wes gave me a warm smile. Their excitement was beginning to rub off on me now, and I found I was grinning too. I still had finals week to get through before the break, and I'd promised my father I'd start thinking about college applications, but it was definitely nice to have something to look forward to. Especially when that something was snuggling up to Wes by an open fire while it snowed outside. It sounded very romantic.

We continued talking about the trip over dinner, and once we were done, Wes offered to walk me back to my room. We were silent as we left the dining hall, and Wes held my hand and rubbed his thumb lightly across the back of it.

I was still excited about our ski trip, but my enthusiasm was dampened when I saw a couple of girls whispering and nodding in our direction. I let out a sigh, assuming they were still gossiping about the picture in the paper.

Wes seemed to notice them too because he pulled me in a little closer and wrapped his arm around my waist. "I really am sorry about that photograph," he said as he steered me away from the girls.

"I told you earlier it's okay."

"I know," he said. "But when you said you needed cheering up tonight, I felt partly responsible."

I let out a sigh and turned to him. "It just took me by surprise a little bit. You guys were together for such a long time. And you only just broke up."

"I get it," he said. "But I'm not the only one who broke up with their ex recently. At least you don't have to see mine every day."

I was surprised by the slightly defensive tone to his voice, but Wes was right. I knew it was hard for him to see me around Noah, and I could tell he was still thinking about the fact I had to work with him on our business assignment.

"I really didn't have a choice about being paired with Noah," I said.

"I know. It just feels like he's always there."

While I didn’t have to deal with seeing Sarah every day, I still felt like it was a slightly different situation. Noah and I had broken up because of something we could never overcome. And he had a new girlfriend. Sarah’s biggest fault was that she went to a different school. She and Wes didn’t hate each other like me and Noah. I pushed the thought from my mind as quickly as it had popped up though. I didn’t want to compare our circumstances. It didn’t matter what we’d been through; we couldn’t keep letting our ex’s affect us this way.

“Wes, we trust each other, don’t we?” I asked.

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Then there shouldn’t be anything for either of us to worry about, right?

“Right.”

“We both just got out of relationships, but like you said this morning, that should only make it easier for us to realize how much better off we both are now. It shouldn’t make it harder. We can’t let it.”

“You’re right,” he said, smiling at me. “I won’t if you won’t.”

“Deal.”

Wes leaned over me and we kissed, trying to quell any fear the other might still harbor. It made me feel better in the moment, and I hoped it did the same for Wes. But, as soon as we parted ways, a seed of doubt seemed to sprout anew. What if this was going to be harder than I thought?

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The week passed quickly, and it was Friday before I knew it. Despite being confined to the school grounds, I was excited for the weekend. I wasn't, however, looking forward to my detention on Friday evening.

I had to be in the English classroom immediately following the end of the day. When I arrived, the teacher wasn't there yet, but a few students were. I didn't recognize any of them, so they must have been from other classes. I made my way to the desk I usually chose in English, pulled out my laptop, and sat down.

My computer was still booting up when Veronica hurried into the room. I was surprised to see her. She was the last person I expected to run into at detention. She seemed like the type of student who would go straight to her parents and have them get her out of it.

She looked on edge as she entered, and given the way she kept her head down as she crossed the room, I got the feeling she was embarrassed to be here. She was probably worried about how it might affect her image, which was clearly so important to her.

Like me, she seemed instinctively drawn to her usual desk and took the seat right in front of me. She placed her bag on the floor beside her and was fishing something out of it when she glanced up and realized I was sitting behind her.

Her eyes grew wide with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Normally, I would have expected a statement like that to be laced with venom when it came from Veronica, as though she was pointing out that I didn't belong in this school, let alone this classroom. But today it sounded

like a genuine question. It certainly didn't feel like we'd become friends after our strange conversation in the kitchen, but apparently, we were at least on good enough terms to chat in detention.

"Lisa caught me sneaking out after curfew to see Wes."

"Really?" She smirked. "I find it hard to imagine you breaking the rules."

"I'm not a total goody two-shoes." I shook my head. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

I struggled not to lift my eyes to the ceiling. "Why did you get detention?"

"Oh." I could have sworn her cheeks were growing pink. "I got caught with a boy too. They've gotten so strict now."

I lifted my eyebrows. "You mean Noah?

"Right, yeah, Noah." Veronica's reply was abrupt, and she looked away from me. Why hadn't she just said his name the first time? It's not like I didn't know they were dating. She slowly glanced at me, but when she saw I was still frowning at her answer, her eyes darted from mine once again. She was hiding something.

My eyes widened as I realized. "It wasn't Noah?"

"Will you lower your voice?" she hissed, which only confirmed my suspicions.

"You're cheating on Noah?" I asked, more quietly this time.

"No, I'm not cheating on him."

"But you just said—"

"I can't cheat on Noah," she fired back

"What do you mean?"

"I can't cheat on him because we're not—" She paused and started quickly shaking her head. "Look, we're not talking about this. Forget I said that."

"But…"

Before I could say anything else, Veronica gathered her things and moved to sit at a desk on the other side of the room. Moments later, the teacher entered and called us all to attention.

Once we'd all confirmed our attendance, the class fell silent as everyone buried their heads in their work. I was completely distracted though, and I couldn't stop myself from flashing looks in Veronica's direction for the

duration of the hour-long detention. Who had Veronica been caught with? More importantly, what was going on with her and Noah?

It wasn't until after detention that Veronica acknowledged me again. She pulled me aside as we exited the classroom, and she waited for other students to filter past before she spoke.

"You need to forget what we talked about earlier," she said. "You can't say anything to anyone. Especially not Noah."

"Why?"

"You just *can't*." She seemed really stressed out. It was the first time I'd ever seen Veronica lose her cool like this. "Promise me."

She was almost begging me to help. I didn't feel like I owed Veronica anything though. She'd put me through a lot since I'd first arrived at Weybridge. Plus, even though Noah and I weren't exactly on good terms, that didn't mean I wanted to aid Veronica's deception of him.

"If you're cheating on Noah, he probably deserves to know."

"I already told you I'm not cheating." Veronica released an irritated breath. "Look, all I'm asking for is a bit of time. Keep this to yourself until after next weekend and I'll explain. Though it should all become pretty apparent by then."

"What's happening next weekend?"

"Just trust me."

I stared at her, unsure what to do. I definitely didn't trust Veronica, and I didn't want to be involved in whatever she was covering up. But she seemed like she really needed this.

"Please?" she asked. "Can you keep it to yourself?"

"Fine." I shook my head. I couldn't believe I was agreeing. "But if I'm doing you a favor, I want one in return."

She began to frown. "What do you want?"

"I want you to stop calling the scholarship students rude nicknames—especially Lily. You told me you don't have a problem with them, so prove it."

"Done." Veronica didn't even hesitate, and I again wondered what it was she was so desperately trying to hide.

It felt like I was making a deal with the devil, but at least I didn't have to keep quiet forever, and in exchange, Lily would never be called a charity case by Veronica again. "Okay, I really don't like it, but we have a deal."

“Good.” Her whole body seemed to relax. “I better run. I hate being late for dinner. There’s never any dessert left.” She took off without another word, leaving me standing in silence by the classroom door, trying to work out what had just happened.

DINNER WAS DRAWING to a close by the time I arrived. Most of the food at the buffet had already been taken away, and there wasn’t much to choose from as I scrounged for something to put on my plate. I guessed most of my friends had already eaten and left as none of them were sitting at our usual table.

I wasn’t too sure where I should sit, but as I started across the room, Lily caught my eye and waved me over. She was sitting with her roommate, Amber, and Eric from my econ class. We hadn’t spoken since he’d helped me pick my books off the floor after class a few weeks back, but he always gave me a smile when we passed in the corridor.

“Where have you been?” Lily said as I took a seat beside her. “You almost missed dinner.”

“I had detention,” I replied with a groan. “And thanks to detention, I appear to have missed dessert.” I probably should have rushed to the dining hall like Veronica.

“You can have my dessert if you like?” Eric said, pushing his slice of chocolate cake over to me.

“Oh my gosh, I’m not stealing your dessert.”

“Please do,” he said with a soft laugh. “This might be my second slice, and it’s more than I can eat.”

Seeing me hesitate, Lily nudged the plate the rest of the way across the table so it was sitting right in front of me. “He’s not joking. He had a massive slice just before this, so you should take it,” she said.

I lifted me eyes to Eric and smiled. “Thanks.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“So, what did you get detention for?” Amber asked as I took a bite of my food.

I swallowed before I answered. “Breaking curfew. I’m also grounded for the weekend too. It’s just lucky this didn’t happen next weekend because I’m supposed to be meeting my dad in New York then.”

“Lucky,” Lily agreed.

“Or unlucky to get caught in the first place.” Amber laughed. “I heard they’ve been cracking down since the pranks. I swear they never used to care much before.”

“Yeah, Lisa mentioned that when she caught me. I guess they’re keen to stop us from smuggling any more roosters into the dorms in the middle of the night.”

“Well, I for one am fully on board with leaving poor Barry in peace,” Eric said with a laugh. “I’m still catching up on sleep after that wakeup call.”

“You guys deserved it,” Amber said

“Totally.” I gave Eric a playful glare.

“Didn’t you get detention this week too, Eric?” Lily asked.

His gaze skirted away as he nodded. “Uh, yeah, but mine’s tomorrow.”

"You’ll have to say hi to Wes,” I said. “He’s in detention tomorrow for sneaking out with me.”

“Guess Saturday morning detention is for all the cool kids,” Eric joked.

“Are you saying I’m not cool?”

“Oh, I would never.” He laughed.

I poked my tongue out at him, making him smile.

“What did they get you for?” Amber asked him.

He turned to her, and his happy expression dropped.

“You weren’t sneaking out like Wes and Isobel, were you?” Amber added with a light laugh as she nudged her shoulder against his.

“Uh, no.” He rubbed the side of his neck and gave her a tight smile.

“Well, what was it then?” Amber asked. “I can’t picture you talking back to a teacher or submitting an assignment late.”

“No, nothing like that. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” he said with a nervous laugh. “Anyway, I better get moving. I’m supposed to be tutoring tonight.” He finished the last of his glass of water and picked up his empty plate and tray as he stood from the table.

“Thanks for the cake,” I said. “You’ve pretty much made my night.”

He smiled again before saying a hurried goodbye and walking away.

“What’s his rush?” Amber said

“I’m not sure,” Lily replied. “I didn’t know he had tutoring tonight.”

“What do you think his detention was for?” Amber wondered aloud. “His explanation was way too vague. I want details.”

“Beats me,” Lily said. “But I doubt it’s for anything serious. Eric never gets detention. Us scholarship students can’t afford to get into trouble.”

“I didn’t realize Eric was here on a scholarship,” I said. “I only just met him, but he seems really nice. Do you guys usually hang out with him?”

“We do when we can drag him away from his books,” Lily said. “He’s always studying.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” Amber added, smirking at Lily.

Lily rolled her eyes before focusing on me. “How was your detention?”

“It was okay. I got a bit of homework done, but I kept getting distracted.” I managed to refrain from telling the girls why I’d been so distracted, but I couldn’t stop myself from glancing at Noah’s table as I thought of Veronica.

The boys weren’t there tonight, and neither was she. Instead, Veronica was seated one table over with a couple of her friends. It was the first time I’d seen her at her usual table in weeks, but I didn’t read into it too much seeing as Noah wasn’t around for her to be fawning over him.

I couldn’t get our conversation from detention out of my mind, and I wondered again if I was doing the right thing in keeping it quiet. It seemed a small price to pay if it meant she’d leave Lily and the other scholarship students alone, but it didn’t stop me from feeling guilty. Veronica had said she wasn’t cheating, but what if she was lying? And, if she wasn’t lying, then what was really going on with her and Noah. And the most important question of all—how was I supposed to last more than a week without answers?

I turned back to the girls, wondering if there was any way I could gleam a little more information from them.

“Unusual to see Veronica here without Noah,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Do you think there’s trouble in paradise?”

Their faces filled with pity, and I realized they must be thinking I was bringing it up because I was still hung up on Noah.

“I’m only asking out of curiosity,” I quickly added. “I’m completely over Noah.”

Neither of them looked convinced.

“They were sitting together at lunch,” Lily replied, her tone soft as though she were trying not to hurt my feelings.

“Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if things were a little rocky between them,” Amber said with a shrug. “On paper, they’re the perfect couple, but

I’m not sure the romance is there.”

"What do you mean?” I asked.

“She does have a point,” Lily agreed. “Veronica seems to treat Noah like he’s some sort of trophy, and Noah barely even looks her in the eyes. It doesn’t begin to compare to the way he used to look at you.”

“Guys, I told you I’m totally over Noah. You don’t have to say what you think I want to hear.”

“We’re not,” Amber said. “Lily’s spot-on. Anyone else who’d ever witnessed your relationship with Noah would tell you the same thing. His eyes just sparkled when he looked at you, and he always seemed like he was struggling not to smile.”

“Seriously,” Lily added. “We all saw it. It was like he couldn’t imagine something more perfect.”

My heart lurched slightly, but I kept my face neutral so the girls wouldn’t notice my reaction to Lily’s comment. It was sad to think of the way Noah used to look at me. I could so easily picture the way his eyes lit up when he saw me, just as Amber had described. How he so rarely allowed himself to smile until we were alone, and his smile broke free like the sun peeking out from behind a cloud. Seeing those expressions on his face felt like a dream. Things were so different now a part of me felt like I must have imagined them.

“So, do you think they’ll last?” I asked.

Amber shook her head. “Doubtful. Everyone thinks they’re only together because their families are so close.”

“Which is really sad if it’s true,” Lily said.

I nodded because I knew firsthand how hard it was to have a relationship affected by your family, though I couldn’t imagine having to date a guy just because it was what my parents wanted.

“Has Veronica ever dated other guys at school?” I asked.

“Not really,” Lily said, her eyes thoughtful as she considered it. “She’s always just seemed set on Noah. No one else lives up to her expectations.”

I nodded as I reflected on what the girls had told me. Thankfully, they didn’t ask what had prompted my questions. They probably still assumed it was because Noah was my ex.

I left dinner feeling no more or less certain if I was doing the right thing in keeping quiet for Veronica. My conversation with the girls sure hadn’t helped convince me either way. The only thing I seemed to have learned

was that I wasn’t the only one who thought they were a terrible match, which, although reassuring, wasn’t going to help me sleep better at night.

I’d told Veronica I’d keep the information to myself until next weekend though. So, I was just going to have to stick to my word and hope the time passed by fast so I could hear her explanation sooner rather than later.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I found it far easier than I expected to keep Veronica's secret over the next week. Mostly because Noah refused to help me with our business management assignment, so I couldn't have told him even if I wanted to.

I still couldn't believe we'd been paired together, but I was doing my best to approach the whole situation maturely and leave my emotions aside. But every time I tried to talk to him about the assignment, he said we'd discuss it later and walked away. Of course, later never came. I knew we had a few weeks before it was due, but it was frustrating not being able to at least get a start on the project.

I shouldn't have been surprised Noah was avoiding me. He'd made it clear multiple times he wanted nothing to do with me, but the chasm between us only seemed to be growing larger. I wondered if his hatred for me was being fueled every weekend when he went to spend time with his grandfather. Seeing William at Luther's party had reminded me how intensely that man despised me, and I knew how much he influenced his grandson.

There was one moment during the week, however, when I briefly questioned the hostility between Noah and me. Just one. It was Noah's eighteenth birthday on Tuesday, and a cake was organized for him at dinner. He'd barely cracked a smile as they'd placed the cake in front of him. The whole dining hall was singing happy birthday to him, and yet he didn't seem all that pleased. He likely had something much more extravagant planned for his birthday celebrations, so this was probably no more than an inconvenience to him.

But when he lowered his head to blow out his candles, his expression changed. His eyes lifted to mine, and for a moment, something flared between us. There was passion in his gaze, but I couldn't tell whether it came from a place of animosity or somewhere else. Whatever the emotion was, I felt it with such intensity that it briefly took my breath away. His eyes danced with mischief as he lowered his mouth and blew out his candles. The moment was over as soon as those flames had guttered though, and I questioned whether it had happened at all.

I spent the rest of the week counting down the hours until my trip to New York. Matthew had invited me to join him for some work event on Saturday night, and while I wasn't all that excited about the function, I was looking forward to spending time in the city with him.

I was even more excited about the drive to New York. Cress's parents had arrived in the city, and she was visiting them for the weekend, which meant we'd be road-tripping to New York together—Cress driving, of course.

We left straight after school on Friday, and the trip was so much fun. We chatted about our boyfriends, sang along to the Spotify playlist she'd put together for the journey at the top of our voices, and ate so many snacks we were both feeling slightly ill before too long.

When the jagged New York skyline rose up ahead of us, I let out a squeak of delight. I had so many great memories from my last trip to New York. I'd been sightseeing with my friends and had gotten to know my father a little better. And it was the place Wes and I shared our first kiss, which was pretty unforgettable.

My previous trip to the city had also included its fair share of drama and food poisoning—both things I was eager to avoid this time.

"Thanks for driving me," I said as Cress pulled up outside my father's apartment building.

"Anytime," she said, reaching out to give me a tight hug. "Thanks for letting me sing Taylor Swift songs on repeat the whole way here."

"Not a problem."

I climbed out of the car, got my bag from the back, and waved at Cress through the window as she moved off down the street. It was sad to say goodbye even though I'd see her for the drive back on Sunday. I spent every day with Cress, and it felt weird to know she wouldn't be sleeping in the bed next to mine that night.

As I entered the building, the concierge welcomed me and helped me carry my bag to the elevator, which I took to the very top floor. As the doors opened on the penthouse level, I found my father's butler, Caldwell, waiting just inside the entrance.

"Miss Isobel." He greeted me with his familiar condescending drone.

"Caldwell." I smiled back as sweetly as I could. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Good to hear. Is my father—"

I didn't get a chance to finish my question as a high-pitched squeal sounded from inside the apartment.

"Isobel!" My mom dashed toward me and pulled me into her arms.

"Mom?" I gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Surprise!" She squealed again as she stepped out of my grasp. "Matthew invited me to join you both for the weekend. And things are so quiet at the café I couldn't bring myself to say no."

"You're spending the weekend with us?" It was hard to contain my excitement.

"I sure am."

"You actually left the café for a whole weekend for the second time in a month?"

"I did." She sounded so proud of herself, and I had to admit I was proud of her too. It took courage to step away from work when it was your entire livelihood. Mom found it nearly impossible to hand over control to someone else, but she didn't need to worry because I knew Norma would have everything in order while she was gone.

"Hello, Isobel." Matthew appeared in the hallway, a shy smile on his lips.

"Hey, Matthew." My voice was still brimming with joy from the surprise of seeing my mom. "You managed to convince my mom to join us?"

He nodded. "I hope that's okay."

"Of course, it is. I'm excited to spend the weekend with you both."

He released a breath and his smile grew. "I'm glad. Have you had dinner yet?"

"No, but Cress and I ate our body weight in snacks on the way here. I thought it would be too late for dinner by the time we got in."

“Yes, we’ve eaten as well,” Matthew replied. “But we could always go for dessert, if you both like? I was thinking ice cream.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. I was already overloaded on sugar, but I was in such a good mood and I couldn’t say no to ice cream.

“Definitely.” Mom agreed, which was no surprise with her sweet tooth.

Matthew chuckled. “Okay, let me grab my coat.”

Mom went to get hers too, before the three of us set out into the New York streets. Matthew took us to a small ice cream store just down the road from his place. It was surprisingly fancy for such a tiny place, and it had such a wide array of unusual flavors I had no idea what to pick.

I was a little surprised when Matthew went for two scoops of peanut butter brownie chip. He seemed to me like more of a vanilla ice cream kind of guy. They even had an Earl Grey tea flavor, which I could have easily pictured him choosing. Mom got honeycomb while I went for the Christmas special, which had chocolate swirls and was laced with chopped pieces of candy cane. It tasted amazing.

As we sat around one of the small tables on the sidewalk outside the store, I kept being struck by how natural it felt to hang out with Matthew and my mom. When I’d first met my father, I never imagined the three of us doing anything together—let alone something as casual as going for ice cream.

I’d always struggled to picture how my parents had gotten together in the first place. Matthew was so refined and his life was so regimented and filled with luxury. My mom was more of a free spirit, fighting every day to make her way in the world. They seemed so different. And yet, somehow, they were so comfortable as they sat next to each other, smiling, and stealing tastes of each other’s ice cream.

We didn’t stay out too late because I was tired from school and traveling. My mom wasn’t faring much better. She looked as exhausted as I felt. She’d probably been up since the crack of dawn and worked up until the moment she’d been whisked here on Matthew’s plane.

As we got ready for bed, my mom came into my room to say good night.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I said, cuddling up under the sheets as she leaned on the doorframe, watching me. Last time I’d visited Matthew’s apartment, I’d thought the incredible view of the New York skyline was its best feature, but hopping in this bed had changed my mind. I’d now decided

that this bed alone was the best thing Matthew had spent his vast wealth on. It was like lying on a cloud.

"Me too," she said. "Good night, Iz."

She went to leave, but I called out to stop her. "Why did you accept Matthew's invitation? I know how busy you are, and I never would have thought you'd agree to let him fly you here…"

"I'm surprised I agreed too," she said, looking thoughtful. "But I realized that if I said no, I'd be missing time I could have spent with you. I guess I've come to realize recently that the moments we spend together as a family are worth far more than my pride."

"That makes sense," I said.

She shared a smile with me before she left the room. Her response made me question my feelings toward Matthew's wealth. When I'd first met him, I had never wanted to accept a cent from him. But, slowly, I was starting to realize all the things he offered me were because he cared for me. And each day that passed, he felt more like family.

I'd been putting off my college applications partly because I'd been unwilling to accept his generosity. But, maybe, like my mom, it was time I put my pride aside and let him help me.

WHEN I WOKE the next day, I didn't need to look at the time to know it was already late morning. I felt like I'd slept for days, which was certainly possible in a bed this comfortable. I could have easily stayed under the covers for a few more hours, but I was sure my mom and Matthew would already be awake.

Although I was grateful for the extra sleep, I wanted to make the most of my time in New York, so I climbed out of bed and walked into the en suite bathroom to shower and get ready for the day.

I knew Matthew was taking us to an event that evening, but his plans for the rest of the day were still a mystery, and I wasn't sure what to wear. I settled on a casual pair of jeans and a hoodie. Whatever we were doing, it was freezing outside, so I was probably going to have to add a jacket, scarf, and gloves on top of that.

Matthew was in the dining room when I went down for breakfast.

"Good morning, Isobel."

"Morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

“Yeah, that bed is amazing. It was heaven.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said before he gestured to the table in front of him. “Help yourself to breakfast.”

I marveled at the huge spread of food that covered the long dining table. Almost every breakfast option I could think of was within reach, and I wondered if Matthew had told his kitchen staff to prepare one of everything in their repertoire in the hopes there would be something my mom and I would like.

“Thanks,” I replied with a smile. “This all looks great.” I buttered some toast and filled my glass with some fresh orange juice. It wasn’t like the cheap stuff my mom and I drank. It tasted like it had been freshly squeezed from oranges that had been grown lovingly in someone’s backyard.

“Is my mom here?”

Matthew shook his head. “No, she went out a little while ago.”

“Where’s she gone?”

“To a yoga class.”

“Yoga?” The shock in my voice must have sounded a little silly. I’d just never heard my mom talk about yoga before, let alone go to a class. “She’s gone to a yoga class?” I repeated Matthew’s answer, just to be sure it was correct.

“Yes, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, sure, I just didn’t know she was into yoga.”

“Oh,” Matthew replied with a slight shrug. “I remember her being very fond of it when we first met.”

“Huh,” I murmured. “I had no idea.” I took another bite of my toast as I considered it. I was so close with my mom I thought I knew everything about her. Although now I’d met my father, I was realizing there was a whole part of her past I actually knew nothing about. The yoga wasn’t a big deal, but it made me wonder what else I had to learn about her.

“Are you ready for the day?” Matthew’s question pulled me from my thoughts.

“I mean, I think so, but I don’t know what we’re doing.”

“Well, like I told you, New York is very special this time of year, so I’ve got a few things in mind.”

Before I could question him further, my mom walked into the dining room. She was dressed in sleek black athletic wear, and there was a slight sheen of sweat covering her skin. She looked exhausted but happy.

“Morning, Iz,” she said through slightly heavy breaths.

“Morning, Mom. How was yoga?”

“It was wonderful,” she said, letting out a long, relieved sigh. “I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

“I didn’t even know you knew what yoga was,” I replied.

She laughed. “I used to practice all the time when I was younger. But I pretty much gave it up when I got too busy at the café. I’ve been meaning to get back into it for a while, but Rapid Bay doesn’t have a yoga studio. There’s one right down the street here, so I thought I’d check it out.”

I’d never once seen her practice while growing up, so I had a suspicion it wasn’t just the café that had put a stop to her yoga. When she wasn’t working, she was looking after me. Whether it was driving me around, cooking us dinner, or helping me with homework, she rarely had a moment to herself. I’d always tried my best not to be a burden, and I’d helped out at the café almost since I could walk, but it was nice to see my mom finally doing something for herself.

“That’s great,” I said. “It looks like it was hard work.”

“It was,” she agreed, running her hands through her damp hair. “The first one was always going to be tough. I should jump in the shower.”

She went to walk around the dining table, but her foot caught the edge of a chair, and she stumbled forward. Matthew was up in a flash and reached out a hand to steady her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice filled with concern. At first, I thought it was sweet he was so worried, but then I realized my mom was really leaning on him as she found her feet.

“Yeah, Mom, are you okay?” I said, rising slightly from my seat

“Oh yes.” She forced out a laugh as she righted herself. “I’m fine. My legs are just a little heavy. I guess I’m even more unfit than I thought.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself so much,” Matthew murmured.

“I know.” She nodded as she let go of him. “Thank you.”

I didn’t think yoga was that exhausting. But then again, I’d never done yoga in my life, so what did I know? It made sense my mom was tired after trying it for the first time in eighteen years.

“I’ll go take a shower, and then we can get going,” my mom continued. “What time do we need to leave, Matt?”

“As soon as we’re all ready,” he said. “I’ve got a lot planned, and we should probably get back here for five so we can get ready for the evening.”

“You haven’t told me much about the event,” my mom said.

“Yeah, same,” I agreed.

“It’s just something I need to show my face at for work,” Matthew replied. “We shouldn’t need to stay long. I’m sure we’ll be back here in time for another trip to the ice cream place.”

“Sounds perfect,” my mom replied.

As we all went to get ready for a day out in New York, I found myself wondering about the evening that awaited us. When Matthew had first mentioned it to me in Rapid Bay, it had seemed like this event was one of the main reasons he’d invited me to New York in the first place. If it was just something he needed to quickly show his face at before we bailed to get ice cream, why did he want me to be there so badly?

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Matthew had planned a day full of Christmas-themed activities. We visited the massive Christmas tree at the Rockefeller Center and all the gorgeous window displays in the department stores nearby. We strolled through a winter holiday market, and we finished the afternoon off with ice-skating.

It was the first time I'd ever strapped a pair of skates to my feet, and I was absolutely terrible. I spent most of the session with my hands gripped firmly to the barrier that bordered the rink. Eventually, Matthew managed to coax me off the barrier, and I took a spin around the ice holding his hand.

Despite my distinct lack of coordination, it was still such a fun afternoon, and nothing made me happier than seeing the pure joy on my mom's face as she slowly puttered around on her skates. I was simply glad to have survived the experience, and the hot chocolates we got after we'd finished more than made up for my still shaking legs.

By the time we got back to Matthew's apartment, I was well and truly exhausted. I had no idea how I was going to find the energy for an evening out. I subtly tried to suggest to my father that maybe my mom and I should skip the party, especially if it wasn't that big a deal. But he wouldn't hear of it.

"I know I said we wouldn't have to stay long," he explained. "But it's important to me that you're both there."

"Why?" I asked. My suggestion we skip the event wasn't all that serious, but a part of me felt like it might force him to be a bit less cryptic about what the evening would actually entail. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

“I’ll be asked to say a few words, and I’d like you to hear them.”

“Okay.” I nodded, but I was only feeling more uncertain about what to expect.

I left Matthew and went upstairs to my room to begin getting ready, but my intrigue about the night ahead reached another level when I saw a beautiful dress hanging on the door of my closet. It was a stunning deep-blue color that shimmered like the night’s sky, and when I reached out and touched it, I could tell it was made of the softest satin.

“Matthew got them for us.” My mom’s voice made me turn toward the door. She was standing in the entrance to my room holding an equally dazzling dress. Hers was long and red with a similar satin sheen that made it flicker like a dancing flame. It was going to look incredible on her.

“They’re amazing,” I replied. “He shouldn’t have.”

“That’s what I told him,” she said. “But he insisted. It must be a pretty fancy party.”

We decided to get ready together in my room. We rarely had a chance to dress up back home, and the last time Mom had helped me with my hair and makeup was before my junior prom last year.

I loved seeing her get dressed up too. She, on the other hand, kept shooting uncertain looks at her reflection in the mirror once she had the stunning red gown on. She looked beautiful, but I could tell she felt uncomfortable in the designer dress.

I had to cover my smile when I saw the flat shoes she’d paired with the outfit. I recognized them from home. They were a little worn, and while they matched okay, they looked slightly awkward next to the expensive gown. That was my mom though. She was always going to choose practicality and comfort over anything flashy—and I hoped that never changed.

Once I was dressed, I stared at myself in the mirror for several long moments. If I’d thought the gown Matthew had gotten me looked impressive on the hanger, that was nothing compared to how it looked now. If I had seen myself this way just a few months ago, I wouldn’t have believed my eyes. I looked so mature and elegant, especially given the way Mom had swooped up my hair.

“You look gorgeous,” she said.

“Me?” I shook my head. “You do. I’ve never seen you look so beautiful.” My mom was always gorgeous, even after a hectic day at the

café, but tonight was different. It wasn't just that her curly hair fell in perfect waves or the way her makeup accentuated her long eyelashes. It wasn't even because of the flowing red gown Matthew had bought her. There was a twinkle in her eye I'd never seen before. I was beginning to suspect it had something to do with my father.

"Oh, I'm sure I look acceptable." She quickly waved my compliment away, but I walked over and took her hand.

"More than acceptable. You take my breath away."

Mom's cheeks flushed as she laughed. "Now you're just embarrassing me."

"Yes, well, it only seems fair as you're always embarrassing me," I joked.

We made our way downstairs, where Matthew was already waiting. Unsurprisingly, I wasn't the only one who was blown away by my mom's outfit. Matthew was wide-eyed when he caught sight of her, and it must have taken him at least twenty seconds to realize he was staring, totally speechless.

"You both look beautiful," he said when he finally found his voice.

"Thank you," Mom replied. "And thank you for the dresses. They're wonderful." Her cheeks were a lot pinker than when I'd given her a similar compliment.

"Yeah, thank you," I said. "It's very generous of you."

"It's no problem," Matthew replied.

I wasn't quite finished though. I was still eager to learn a little more about what it was we were actually doing tonight. "Although, it seems like a lot of effort to go to for a party you just want to show your face at and leave."

My mom shot me a look, clearly disapproving of my prying. "Stop worrying, Isobel," she said. "It'll be fun, won't it, Matt?"

"I hope so," he said. "Shall we go?" He held out his arm, guiding us to the elevator, seeming a little relieved he'd avoided my question.

My mom took his arm, and I followed them as Matthew led the way. With my mom all dressed up and Matthew in his pristine tuxedo, they looked like a picture-perfect couple. It didn't feel real though. More like a something out of a movie than my actual life. My parents weren't a couple —but tonight, for the first time, it wasn't quite as hard to picture them together.

Thunder rumbled overhead as we exited the building, and the breeze that ruffled the skirt of my dress smelled of rain. I hoped we weren't going to get caught out in the storm.

There was a limo waiting for us in front of the building, and Matthew pulled the door open so my mom and I could get in. I'd never been in a limo before, and from the way my mom peered around at the interior, curiosity playing in her eyes, I could tell she felt as out of place as I did.

Matthew looked right at home as he slid onto the seat across from us and pulled out his phone. He'd probably been riding in cars like this his entire life, so it had never even been a novelty. He still seemed distracted though, and his head was in his phone for most of the drive while my mom and I talked, admiring the features of the limo and trying to spot landmarks through the tinted windows. It wasn't long before the vehicle pulled up to the curb.

"We're here. Are you both ready to go inside?" Matthew asked.

He might have directed the question at both of us, but his eyes were only on me. I kind of thought if anyone didn't look ready, it was Matthew. He kept rubbing his hands on his pants, and I got the distinct impression he was nervous.

"Sure, we're ready," my mom replied for the both of us.

"Great." He gave me a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, and again I felt a flutter of unease. Why was Matthew acting so strangely?

I didn't have a chance to ask if he was ready too because the door opened beside me, and Matthew moved to step out. I slid down the seat to the door and took his offered hand as he helped me out onto the sidewalk.

"Is everything okay?" I asked as I stepped to his side.

"It'll all make sense soon," he replied. "Just trust me." It was the least reassuring thing he'd said all day, and the uncertainty that had been simmering in my gut started to spread throughout my body, tingling my skin.

Matthew turned to help my mom out of the limo and then took her by the arm once more and led her up the steps of the old stone building before us. It was gorgeous and stately and looked like some kind of art gallery. There were people milling on the steps and by the entrance, all dressed just as elegantly as we were. Their gazes turned on Matthew as he approached, recognition and curiosity flashing in their eyes.

Several people tilted their heads, acknowledging my father, and Matthew nodded in return. Some appeared to want to talk with him, but Matthew didn’t stop, marching us right past them and inside the building. We took the elevator up to one of the higher floors, and as the doors opened, the sounds of string music and the chatter of guests drifted to us from the end of the hall. We followed the music to a grand ballroom that was packed with people talking, drinking, and dancing to the sounds of a full string orchestra.

I might have looked the part of an elite New York socialite in my long evening gown, but it was all just an act—and one I was struggling to maintain. Even my mom appeared to be coping better than me, and she held her head high as she lightly grasped Matthew’s arm. I knew she must have felt just as uneasy as I did though. She was simply better at faking it.

More people looked our way as we passed, some stopping their conversations to watch us walk into the room. It felt like the crowd was parting around us, as though people naturally sensed Matthew was there before moving out of his way. I knew Matthew was an influential man, but this was the first time I’d seen how powerful the aura that surrounded him truly was. In a place like this, filled with rich and powerful people, he was still being watched like a king entering his throne room.

As we walked through the crowd, I grabbed a champagne glass off a tray carried by a passing waiter. I still hadn’t been able to quell the nerves that had been hounding me since I left the limo. I took a quick sip and placed the glass down on a table before my mom or Matthew noticed.

Matthew didn’t seem the least bit bothered by the attention he received. He approached the bar with my mom and flagged down the bartender. He even nodded at a couple of people standing nearby and welcomed their attempts at small talk. I wasn’t particularly interested in making small talk. Not when the whole reason we were here still eluded me. Why was it so important to Matthew we come to this party?

I jolted with surprise as someone grabbed my arm, and when I turned to see who it was, my shock only intensified.

“Cress?”

Her eyes were filled with confusion that must have mirrored my own. She took me by the hand and pulled me away from my parents and any other guests who were standing nearby. “Cress, where are we going? What are you even doing here?”

“What am I doing here?” she whispered, coming to a stop when we were seemingly out of earshot. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I’m here with my mom and Matthew,” I said. “He invited us.”

“Your parents are here too?”

“Uh, yes.” I was taken aback by the concern in her voice. “Why, what’s going on?”

Cress stayed silent, apparently too stunned to speak. She was looking at me like I’d just asked the most ridiculous question she’d ever heard. If I’d been nervous before, I didn’t know what to feel now.

“Cress,” I said again. “Seriously, what’s going on?

“Isobel…” she said. “You know this is a birthday party for Noah, right?”

It felt like the room around me warped at her words. The music turned distant, and the people surrounding us seemed to blur.

“What?” I breathed the word.

“This is Noah’s eighteenth birthday party,” she repeated. “It’s the reason my parents are back in town. Apparently, him and his grandfather are making some big announcement…”

I wasn’t really listening, and her words faded away as I tried to process what she’d said. Matthew had dragged me to New York for Noah’s birthday? What was he thinking? Why hadn’t he told me? And why the hell was I here?

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Isobel?” Cress’s worried tone dragged my attention back to her. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head to clear the fog of uncertainty clouding my mind. “I’m just confused. When my father told me we were going to an event this evening, he said it was something to do with work. This is really Noah’s birthday?”

“Yep.” Her eyes were filled with sympathy. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about it. I just didn’t think you’d want to talk about it.”

"It’s not your fault,” I said. “I just don’t get why my father would want to be here himself, let alone bring me and my mom.”

“I have no idea,” Cress agreed. “Maybe your dad is trying to make peace?”

“Maybe.” I didn’t share her optimism though. If Matthew had wanted to make peace with the Hastings family, why hadn’t he said anything to me? What if he was here for some other reason. What if he was here to get even.

“I need to talk to my dad,” I said.

“Okay, come find me if you need anything. I may be Noah’s cousin, but I am obviously team Isobel.”

“Thanks, Cress.”

She gave my arm a comforting pat, and I took a deep breath before turning to face my father. But as I looked at the bar where he’d been standing, I couldn’t see him. My mom wasn’t there either.

I took a few steps forward, searching the crowd, but I couldn’t see either one of my parents. I glanced back at Cress, but she was already talking to

some other guests. I swallowed as another wave of nerves that felt a lot like nausea washed over me. It was one thing to face a party like this alone but something else entirely knowing it was a Hastings party. I was behind enemy lines with no backup.

I was starting to panic as I continued the unsuccessful search for my parents. They had to be here somewhere. I knew neither one of them would just leave without me. But I still felt completely vulnerable without them, and I desperately wanted answers from my father.

I decided to check back toward the entrance to the ballroom, but as I headed in that direction, I spotted Veronica walking into the room. She looked the picture of ease as she waltzed inside. Her mom walked on one side of her, and a handsome older man I assumed was her father was on her other side. I was reminded of the secret I'd been keeping for her. She'd begged me to stay quiet until after this weekend. I had no idea why, but maybe it had something to do with Noah's birthday. I desperately wanted to ask her but, even though Veronica and I seemed to be getting on a little better recently, I didn't really want to confront her with her parents around. Especially when I was already feeling so on edge.

I started to backtrack and glanced around the room for a place to escape to. As I scanned the ballroom, I was relieved to spot Luther. He was disappearing through a wide set of French doors that looked as though they led onto an outdoor terrace. He wasn't Cress or my parents. He wasn't even a friendly face at the moment, but Luther was only ignoring me at Noah's request, so at least he was one person at this party who didn't completely hate me.

I headed toward the open doors I'd seen Luther walk through and stepped out onto the large open roof terrace that had a beautiful view of the New York skyline. At least, it would have been beautiful if the sky was clear and the heavy clouds overhead weren't promising a storm.

It was far less crowded out here with most people standing in pairs or small groups as they talked. The soft sound of the string ensemble floated outside from the ballroom, and it was a striking contrast to the chaotic sounds of traffic drifting up from the street far below.

Luther was alone, leaning on the wall of the balcony that overlooked the view. As I left the protection of the ballroom and started across the terrace toward him, a few droplets of rain hit my skin. Some of the guests outside

glanced nervously up at the sky, but I was wasn't going to let a few specks of rain force me back inside where who knew what was waiting for me.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised you're here," I said, as I joined Luther.

"Newbie?" He gasped when he turned to face me. I must have caught him by surprise because he'd reverted to calling me by my old nickname.

"I thought I was just Isobel to you now."

"Right." He cleared his throat before he continued. "What are you doing here, Isobel?"

"Apparently, I'm crashing my ex-boyfriend's birthday party."

"I see that. The question is why?"

"I'm trying to work that out myself," I said. "I was hoping you might have some idea why my dad dragged me here."

"Your father's here too?"

"Yep."

Luther shook his head. "Is he crazy? William's going to lose his mind, and Noah won't be happy either."

I nodded, dreading to think how either Noah or his grandfather would react if they saw my father. And if they saw me. Last time Noah saw my dad, he'd punched him.

"I shouldn't be seen speaking with you," Luther said, quickly finishing the rest of his drink and placing it down on the nearest table.

"Seriously?" I scoffed. "I get that Noah doesn't want you to be friends with me. But does that mean we can't even talk?"

Luther gave me a sad smile. "Whatever you're doing here, I hope you enjoy your night, Isobel."

He hurried past me without looking me in the eye and made his way back into the ballroom.

"Traitor," I muttered to myself before moving closer to the edge of the balcony. I leant my arms on the wall and stared out at the Manhattan skyline. The clouds were low this evening, and the bright lights of the buildings were barely visible in the fog that shrouded them. There was no sign of the Empire State Building or my father's name lighting up the sky.

Light drops of rain continued to fall, though they were coming in slightly faster. It was clear it wasn't just a passing shower and anyone else who was still outside on the terrace began to retreat inside. I had no desire to return to the ballroom though. There was too much uncertainty in there.

Too many surprises lying in wait. The rain seemed a far more acceptable foe. At least I knew what to expect from the rain.

“You’re here.”

I struggled to stop a shiver running through me as I heard Noah’s voice behind me. He sounded calm compared to Cress and Luther, who had both been shocked to see me. I turned to face him. He was dressed in a tuxedo, looking as handsome as he always did. Despite his formal outfit, his dark hair was still slightly messy, and his black bowtie was loose. His face echoed his composed tone of voice. He didn’t seem angry or surprised I was here. If anything, he seemed glad. It felt like I was never going to understand this boy.

“Yep, I’m here,” I said. “I’m not sure why, but I’m here.”

“Well, I did invite you.”

“You what?” I frowned. “Why would you invite me? My father?”

Noah let out a sigh and glanced up at the clouds overhead. The rain was getting heavier, but he didn’t seem to care as he let it fall upon his face, run down his cheeks, and splash against his suit.

“Noah?”

He lowered his eyes to me once more, and they almost seemed to sparkle as the slightest smile curved his lips. “Will you dance with me?”

“What?”

He held out a hand toward me and repeated the question. “Will you dance with me?”

“Out here? In the rain?”

“I don’t see you running inside to escape it,” he said. “So, yes, out here, in the rain.”

“Noah…”

“It is my birthday, after all.”

“Your birthday was on Tuesday.”

“And yet you didn’t get me a gift…”

Obviously, I wasn’t going to get the guy who punched my father a birthday gift.

“Your girlfriend’s inside. Wouldn’t you rather dance with her?”

“It’s just a dance,” Noah replied. “I’m not asking you to marry me.”

The intensity with which he gazed at me made my cheeks grow warm, and I looked away.

“Besides, I don’t have a girlfriend,” he continued. “And I haven’t had one since you.”

My eyes darted back to his. “But I thought…”

“You thought wrong.”

I was struggling to breathe. Where had Noah’s scowls gone? Why had he and Veronica made everyone think they were together if they weren’t? But most of all, I wondered why his hand was still offered out to me. Why he wanted to dance with me so much when he’d wanted nothing to do with me for weeks.

“Aren’t you worried your grandfather will see us together?” I asked.

“I think you’ll be surprised by what does and does not worry me these days.” He drew in a breath. “Please dance with me?”

I could see how much he wanted this. I told myself that if I accepted his offer I might get one step closer to finding out what was going on. But I think a small part of me just wanted to dance with him too.

“Fine,” I said. “Just one dance.”

He smiled as he took hold of my hand and pulled me into his arms. It appeared I still had such little control when it came to Noah—even after everything he’d done.

We slowly rocked to the sound of the strings and the light tapping of raindrops against the tiled floor. Noah held me lightly, cradling me as if I were as delicate and fleeting as the mist clouding the buildings around us. Like I might disappear if he tried to grip me too tight.

“You never answered my question,” I said. “Why did you ask us here tonight?”

Noah opened his mouth to answer but then closed it again and shook his head. “It will be easier to explain later.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just trust me. It’ll all make sense soon.”

I let out a sigh and turned my head so I could look out at the view of New York. I should have known he wouldn’t give me the answers I wanted.

The rain was falling even harder now, and yet I didn’t step from Noah’s arms. My hair was starting to feel wet, and water droplets were staining the material of my dress, but still I remained in his grasp. I thought I was over him, but all Noah needed to do was hold me, and it felt like I was right back where I started. What was it about this boy that made him so hard forget?

“This is it, you know,” Noah said.

“This is what?” I asked as I looked back up at his sparkling green eyes. He’d lowered his head to return my gaze, and having his face so close to mine made my stomach tighten.

“This is what I wished for when I blew out my candles this year.”

“You wished to dance in the rain?”

“No, I wished for another chance with you…”

I quivered as a light breeze skirted across my wet skin, but I wondered if perhaps my trembling was born as much from the feel of Noah’s body against mine. I hated dancing, and I hated him, and yet somehow, he had me in his arms. He made me want to stay in the rain.

“How could that be what you wished for after everything?” I whispered.

“Because despite the way I’ve acted and despite what you may think, everything I’ve done has always been for you. For *us*.”

My breath caught, and I stilled in his arms. I was trapped by his gaze. Confusion swirled through me as I tried to make sense of his words. What did he mean he wanted another chance with me? How could everything he’d done have been for us? Why did he even think there still was an *us*?

While I didn’t fully understand, the way Noah was looking at me told me he was very clear about what he meant and how he felt. He was looking at me like he wanted to stay out here in the rain dancing with me all night. He was looking into my eyes with the same adoration he’d had when we were together. He was looking at me like I was the only thing he wanted. And I knew I shouldn’t be dancing with him.

I quickly stepped from his arms. It had been one thing to agree to dance with him when I thought he hated me, but when he was saying these things to me and looking at me this way, it felt wrong. I was with Wes, and dancing with Noah was starting to feel like I was betraying him.

A flicker of hurt crossed Noah’s eyes as he stared across the space between us. He nodded though, and I knew he understood.

The music came to a halt mid-song, and all that remained was the drumming of rain across the ground and the muffled buzzing of traffic in the distance. Noah glanced toward the ballroom and swallowed.

“We should get inside,” he said. “You’re going to want to hear my birthday speech.”

He gestured for me to go first, but I folded my arms and nodded for him to lead the way. “You’re the one they’re waiting for.”

He hesitated but then started back toward the ballroom. I kept my distance as I trailed behind him. I didn't want us to be seen entering the room together. By the time I walked through the French doors, people were already gathered on the dance floor in front of the stage the band had been playing on.

William stood on the stage, looking down at the crowd, a wide smile pasted across his face. He held himself with such arrogance and superiority it was as though he genuinely believed himself better than every other person in the room.

"Where's Noah?" He spoke into a microphone as he surveyed the crowd from his spot above them. "Where's my grandson?"

Noah bounded up the steps to join his grandfather, and William's smile dropped when he saw Noah's wet suit. He covered his reaction quickly though, and I doubted many in the crowd would have noticed it. I hadn't realized just how wet we'd both gotten while we were on the terrace, but as I glanced down at my own dress, I realized I must have looked just as damp as Noah.

"Isobel, there you are."

I turned to see my mom squeezing her way through the crowd toward me. Matthew was right behind her.

"What happened to your clothes?" Her voice trailed off as her attention flicked to the stage and she realized Noah was soaked through too.

"Don't ask," I replied.

Mom gave me a look that told me she had plenty of questions to ask but would save them until later. What had I been thinking, dancing in the rain with Noah. I was just grateful William Hastings hadn't noticed me.

"We need to talk," I said, turning narrowed eyes on my father. He was in serious trouble for not telling me the truth about this party, and I had a whole lot of questions I needed answering.

He swallowed and nodded. "We will. Soon."

I wanted to argue with him and demand he answer my questions here and now, but William's voice filled the room again as it boomed into the microphone.

"It appears my grandson forgot his umbrella this evening," William said, and amused murmurs rippled through the watching crowd. As they quieted, William proceeded to welcome everyone to the party. He was

clearly an experienced public speaker, and he came across as charismatic and charming as he spoke.

It felt like I was seeing a completely different side to William Hastings—the side he must have portrayed to most of the world. It was a side I'd yet to encounter, and despite the beaming smile on his face and his jovial tone, I saw his manner for what it truly was—a show.

He heaped praise upon his grandson, explaining to the crowd how Noah was a fine man of maturity and talent well beyond his eighteen years. To me, William's words just sounded like another well-rehearsed part of the performance, but most of the guests seemed to be lapping it up.

"Tonight is not just a celebration of Noah's eighteen years though," William continued. "It also marks the beginning of a new chapter for Hastings Laboratories. Noah's birthday has marked the release of the trust his father left for him. And as such, I am pleased to welcome him as Hastings Laboratories' newest minority shareholder. Noah is the future of our great company, and I know he will revolutionize my business for the future. I look forward to seeing what kind of innovation he brings in the next few years and beyond."

The crowd started clapping politely, and Noah smiled brightly next to his grandfather, bowing to his adoring guests. William wore a proud expression, but the fevered look in his eyes made me wonder if he felt the applause was as much for himself as it was for Noah.

"As you all know," William said over the fading applause as he returned to his speech. "Noah has been—"

"Excuse me, Grandfather." Noah stepped forward and placed a hand on William's shoulder, cutting him off. "Might I say a few words?"

William frowned slightly at his grandson, clearly annoyed by the interruption. I thought he was going to outright refuse Noah's request, but he seemed to reconsider because of the room full of people watching on.

William slowly started to nod. "I'm sure a few *quick* words would be fine." I didn't miss his emphasis on quick.

"Oh, this won't take long," Noah replied. He took the microphone and walked to the very front of the stage, leaving his grandfather standing behind him.

"I wanted to thank you all for being here tonight and my grandfather for such kind words," Noah said. "And he's right. I do intend to revolutionize our company for the future. But this is not something you will have to wait

several years to see. No, in fact, I've already taken decisive and effective actions since my trust was released on Tuesday."

Murmurs passed through the crowd, and William Hastings was looking more and more uncomfortable that he didn't have control of the microphone. It was obvious he was unsure what his grandson was going to say next. His hands formed tight fists at his side as he stepped beside Noah.

"What is this about, Noah?" he asked, his clenched teeth only partially hidden by a forced smile.

"Well, Grandfather, Hastings Laboratories has been sold."

Gasps rippled through the crowd. William grabbed Noah by the elbow and yanked the microphone toward him, covering it with his other hand. "What are you talking about?" he hissed. "You don't have the power to sell *my* company." Despite his best efforts, William's voice was still easily picked up by the mic, and it echoed in the speakers so everyone could hear.

"Actually, I do," Noah replied, shrugging him off and pulling the microphone free. While he wasn't speaking directly into the microphone anymore, he was hardly trying to keep his voice down and clearly didn't care that everyone in the room could hear him.

"You should have been more careful when you were desperately looking for cash to keep the company afloat," he said. "I went to the main investor you found, and it wasn't hard to convince him to part with his share of Hastings. In fact, he's been looking to get out of your failing company for a while. Combined with my share of the company, we hold the controlling interest. Well, we *did* hold the controlling interest…"

William balked, his gaze darting toward the crowd. I wasn't sure if he was more livid about what Noah had said or because we'd all just overheard it. Everyone in the room was staring at the stage in silence, desperately waiting to hear more.

Noah gave his grandfather a defiant grin before he turned to the crowd and lifted the microphone to his mouth once more. "With that in mind, I would like to introduce you all to the new owner of Hastings Laboratories. The man who will lead the company into the future—Matthew LaFleur."

Noah held out his arm and pointed at my father, but his eyes went straight to me. He'd sold the company to Matthew? Was this for real?

Matthew left my side and made his way to the stage. He walked so calmly despite the eyes of everyone in the room falling on him. I was far from calm, and a million questions raced through my mind. Why would

Noah do this? Why would Matthew want this? Why hadn't either of them told me? At Thanksgiving, Matthew had said he wanted to take a step back from his company to focus more on family. This hardly seemed to fit with that wish.

"Did you know about this?" I murmured to my mom.

She shook her head. "I had no idea."

Matthew was just about to reach the top of the stairs and step onto the stage when William snatched the microphone from Noah and addressed the stunned crowd. "I think that's enough theatrics for one night," he said. "Ignore my grandson. He's had a few too many birthday drinks. Please enjoy your evening."

He signaled for the band to start playing again before he took Noah's elbow and dragged him to the edge of the stage. Not that William could really drag his grandson anywhere, given his size, but Noah followed without complaint. They seemed to be heading straight for Matthew, so my mom and I rushed over to back him up.

"You will not be taking my company," William growled as he confronted Matthew.

"You'll find I already have," Matthew replied. "There's nothing you can do."

"The hell there is. I'll die before I let a LaFleur take the one thing I care about in this world."

"Ouch," Noah said from beside his grandfather, but he looked like he was struggling to withhold a smile. He kept trying to catch my eye, but I refused to look at him.

"*You*." William's gaze had moved past Matthew and settled on me. He'd been angry before, but his eyes seemed to light with uncontrollable fury when he saw me. He looked me up and down, and I wrapped my arms around my body as his gaze focused on my wet clothes

"This is your fault," William growled at me. "Another LaFleur woman infecting a Hastings boy just so you can burn our family to the ground." He moved toward me, but Noah stepped between us.

"Touch her, and you'll lose more than just your company." Noah's eyes bored into his grandfather, and William stopped in his tracks.

"You fool," William spat before pointing a long finger past Noah. "Are you really going to turn your back on your family because of this girl?"

My mom wrapped her arms around me, drawing me back toward her as my father stepped closer to Noah. William's eyes were still locked on me. There was so much anger and hatred burning within them, and in that moment, I thought he might be capable of anything. It shook me to my core.

"I'm not turning my back on my family," Noah said. "I'm turning my back on you."

William tore his gaze from me, and his anger mixed with confusion as he considered his grandson. After a moment, William seemed to remember we had an audience, and he glanced around at the watching crowd. The music was playing again, and they might not be able to hear clearly, but it was obvious how aggressive William was being.

He took a breath and then stepped back. Threatening a teenager in the darkness of a parking lot was one thing, but doing it in such a public forum was something else entirely. He'd lost control, and now people were seeing him for the man he truly was.

"I suggest you leave," William said, his voice now scarily calm. "As to whatever deal you think you've struck, I've seen no documentation. My lawyers will tear this shoddy agreement to shreds. And then, you'll pay for this."

He had been talking to Matthew, but when he issued his threat, his gaze fell back on me. Now he was more composed, his warning became even more chilling. There was less emotion in it but much more determination. Without another word, he turned and stormed off the stage and disappeared through a side door.

"Maybe it's time we went home," my mom suggested, gently touching Matthew on the shoulder. Even though William had gone, she still had a protective arm wrapped around me.

"While I don't want to leave on William's orders," Matthew said, "I agree. I think everyone has enjoyed the show long enough."

I looked around at all the guests still watching us. The whispers and murmuring had returned and could be heard over the sound of the strings. Matthew was right; we'd had more than enough attention for one party. Besides, I had no idea what had just happened, and I wasn't going to get an explanation with all these people looking on. I needed answers, and I needed them now.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

We couldn't get off the stage quickly enough, but as soon as we descended the steps, the crowd mobbed us. It seemed like every guest at the event wanted to speak with my father. They were all desperate to find out whether what Noah had said was true and what had prompted his takeover of Hastings Laboratories. They weren't the only ones who were curious.

Matthew dodged their questions by simply raising his hand and quickly ushering my mom and I past them. But while it might have been easy for him to avoid people's questions, it was much harder to ignore the whispers and pointed looks we received as we made our way through the ballroom.

I looked back and saw Noah had descended the steps just behind us, but he'd immediately been surrounded by guests. I didn't know if he'd been following us or not, but I didn't care. He'd completely blindsided me this evening, and I wasn't sure I could handle being around him any more tonight.

It was a relief once we were finally outside, and we hurried down the steps to where Matthew's limo was already waiting. Once we were in the vehicle, it felt like I was finally able to show my emotions.

"What the hell was that?" I asked Matthew. He was sitting across from me while my mom sat beside him. "First, you didn't tell me we were going to Noah's party? And then you steal his grandfather's business?"

Matthew shook his head. "I'm sorry for ambushing you that way," he said. "I only did so at Noah's insistence that you would not come otherwise."

"Of course, I wouldn’t have come.”

He nodded as though I’d just proved his point.

“You really bought the Hastings’ company?” I continued. “What’s this all about?”

Matthew rubbed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as he let out a sigh. He seemed exhausted by the whole thing, but I was still trying to process what had happened.

“Well?” I prompted.

He lifted his eyes to mine once more. “If you could just wait a moment, I’ll explain.”

“Wait? Why do you want me to wait?”

Matthew didn’t get a chance to answer because the limo door opened, and Noah climbed in. He calmly slid onto the bench seat beside me, not the least bit bothered that his wet suit was dripping on the leather or that he was interrupting a discussion I very much wanted to have with Matthew in private.

“What are you doing here?” I growled.

“We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” Noah didn’t look like he was going anywhere though, so I turned to my father. "Does he need to be here?”

“The story behind what happened tonight is as much Noah’s as it is mine,” Matthew replied. “If you want to understand, then yes, he needs to be here.”

I shot Noah a glare, but my need for answers outweighed my need to be far away from him so I conceded.

“Fine.” I shuffled over in my seat, trying to create as much space from Noah as was possible in the limo. My dress was still drenched from the rain, and droplets of water trickled from my hair and down my back. It seemed like a lifetime ago when Noah and I had danced in the rain. I might not have believed it even happened if I couldn’t still feel my damp clothes against my body and the way his hands had branded themselves on my skin. I tried my best not to think about that and turned my focus on Matthew once more.

“Whatever this story is, it better be good.”

Matthew hesitated and shared a look with Noah.

“I should be the one to explain,” Noah said.

“I can do it,” Matthew replied.

“I don’t care who does it,” I demanded. “Just tell us what is going on.”

My voice was becoming more urgent. The limo pulled away from the curb, and a little of my anxiety lifted. I was resigned to the fact I’d be stuck with Noah for the car journey, but it was a relief to know we were leaving. I wanted to be as far away from William Hastings as possible. But even as the distance grew between us, I still struggled to forget the fury that had appeared in his eyes when he’d said we would pay for this. Why had it felt like he’d only been talking about me?

“Let’s all just take a deep breath,” my mom said. She looked at all three of us as she spoke, but I suspected her suggestion was mostly directed at me.

“Noah, why don’t you start.” My mom gave him an encouraging smile. “What happened tonight?”

I had no idea how she managed to stay so calm. I supposed it was because her heart hadn’t been shattered by these families. She cared, of course, but she wasn’t deeply involved in the drama that had unfolded between the Hastings family and the LaFleurs.

Noah cleared his throat and glanced at my father who nodded at him to go ahead.

“Matthew and I…” Noah began. “We’ve been working together.”

Noah’s eyes stayed on me as he spoke, and I struggled to contain my surprise. Even after the way I’d seen Noah and my father acting tonight, it was impossible to imagine. How could they be working together? I thought they hated each other.

“How? Why?” I could only seem to force two words out of my mouth as thoughts, questions, and confusion rumbled around in my head.

“To take down my grandfather.” Noah’s voice was cold, and he spoke with such bitterness the car fell silent. I thought Noah was close with his grandfather and would do anything for him. He was the only family Noah had left. I couldn’t believe it was true.

“I thought you loved your grandfather.”

“Maybe I did, once upon a time, but I’ve hated that man for many years,” Noah said. “My grandfather is not a good person. He’s done terrible things and suffered no consequences. I had to make him pay. So, I’ve been playing the part of the perfect grandson, staying close to him and following his every order like a loyal soldier. Tonight, I finally made my move.”

He seemed so determined, so driven by his mission to take down his grandfather. It was a stark contrast to the boy who felt forced to follow in his grandfather's footsteps. Who felt pressured to do whatever William asked. Now he was saying all that had been an act? It had certainly fooled me.

Only a few weeks ago, Noah had punched my father to defend his family. And before that, on the night I first met William Hastings, Noah had so easily followed his grandfather's order to end our relationship and broken my heart. He'd then spent these last weeks acting like he couldn't stand me. Was this all a part of his performance? And if it was, how did he really feel? The questions piled up in my head. I didn't know which one I wanted answered first. And which ones I didn't want to know the answer to at all.

"You said you wanted to make William pay." Luckily, my mom spoke first. Her eyes were thoughtful as she looked between Noah and my dad. "What did he do?"

"He's done many things over the years," Noah replied. His jaw was tight as he spoke, like he was straining to keep a leash on the anger he felt toward his grandfather. It was clear he'd been bottling these feelings up for a long time. "But there's one thing I will never forgive him for…"

He glanced at Matthew, and I couldn't tell if he was seeking my father's approval to continue or if he wasn't sure he could bring himself to go on. It was clear from the look they shared they both knew what came next. What weren't they saying? And why did my heart twist with concern?

"What did he do?" I repeated my mom's question.

Noah nodded at my father, and Matthew exhaled as they broke eye contact. He slowly leaned forward and grasped my hands in his. If I wasn't concerned before, I certainly was now. Especially when I saw the pain radiating from his eyes.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"There's no easy way to say this," Matthew said. "But the fire that killed my sister and Noah's father." He drew in a breath. "William was the one who started it."

My mom gasped, her hand flying to her mouth in horror. I drew back from my father in shock. "But you told me it wasn't him. That William would never hurt his own son."

“When I told you that, I didn’t know. There was no evidence that suggested it, and I honestly didn’t think he was capable,” Matthew said, wringing his hands as he leaned back in his seat again. “But Noah discovered the truth.”

“Why would William do that?” my mom asked.

“Money, of course.” Noah spat out the words. “The company needed it, and he got a huge insurance payout on the building.”

“But, his son was in that building…”

“We can’t be sure William knew that at the time,” Matthew added. “But we can be sure he started the blaze.”

“Have you told the police all this?” my mom continued.

“No,” Matthew replied. “William covered his tracks well. A lot of the evidence Noah found wouldn’t hold up in court. But, while we might not have enough to put William behind bars, it’s enough to ensure there’s no doubt in our minds he’s guilty.

“And since we knew we couldn’t bring William the justice he deserved,” Noah added, “we had to seek another means to make him pay.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was all so horrible. But it made sense based on everything I knew about the history between our families and the kind of man William Hastings was. Still, it was hard to know what to think when my emotions were still rioting inside me.

“So, we took the one thing he cares about,” Noah continued. “The thing that feeds his greed. It’s going to kill him to see the Hastings empire absorbed into The LaFleur Corporation.”

“So, this was all about revenge?” The word felt harsh and bitter on my tongue.

“It was more than that,” Matthew answered. “It was also about doing some good with Hastings Labs. Both our companies focus on cancer treatments, and if we work in tandem, I believe we can really make some breakthroughs. If Liam was still alive, he would have been in charge, and the company would have been going in a very different direction.”

Noah nodded. “My grandfather only ever cared about profits, and my father hated it. He wanted to use our research and medicines to help people. When I went to Matthew and told him everything, he explained that he felt the same way. He told me that before they died, he’d been working with Georgina and my father to end their rivalry and build a bridge between our

two businesses so that both could be better. We want to continue that good work. To honor their legacy."

It was a lot to take in. I was starting to understand the reasons behind what they'd done, but it didn't stop me from feeling hurt and betrayed. They'd achieved their goal, but my heart got broken in the process.

"Well, congratulations," I muttered. "It seems like you got what you wanted."

"Isobel." Noah moved closer to me, sensing my distress. "You don't know how much I regret the way you've been caught up in this. I wanted to tell you everything, but I didn't have a choice. I had to convince my grandfather I was still loyal to him in case he somehow blocked access to my trust before I turned eighteen. And, I needed to keep you safe. My grandfather is a dangerous man, and I couldn't let anything happen to you."

He was sitting next to me now on the long leather bench seat, and he reached out a hand to touch mine. "I've spent years hiding my true feelings," he continued. "Pretending that the most important thing in my life was my grandfather and his company. I've done plenty of things I didn't want to at his command, but hiding my feelings from you was the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

Noah's words made my heart leap and my stomach drop at the same time. He was hiding feelings for me? How was I supposed to react to that? He'd treated me like he hated me for so long, like he wanted nothing to do with me. But now he was saying it was all to protect me? I thought back over all the conversations we'd had, the arguments, the stolen looks, the kisses. What was real and what wasn't? I didn't know what to say. I wanted to find out more, but I also didn't want to have this part of the conversation in front of my parents.

A moment later, the limo rolled to a stop as we pulled up outside Matthew's building. I still had so many questions, but I felt an overwhelming urge to escape. I needed space to come to terms with everything I'd been told, space to breathe, and space from Noah.

"I need to get out," I said, pulling my hand from underneath Noah's gentle grasp as I scrambled for the door.

I didn't wait for anyone to respond, and I jumped from the car before they could stop me. I didn't look back as I entered the building and ran past the concierge and onto the elevator. I only breathed again when the doors closed behind me and I was alone.

When I reached the penthouse, I headed straight to my room and tore the wet evening gown from my body. I scrubbed the makeup from my face, erasing all evidence of the night we'd endured, and changed into a pair of pajamas.

My body felt better, but my mind was still racing. I was still struggling to comprehend everything my father and Noah had just dumped on me. As I sat on my bed, wondering how I was ever going to get to sleep tonight, there was a knock at the door. It was probably my mom coming to check on me.

"Come in," I called out without looking up.

"How are you feeling?" My father's voice surprised me.

"Uh, fine," I stammered. "Well, as fine as I can be after finding out how my aunt was killed and my father and my ex-boyfriend have been secretly working together for months."

"I'm sorry we kept this all from you," Matthew said, coming to sit at the end of my bed. "But I promise, now this is over, I won't keep secrets from you again."

His eyes were open and honest, and I could see he meant it. That didn't mean I wasn't still mad at him. "I just wished you could have trusted me with it."

"I do trust you, Isobel. We just couldn't risk William getting any idea about what was to come. And we wanted to keep you separated from this as much as possible."

"But I haven't been separated from it," I said. "I've been hurt and lied to. I had to watch you get punched. Noah broke up with me because of all this."

I paused, not wanting to dwell on Noah's actions or think about what they now meant.

"I know," Matthew said. "I'm sorry it played out this way. But I've already lost a sister because of this man; I couldn't risk my daughter. The bitterness between our families is in the past now, and I'm hoping we can move on."

His words took the edge off my anger. I could understand his concern, especially after what happened to Georgina. This rivalry had cost both Matthew and Noah so much. Could I really be mad at them for doing what they had to in order to bring it to an end?

“Okay.” I nodded. “But you could have at least told me we were going to Noah’s birthday party tonight. That was not cool.”

A little bit of the tension that had been gripping my chest and filling the room eased, and Matthew’s lips hitched up in a half smile. “Yes, you’re right. That must have been a shock. Very uncool of me.”

I rolled my eyes. The way Matthew said the word uncool only made it more uncool. He seemed to realize it too because he released a soft chuckle.

“I still can’t believe you two worked together on this,” I said. “Only a month ago, Noah was punching you in the face.”

“He only did that so William wouldn’t suspect we were working together,” Matthew replied with a shake of his head. “He probably could have gone a little softer on me though.”

“You were working together even then?”

Matthew nodded. “Noah came to see me in New York,” he said. “He was devastated by what happened the night of the White Ball. He explained what he was hoping to achieve and how I could help.”

I struggled to swallow as memories of that night flooded my mind. The cool night air in the courtyard outside the ballroom at Weybridge Academy. The look on Noah’s face when he’d learned who my father was. The pain and resignation in his eyes when William forced him to break up with me. He’d cast me aside and broken my heart with so much ease, just because his grandfather wished it. It had felt so real, and I struggled to comprehend that there might have been more to Noah’s actions that night than met the eye.

“I have to admit I was surprised when Noah came to me,” Matthew continued. “But when I heard what he had to say and learned the truth about what happened to my sister, I knew something had to be done.”

“I’m really sorry about Georgina.”

“Thank you.” Matthew gave me a sad smile. “I miss her every day, but knowing the truth has helped a little. I have Noah to thank for that. Now we can honor both her and Liam through our work. Maybe that will bring her some peace.”

“I’m sure it will.” I smiled back at him. “What about you though? What does taking over Hastings Laboratories mean for you? I thought you wanted to take a step back from all this.”

“I still do,” Matthew said. “It won’t happen immediately, but acquiring Hastings shouldn’t change those plans. It will become a subsidiary of The LaFleur Corporation that Noah will eventually run.”

“Really? I thought he wasn’t interested in running his family’s company.”

“That’s something you’d have to ask Noah,” Matthew replied.

That was just one of the many things I needed to ask Noah. The thought of facing those questions was still a little overwhelming, and I fell silent. Matthew was quiet too. Maybe we didn’t have the energy for any more. I was still trying to make sense of everything I’d learned tonight, but I didn’t have to have all the answers now.

Matthew must have agreed because he rose from the edge of the bed. “You should get some rest. It’s been quite a night.”

I didn’t protest. I was exhausted after the evening’s events. As my father left the room, softly closing the door behind him, I settled myself into the giant bed and stared up at the ceiling.

I expected to be plagued by thoughts about everything that had happened tonight as I peered upward at the ceiling, but instead I found myself thinking about the least likely of people. I was thinking about Norma and the prediction she’d made for me when I was last at home. She’d told me to trust my heart, and I wondered if perhaps her prediction hadn’t been about Wes. I’d always found it difficult to believe Noah had changed so completely after we broke up, and I wondered if perhaps she’d been talking about him all along.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

I woke the next morning to the sound of my phone buzzing with an incoming call, and I groaned as I patted my hand around my bed and tried to find the device. I'd been up half the night, tossing and turning as I chewed over the night's events. I'd only properly drifted off to sleep a little before sunrise, so it felt like I'd only just shut my eyes. My eyelids were heavy, my mouth felt parched, and my hair was probably a mess since I hadn't bothered to dry it before I went to bed.

When my fingers finally wrapped around my phone, I took one glance at the caller ID before I answered. "Cress?" My voice was croaky and deep with sleep.

"Finally," Cress replied. "I've been texting you all night. You guys disappeared after Noah's announcement, and I haven't been able to get hold of you since. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." I carefully and slowly pushed myself up in bed. "I'm tired and a little confused but okay."

"It was pretty shocking," Cress said. "Did you know what Noah and your dad were up to?"

"I had no idea." I rubbed a hand across my face. I was still waking up, so I wasn't quite ready to relive the evening again. "Do you think we can talk about it on the trip back to school though? I'm half asleep, and I'm going to need about three cups of coffee before I can even consider revisiting it all."

"About that…" Cress started. "The other reason I called so early is because I can't drive you back. I mean I can if you can't find another way.

But my parents are sticking around longer than expected, and they want me to stay for an extra couple of days."

"Oh, well, you haven't seen them in months," I replied. "You should stay, obviously."

"But what about you?"

"I'll talk to Matthew. I'm sure he can help me organize a way to get back to Weybridge."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely. You should spend time with your parents. I know you've missed them."

"Thanks, Isobel. I'm so sorry for bailing on you last minute. If you get stuck, call me and I'll drive you."

"Like I said, I'm sure it won't be a problem."

"Okay, well, remember I'm always here if you want to talk once you've had your coffee."

"Thanks, Cress."

I pursed my lips as I ended the call. I hadn't thought twice about telling Cress to stay. She deserved to spend time with her parents. But I hoped I was right about Matthew being able to help. I was not in for a fun day if I had to catch a bus back to school.

I considered trying to go back to sleep, but my stomach rumbled with hunger, so I got up and made my way downstairs instead. I entered the dining room with my eyes focused on my phone as I read a text from Cress. She'd simply sent a stream of heart emojis, so I sent some back in reply.

"Good morning."

I froze and my eyes whipped upward as Noah stood from the dining table. There was a bowl of cereal in front of him and a cup of coffee in his hand. I'd clearly interrupted his breakfast, but I had no idea why he was here. It took me a moment to notice my mom was seated at the table across from him.

I closed my mouth when I realized it had dropped open. If any part of me had hoped last night was just a bad dream, Noah being here was proof it was all very real. He was still dressed in his formal wear from last night. Well, partially. He'd lost the tie and jacket, and his white shirt was loose around the collar with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his strong forearms.

"Have you been here all night?" I asked.

“Matthew and I had some final details to sort out. It took longer than anticipated,” he replied.

“Are you going to join us, Iz?” my mom asked.

I wanted to, but I suddenly remembered my sorry appearance. I hadn’t done my hair or brushed my teeth before coming downstairs. And I was still dressed in the pajamas I’d thrown on last night. At least I could be grateful they weren’t the ratty Winnie the Pooh pajamas I normally wore. Still, I felt the urge to turn and run right back up to my room so I could shower at the very least before I reappeared.

I didn’t want Noah to think he’d chased me off though, so I reluctantly nodded and went to sit in the empty chair next to my mom. As I did, Noah lowered himself into his seat and took a sip of coffee.

I helped myself to a piece of toast and nibbled on the end of it. I’d lost my appetite the moment I’d laid eyes on Noah, and my mind was still whirring as I tried to accept he was sitting across from me. Thankfully, he didn’t try to talk, but he was constantly glancing up at me from his breakfast and would give me a nervous smile when I caught his gaze. I wanted to ignore him, but how could I pretend he wasn’t there when I could constantly feel him watching me?

“When are you heading back home?” I tried to fill the awkward silence in the room by speaking to my mom.

“After breakfast.” She sounded tired, and given the bags under her eyes, I suspected she’d struggled to sleep last night too.

“So soon?”

She took a long sip of her coffee as she nodded. “But it’s just a few weeks until Christmas now. It won’t be long until we see each other again.”

“Yeah, I know.” It would still feel like forever.

I focused on my toast again as we fell silent. There was an awkward air in the room, and I assumed we were all still thinking about last night.

My mom was doing her best to pretend everything was normal, and she began conversing pleasantly with Noah, asking him about school and talking about the café. Their light chatter might have filled the silence, but it did little to lessen the uncomfortable tension.

I had no idea how my mom was able to talk with him so easily. He and Matthew might have explained their actions, but I couldn’t just forget the way Noah had acted recently. It didn’t matter that he had been secretly working with my dad; he never should have punched him, and it didn’t

excuse the way he'd treated me at school. He'd spent weeks positioning himself as my enemy. But now he was eating breakfast with us like he was a lifelong friend. He'd broken up with me, lied to me, and turned people against me. I wasn't certain I'd ever get past that.

Matthew joined us just as we were finishing up. He didn't look like he'd slept much last night either, but unlike Noah, he'd changed out of his formal suit since the party.

"My apologies for missing breakfast," he said. "I've been checking over the paperwork with my lawyers. Everything looks in order."

I felt sorry for his lawyers being hauled into work first thing on a Sunday morning. But William had probably done the same. The look on his face last night had told me he was going to stop at nothing to prevent this deal from happening.

"How are you feeling this morning, Isobel?" Matthew asked.

"Just a little tired." It was a huge oversimplification of what I was actually feeling.

"Well, there's no rush today," he said. "You can stay here as long as you like until you're ready to go back to school."

"Uhh…" While a part of me wanted to go back to Weybridge as soon as possible, I was still without a ride. "I actually have to talk to you about that. Cress is staying in the city to spend a couple of extra days with her parents. I was wondering if you could help organize a ride back to school for me."

"I can take you," Noah said.

I'd barely finished my sentence before he butted in, and I stiffened in response. "Uh, no, that's okay."

"It's not a problem. I was planning to head back this morning anyway."

"I'm sure Matthew has someone who can take me." I looked at my father, hoping he could see the desperation in my eyes. I did not want to get in a car with Noah.

"Really, it's no trouble," Noah said. "We're both going to the same place."

Matthew seemed hesitant as he glanced between the two of us, but then his gaze settled on me. "It might be good for you to go back together," he said. "I'm sure you have plenty to talk about."

I officially wanted to kill my father. It didn't help that my mom wasn't coming to my rescue either. Instead, she was nodding like she thought it

was a good idea too. And while Noah and I probably did have a lot to talk about, I didn't think I was ready to dive any deeper into that minefield.

I considered protesting further, but my parents looked exhausted. Last night had been draining for all of us, and I didn't want to make it any more stressful on them. At this point, I just wanted to get back to school and pretend this weekend hadn't happened. If going with Noah would get me there sooner, perhaps it was a necessary evil.

"Okay," I said, turning to Noah. "Thanks." I felt like I was speaking through gritted teeth, but Noah smiled in return. The look struck me somewhere deep in my chest. He seemed genuinely happy I'd agreed, and I couldn't remember the last time he'd given me such a carefree smile.

"When do you want to go?" I asked him.

He turned to my father. "Do you need me for anything else?"

Matthew shook his head. "I'll call you if something comes up."

Because apparently, they called each other now too.

"I'm ready when you are then," Noah said, returning his focus to me.

"After breakfast?"

"Sure."

I finished my toast and went upstairs to shower and pack. I was just putting the final items in my duffel bag when there was a knock at my door.

"Can I come in?" My mom's soft voice floated through the slightly open door.

"Of course."

She came to sit on the bed and watched as I zipped up my bag. Her eyes were studying me closely, probably trying to work out how I was feeling about all this.

"I'm so proud of you, Iz," she finally said. "I know this must be hard, but you're taking it all in your stride."

"I'm trying my best," I said. "I just…

"What?" she asked when I let my sentence drift into silence.

"Well, I'm sure Matthew and Noah did what they felt was necessary. I just wish I didn't have to get so battered in the process."

She stood and pulled me close, wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug. "I know," she said. "I wish that too."

"It's hard because I know how much they both lost," I mumbled into her shoulder. "And I hate bringing up my own pain because it doesn't compare. But they don't seem to realize how much this has hurt me."

She pulled back slightly so she could look me in the eyes.

“They do,” she said. “After you left last night, I spoke to them a little more. It really sounds like they didn’t have a choice, and they both feel terrible about it.”

I shrugged.

“You have every right to be upset,” she continued. “But maybe the drive back with Noah will help. If you still feel upset when you get back to Weybridge, I’m always just a phone call away.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Thanks, Mom.”

When we got downstairs, Noah and Matthew were waiting in the lobby near the elevator. Noah had finally changed out of his suit from last night, and it looked like he’d showered too. His hair was still damp, and he was wearing a pair of jeans and his red Weybridge sweatshirt. He looked remarkably good considering he’d probably had no sleep.

My father turned when he saw us and took a step toward me. “I know this weekend probably didn’t end the way you imagined it,” he said. “But I’m glad you were here. And I enjoyed our time together very much.”

To say the weekend hadn’t turned out as I expected was an understatement of epic proportions, but I couldn’t deny I’d enjoyed most of the visit as well.

“I did too,” I said. “The ice cream was good, at least.”

He chuckled under his breath and nodded. “It was. We’ll have to have some more over Christmas.”

“We will?”

He nodded. “I want to visit Rapid Bay at some point over the holidays to spend some more time with you and your mom.”

“I guess I’ll see you then.”

He smiled down at me, and it felt like, despite the bombshells he’d dropped last night, we’d somehow become closer this weekend. We stood opposite each other, and there was an awkward silence. I was surprised I wanted to hug Matthew goodbye, but I wasn’t sure how he’d react.

I decided to risk it, and I closed the distance between us to wrap my arms around him. It took him a second to respond, but then he lowered his hands to my back, and ever so cautiously, he tightened the hug in return. My chest felt warm, and a hint of a smile pulled at my lips. This was the first time I’d hugged my father, and even though we were both completely awkward, it felt perfect.

When I pulled back from him, Matthew had a faint smile on his lips too. He looked like he was trying to contain whatever emotions had been brought to the surface. I'd clearly taken him by surprise, but I felt like he'd enjoyed the hug as much as I had.

"I'll let you say goodbye to your mother," he said before he turned to Noah.

"Have a safe trip back, Iz," my mom said as she gathered me up in her arms. "And be careful on that ski trip. I don't want you showing up for Christmas with a broken leg."

"I'll try my best, Mom." I laughed.

When I looked back, Matthew was shaking Noah's hand, and the two of them were smiling broadly at one another. There was a look of pride in Matthew's eyes, and it struck me that Noah probably didn't have many people in his life who looked at him that way—if there was anyone at all.

Clearly, his grandfather didn't feel true human emotions. And he never saw his mother. His father had died years ago, so it must have been such a long time since Noah had someone he could truly look up to. From the way he was looking at Matthew, it seemed like perhaps he'd found one. The interaction only lasted a moment, but I couldn't get it out of my mind.

I quickly gave my mom one last hug before I followed Noah to the elevator, and we went down to the garage where his car was parked. I had no idea how it had gotten here, seeing as he was in the limo with us last night. It was a mystery I was quite happy to leave unsolved though—the less Noah and I spoke today, the better.

"Are you getting in?" Noah was waiting for me by the car, holding the passenger door open. I didn't respond as I tossed my bag in the back and then slid past him into the seat.

When Noah got into the driver's seat and started the car, I let out a sigh and glanced out the window. This was going to be a very long trip back to school and not nearly as pleasant as the drive here with Cress.

Noah didn't say anything as he pulled the car out of the parking garage and onto the city streets. He seemed tense though. I wondered whether it was simply because of the awkwardness between us or whether he was thinking about last night. The move he'd made against his grandfather had been bold, and he had to still be reeling from its success. It couldn't be easy to steal your grandfather's company—no matter how much you might hate him.

There was a lot of traffic in the city, and Noah seemed especially anxious whenever we came to a stop. Just when he looked like he might say something, the light turned green, and we set off again. It wasn't until we were free from the gridlock of cars and onto a long bridge over the water that Noah finally said anything.

"You're going on a ski trip?" he asked.

My head was resting against the window as I watched the New York skyline shrink behind us through the side-view mirror, but I slowly glanced at him. Noah's eyes were on the road, and he was gripping the steering wheel tightly. The ski trip was the last thing I'd expected him to talk about, given everything that was still unsaid between us. How did he even know about it? He must have overheard me talking with my mom at the apartment. I considered ignoring him, but the silence that filled the car was starting to drive me crazy.

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to Aspen with my friends."

"Wes going to be there?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but, yeah, he is. We're staying at his family's place."

Noah grunted. I didn't know what to make of the reaction, but I could tell he wasn't thrilled by the idea.

"You don't get to be pissed off that I'm going away with my boyfriend," I said.

"I can feel whatever I want."

"I think I preferred it when you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I certainly didn't. Do you know how hard it was for me to act like that?"

This time, I grunted. "I'm sure it wasn't that hard. You certainly looked happy enough with Veronica."

"That was all for show," he replied.

I sat up straighter in my seat, my full focus now on Noah. "What do you mean?"

"Veronica needed the arrangement just as much as I did," he continued. "But it was never real."

I frowned at him, trying to process what he was saying. Veronica had hinted there was something strange going on with her and Noah, but I hadn't been sure exactly what it was. I had never imagined the entire relationship was fake all along.

“Well, it was very convincing.”

A hint of a smile curved the corner of his lips. “Jealous?”

“Why would I be jealous?” I said, turning back to look out the window. “I have Wes.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw his half smile drop, and I knew I’d gotten to him. It didn’t make me feel better though. If anything, I felt like I was being unnecessarily harsh.

We had just reached the end of the bridge when Noah suddenly switched on the turn signal, swerved across two lanes of traffic, and took the first exit.

“What are you doing?” I said, gripping the edge of my seat with both hands.

He didn’t answer.

“Noah?” I prompted. We pulled off the bridge and into an area close to the water that was still very built up but not nearly as vertical as Manhattan. I didn’t know where we were going, but I knew it wasn’t the way back to school, and it seemed Noah had made a sudden decision to take us this route. He continued to ignore me, but it wasn’t long before he stopped the car alongside a small park.

As he turned off the ignition, he released a heavy breath.

“Noah?” I asked, my voice soft. “What’s going on?”

He heaved out another breath before he responded. “There’s something I want to show you.”

I glanced around trying to figure out what he was talking about. There was no sign of anything out of the ordinary, but when I looked back at Noah and saw the gravity in his eyes, I knew, whatever it was, it must be serious.

“I don’t know if I can handle any more surprises,” I said.

“I understand this is a lot to ask right now, but can you trust me?”

It was a difficult question to answer given everything that had happened recently. But I found myself nodding. “I guess.”

Noah swallowed and then nodded before he opened the door and got out of the car. He walked around the front of the car to the passenger side and opened my door for me.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“This way.” Noah held out his hand, and as I took it, he gently helped me from the car. He kept hold of my hand and led me to the green park.

On the sidewalk next to the stone archway that marked the entrance to the park, there was a man selling flowers out of a small wooden cart. Noah walked up to him, selected a colorful bouquet, and gave the florist some cash. He caught the look of confusion on my face and chuckled softly.

“This isn’t what I had to show you,” he said. “I know I’ll need a lot more than flowers before you can forgive me for all this.”

We left the florist and walked along the gravel path that led under the arch and into the park. It wasn’t a huge area, but it was lush and green with pretty manicured gardens and a duck pond in the center. The trees that bordered the area were bare of leaves, but it would have been beautiful in the spring. On the far side of the park, beyond the trees, I caught a glimpse of the water and, beyond that, the sunlight glinting off the glass and metal skyscrapers that made up the New York skyline.

When we reached a bench that overlooked the pond, Noah stopped. He walked past the bench to the edge of the water. He was approaching a square stone block that was sticking out of the ground about waist height. When he reached it, he bent down and laid the bouquet of flowers on the grass in front of it. I slowly edged closer to Noah, and it was only when I came to stand next to him that I noticed the small rectangular plaque attached to the stone. Etched into the golden plaque was his father’s name.

“Noah,” I whispered. “What is this?” His eyes were fixed on the plaque, and they glistened with unshed tears.

He sighed and blinked the moisture from his eyes. “This is where they died,” he murmured before looking up at me. “My father and your aunt.”

The pain in his eyes caused my chest to tighten, but as I glanced around a look of confusion formed on my face.

“This was the site of Hastings Laboratories’ main research center,” Noah explained. “Of course, it looked very different back then. After the fire, my grandfather had the building torn down and converted into a park in my father’s memory.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “It’s beautiful.”

He nodded and looked out over the pond. "I try and come here every time I visit the city.” He sighed again before he stepped back and lowered himself onto the bench. He gestured for me to sit with him. It was cold today, and the pond showed hints of icing over, but the sun was out, and its glow warmed my skin despite the cool breeze. I nodded at Noah and sat beside him.

“I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness. But I needed you to see this place,” Noah said, waving a hand at the park, the pond, and the plaque. “This is all that remains of my father. This is why I stopped at nothing to bring my grandfather down. And I’m so sorry I had to hurt you in the process. That I didn’t treat you the way you deserved. That I made my friends avoid you, and I pretended to date someone else so my grandfather couldn’t see how much I cared for you.”

He leaned forward on his knees and bent his head low. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to forgive Noah, but I was beginning to understand the enormity of what he’d been through. Being in this park. Seeing the one thing that was left of his dad. It really hit me.

It didn’t matter what had happened between us over the last few hours, days, and weeks. I could see he was in pain, and I needed to reach out to him. When my hand found his, he let our fingers intertwine, and he gripped my hand tightly.

“I wish you hadn’t had to go through all of this,” I said.

“I wish you didn’t either.”

I shook my head because the pain Noah had caused me paled in comparison to what he’d experienced. How he’d spent years pretending to love such a vile man simply so he could find justice for his dad.

“How did you find out William was behind this?” I asked.

“I’ve been piecing things together for years,” he said, looking up to meet my eyes. “In the aftermath of the fire, I knew my grandfather was covering things up. He wanted to make sure my father’s reputation remained intact, so he did everything he could to make sure no one found out your aunt had been there too. He didn’t want anyone to know they were having an affair.”

“You know that’s not true, right?” I said. “About your dad and my aunt.”

“I didn’t, but I know now,” he said. “I’d always struggled to believe my dad would cheat on my mom, and I can’t tell you the relief I felt when Matthew told me what really happened. How he, my dad, and Georgina had been trying to fix the rift between our families. I think that’s what I liked most about teaming up with Matthew. It’s what my dad would have wanted.”

He smiled, and I found myself smiling too. He didn’t talk much about his dad, but it clearly meant so much to Noah that he made his father proud.

He released a sigh, and his expression became heavier as he continued. “But, at that time, I believed what my grandfather told me about the affair, so I didn’t question his decision to hide it from the public eye. It wasn’t until later that I started to suspect that wasn’t the only thing he was covering up.”

“What happened?”

“Shortly after my father died, William wanted me to start learning more about the company. I started to spend my summers working there, attending business meetings with him, and doing paperwork. Over the years, I started to notice things.

“One evening when I was at the office, someone from the fire department came to visit my grandfather. I overheard the two of them talking, and it sounded like the man was trying to blackmail my grandfather. Apparently, this guy had overseen the inspection of the fire at the lab, and William had paid him to alter the report so it listed the cause of the fire as an electrical fault rather than an accelerant. He wanted more money to stay quiet.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean your grandfather was the one who started the fire.”

“No, not necessarily” Noah agreed. “But my grandfather gave the man the extra money he wanted. After that, I started to do some digging. I stayed close to my grandfather, worked hard at the company, and gradually he trusted me with more responsibility and more access.

“The longer I worked at the company, the more I realized how much it was struggling, especially since Matthew undercut the price of our bestselling drug. The finances made for grim reading. But after the fire destroyed the lab and a ton of priceless research went with it… Well, the massive insurance payout my grandfather received was the only reason the company survived. I discovered documents that showed William had conveniently increased the policy by millions of dollars only weeks before the fire.

“It was clear that he’d started the fire to get the money, and as I reflected more and more on that horrible night, I cursed myself for missing it at the time. The way my grandfather had so desperately tried to keep the whole thing quiet. Even the speed with which he tore down the lab, destroying all evidence, so he could create this park…”

Noah let out a heavy breath and stared down at the flowers he'd laid by the memorial to his father. "I don't know if William intended to kill my father, and I think I'm always going to hope that was an accident. But, either way, William is to blame for my dad's death. It was time for him to finally pay."

Noah glanced up, and there were so many emotions flickering across his eyes it was hard to tell what he was truly feeling. There was relief and anger, sadness and pain. If Noah had been hurting over this for years and planning his grandfather's downfall all this time, I couldn't begin to fathom how he must feel now he'd succeeded.

"So, you sold his company."

"I did."

"And you plan to run it for Matthew?" I asked. "I thought you didn't want that."

"No, I just didn't want to follow in my grandfather's footsteps. I wanted to follow in my father's and use the work of Hastings Labs to help people. By working with Matthew, I finally can."

"Oh," I murmured.

"I've hated lying to you so much," he said. "And I can't begin to tell you how hard it's been to pretend you mean nothing to me."

"Noah, we don't have to talk about this."

"Please just hear me out."

I didn't know if diving into the act Noah had put on for his grandfather would help either of us. But given the depth of the emotions Noah had just laid on the table, I wasn't sure I could bring myself to deny him. I nodded for him to continue.

"I've done a lot of things I've hated to gain my grandfather's approval and maintain his trust. But the night he asked me to break up with you was the first time I considered telling him no. Everything I'd worked for would have been gone, but at least I would have had you."

I was already regretting agreeing to let Noah say his piece. I needed to be reaffirming the wall between us, not letting him slowly take it down.

"I stupidly thought that maybe I could do both," he said. "That I could be with you in secret and still try to take William down. But it was never fair of me to ask that of you. And even though you rejected me, even though you were moving on, William still suspected my feelings for you."

I wrapped my arms around my body as the chill in the air began to seep beneath my skin. The sun had gone behind a cloud and taken its warm glow with it. Even the slight breeze that had swirled around the park when we arrived had halted as Noah spoke. It was as if the world around us was holding its breath and listening to what he had to say.

“I knew I just needed to make it to my eighteenth birthday,” Noah said. “When my trust finally opened and I got my shares in Hastings Laboratories. Then I could instigate the sale of the company to Matthew. Once it was all agreed, I wouldn’t need to pretend anymore. But I couldn’t let my grandfather suspect I wasn’t committed to our family, that I wasn’t still on his side—not when I was so close.

“It didn’t help that he was so fixated on you. He seemed so angry at the idea that another LaFleur had entered our lives. He genuinely believed my dad was having an affair with your aunt. He blamed her for his death, and he was projecting that onto you."

A shudder ran through me, not from the cold but from the reminder of William’s pure hatred for me as a LaFleur. One that he thought was going to corrupt and endanger his grandson.

“I had to do everything I could to protect you,” Noah continued. “But I knew ignoring you wasn’t enough. So, I told my friends to stop talking to you and convinced Veronica to fake a relationship with me. I know how our school works and that word would get back to my grandfather. It was the only way I could ensure that this all went down the way we planned and you stayed safe.”

It was much harder than I expected to hear Noah’s explanation, and I stood from the bench and paced away from him. “Why didn’t you just tell me? Why did you let me think the worst of you? Why did you let me move on?” My voice broke over my last question, and my heart clenched in pain. “I would have kept my distance. I could have pretended…”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that,” he said, standing to meet me. “There were no guarantees in any of this. And if this plan didn’t succeed, I would have moved to Plan B and then Plan C. I couldn’t ask you to wait for me, not when I had no idea if or when this would work.”

"You should have given me the choice. I could have handled this.”

“You weren’t the problem. I was. No matter how well I acted, it seemed I could never completely convince William I didn’t have feelings for you. That you weren’t a threat to him. Even when I acted like I was with

someone else, he suspected. But he was right. I never stopped caring for you. Not for one day. Not for one minute."

I swallowed and finally looked him in the eyes. "Noah…"

"I know," he murmured. "I know you're with someone else now. I know it's not fair that I say these things to you."

"It's not even close to fair."

"Like I said, I know. But it doesn't stop me feeling this way. I love you, Isobel, and I would do anything for you."

His words slammed into me with the power of a tidal wave. They rolled over me and pushed down on me, leaving me disorientated and struggling for breath. I rubbed a stray tear from my cheek as I looked out at the frozen pond. My heart couldn't take this. It was all too much. Noah's confession was going to break me all over again.

As the surge of emotion washed over me, I somehow managed to stand my ground, take a breath and respond.

"It's too late," I said. "I understand why you did what you did, but it doesn't change anything. I've moved on, and you should too."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but I cut him off before he got a chance. "I want you to take me back to school," I said, looking out at the lake once more. "And then I want you to forget about me. Forget about us."

"I'll take you back to school if that's what you want."

"Thank you." I released a breath, relieved he wasn't going to argue with me. I went to walk back to the car, but Noah continued before I could take a step.

"But forget about you?" he said. "That's impossible."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Noah and I barely spoke for the rest of the journey home. He'd just confessed his love for me, but I'd told him I was with someone else and to forget me and move on. There wasn't much more we could say to each other after that. But even though we sat in silence, my mind was a hive of activity as I desperately tried to work through everything I'd learned over the last few hours and decide how I felt about it all.

I only broke the silence when we arrived back at school. I quickly thanked Noah for the ride before I jumped from his car and hurried back to the dorms. I didn't want to seem ungrateful or rude, but I needed space from him. Noah had opened his heart to me at his dad's memorial. He'd said some beautiful things, and he seemed genuinely sorry for the way I'd been caught up in his quest to destroy his grandfather. I even understood why he'd done everything he did, but that didn't change the fact he'd broken my heart. He couldn't just turn around and expect me to fall at his feet the moment he decided it was the right time for him.

I was still feeling flustered and overwhelmed by it all when I got back to my room. I needed to talk to someone, so I dumped my bag and went in search of Anna. Thankfully, she was in her room and her roommate was out.

"Hey, you're ba—" Anna answered the door with a smile, but she cut herself off when she saw the expression on my face. "Are you okay? I heard about last night."

"You heard already?" I asked as I walked past her and into the room.

"Cress called to let me know," she explained. "She thought you'd need someone to talk to when you got back to school."

“Well, she was right,” I said as I started pacing the room. “I still can’t wrap my mind around it.”

“It sounds like it was pretty hectic,” Anna said. “So, Noah really sold his grandfather’s company to your dad?”

“Yep. Apparently, Noah has been planning to screw over his grandfather for years, and he’s been working in secret with my dad.”

"Wow.”

“That’s just the start.” I slumped down on Anna’s bed. “Noah told me that everything he’s done recently—breaking up with me, telling Luther and Kaden to ignore me, dating Veronica—it was all to convince his grandfather he wanted nothing to do with me. To show he was loyal to William so he wouldn’t get suspicious. Then on the drive back here, Noah told me he’s been in love with me all this time and now he wants me back.”

Anna stood motionless as she listened to me, her mouth hanging slightly open. I’d left her speechless. It was a feat I never would have believed possible. I had to admit this was all quite hard to believe—even at Weybridge Academy where the bar for drama was pretty high.

“Shit,” Anna finally said. “I think I need a drink.”

“You always need a drink,” I replied.

“True.” She smiled, but then her expression dimmed. “I thought the story about the surprise takeover was wild. But this…”

“Is a lot.” I hadn’t even told her about the fact Noah and Matthew had discovered William was responsible for the deaths of Liam and Georgina. That part I’d better keep to myself.

“What are you going to do?” Anna asked, coming to sit on the bed beside me.

“There’s nothing I can do,” I said. “The deal is done. My dad owns Noah’s family business now. They’ll continue working together.”

“I meant about Noah?”

“I’m with Wes,” I replied simply, like that was all the answer I needed to give.

“Yeah, but do you still have feelings for Noah?”

I wished that was a question with an equally easy answer. It was hard to know what to feel when just two days ago I’d been convinced Noah hated me, and I’d convinced myself I hated him too.

“It doesn’t matter what I feel about Noah,” I said. “I care about Wes. Noah hasn’t changed that. I already told him that he needs to forget about

me and move on."

Anna nodded. "Are you going to tell Wes what Noah confessed? That he's in love with you?"

"I'm not sure." I hesitated. "I don't want to worry him unnecessarily, and I think it would upset him."

"Yeah, it's tricky," Anna agreed. "Noah's feelings might not be something you can hide though. He doesn't seem like the type to sit back and let another guy be with the girl he wants."

I groaned and lowered my head into my hands. She was right. The last thing I wanted was for Wes to learn about all this from someone else. Especially Noah. I'd already suffered enough because of my family drama. I didn't want my relationship with Wes to be affected too. We were so good together. Why would I give that up to be with someone who had treated me as badly as Noah had?

I jumped as my phone buzzed in my pocket. When I pulled it out, I saw I had a text from Wes. Speak of the devil.

> Wes: Hey, how's it going? When are you getting back to school? I miss you.

I SWORE UNDER MY BREATH, and guilt swelled in my chest. I'd been so distracted by everything I hadn't messaged Wes since yesterday. He didn't even know I'd just gotten back to Weybridge.

"That's Wes," I said to Anna. "I should go see him. On a scale of one to ten, how pissed do you think he'll be when he finds out I got a ride back from New York with Noah?"

Anna grimaced. "I mean, probably less pissed than if he hears Noah's in love with you."

I dropped my head into my hands. "Not helpful," I groaned.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm sure he'll be okay once you explain the whole story. You can't help what Noah does or feels. What's important is you want to be with Wes, and you told Noah that, right?"

"Right," I confirmed.

"Then I'm sure Wes will understand."

"Okay," I said, feeling a little more confident than before. Although that wasn't saying much. "I better go. Wish me luck."

~

WES WAS in his room when I arrived, but I wasn't greeted by my normally cheerful boyfriend. He seemed distant, and I knew something was up when he didn't move to kiss me or give me a hug when he answered the door. As I walked past him and into the room, I tried to reach out to him, but he stepped back. Seeing him recoil from me made my heart fall. I'd been worried about how Wes would react to all this, but I hadn't even told him yet, and already it didn't look good.

"I heard about Noah's party," he said once he'd closed the door behind him. "About his announcement and his arrangement with your father."

"You already heard about last night?"

"Everyone's heard, Isobel," he said. "Did you grow up under a rock? It's all anyone can talk about. It's been on the news and everything. What I don't understand is why I didn't hear it from you."

I thought he was being a little harsh, but I knew he was only lashing out because he was shocked and upset. How was I supposed to know that something like this would make the news? Maybe it was naïve of me not to have thought about it, but it's not like I'd been in this kind of situation before.

"I didn't realize," I said. "And yes, compared to you, I did grow up under a rock."

He winced. "I didn't mean it like that."

I shrugged because I thought perhaps he had. "I'm sorry I didn't call you last night. I was upset and just trying to process what had happened."

"And what about you and Noah?"

"What about me and Noah?"

"Why were you in his car?"

The blood drained from my skin. "How do you know about that?"

"One of the guys on the rowing team saw you two in the parking lot. I was planning to give you the benefit of the doubt, but you got back an hour ago and didn't even tell me."

I was really getting sick of this school and the way nothing ever stayed secret for long. "I got a ride back to school with Noah because Cress is staying in New York for an extra couple of days and my father wants us to play nice. I've been with Anna since I got back. I was going to tell you."

"Were you?"

"Of course, I was."

"And you think I'm just supposed to believe nothing's happening between you two now?"

"Yeah, I do," I said. "Just like when you asked me to believe you about that photo of you and Sarah."

"That's different."

"Is it? Because you asked me to trust you, and I did. Now, I'm asking the same."

"I trust you. You know I do," he said. "It's *him* I don't trust."

I let out a sigh.

"Seriously, Isobel. Noah betrayed his grandfather to side with your family. Can you really tell me he doesn't still have feelings for you?"

It seemed like Wes thought Noah's sole reason for the takeover were his feelings for me. There's no way he could have known the true reasons, but it showed how anxious he was about me and Noah. I couldn't tell him the full truth behind Noah's and Matthew's actions, but even if I did, I suspected Wes would still believe Noah was partly motivated by me.

"Noah didn't do it to simply side with my family," I said. "He certainly didn't do it for me. He had other reasons. But Noah's feelings aren't the ones that matter. Mine are."

"I realize that," Wes murmured. "And I know you had strong feelings for him."

"*Had*," I emphasized and walked toward him. This time, he didn't move away, and he let me place my hands on his chest. "And I *have* strong feelings for you. Noah is my past, and you are my future.

"It's just hard not to worry that might change now," he admitted.

"Wes, you're the only one I want to be with, and nothing that's happened changes that. I told Noah as much on the drive back. He knows how I feel about you."

"You did?"

"Of course, I did."

He slowly nodded though his jaw remained tight. "Okay," he said. "Thank you." His shoulders relaxed a little, but he still didn't look convinced, and his eyes were focused on the ground. I slid my hands up his chest and wrapped them round his neck, pulling him closer to me.

"And how are your feelings for me?" I asked, tilting my head to try to catch his eye. "Strong too?"

He glanced up at me, and a little more sparkle was in his gaze. “Stronger than you know,” he said.

I drew him in for a kiss, hoping my lips could erase any doubts he still felt. I wanted to be with Wes. I just needed him to believe it too.

He gave me a smile as I pulled back from our kiss, and I hoped that meant we were okay. But something still felt off. I hadn’t told him Noah had confessed he loved me, and given the strength of Wes’s reaction to everything else, I knew it was probably something he was better off not knowing. But even without that knowledge, there still seemed to be a hint of doubt in Wes’s eyes whenever he looked my way. I just hoped it wouldn’t linger.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I'd hoped that after my dramatic weekend life might go back to normal on Monday. I didn't want the chaotic events Noah and my father had instigated to change anything—especially not my relationship with Wes. It appeared that had been wishful thinking though, and I didn't even make it past breakfast before I realized things were going to be different now.

Noah and I arrived at the dining hall at the same time. He'd been ignoring me for such a long time that I assumed he would just walk past me without acknowledging my presence. I should have realized those days were over. Not only was he looking into my eyes for once, but he was also smiling.

I didn't return the look, striding beyond him and into the room. He fell into step beside me though as I approached the buffet. I glanced nervously toward my usual table but relaxed slightly when I saw Wes wasn't there.

I felt silly for being nervous about getting caught talking to Noah. But after the way Wes had acted yesterday, I didn't want to take any chances. He was already so on edge about me and Noah, and I didn't want to give him anything else to worry about.

As it was, Wes would probably still hear about it via the Weybridge Academy gossip grapevine. I'd always known the gossip in this school was rife, but I still couldn't believe he'd heard about my ride back from New York with Noah from a friend so quickly. I'd jumped out of Noah's car as soon as I'd arrived at school, but apparently in this place, all you needed was one person to see you at the wrong time.

There were only a few people in the dining hall this morning, but I knew that was more than enough to give rumors wings to fly. I needed to get Noah to leave me alone, and fast.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I don’t want to talk to you, Noah.”

He didn’t look the least bit put off by my response. “I know you must still be angry with me,” he said. “But I’m going to make it up to you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I replied. “I’d rather you just left me alone.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Crash.”

“Please don’t call me that.” I grabbed a plate and started piling food onto it. I was being as quick as I could and barely looking at the items I was selecting. I just wanted to get to the safety of my table as soon as possible. Noah followed me closely as I walked alongside the buffet counter.

“How was the rest of your weekend?” he asked.

“Not great seeing as, thanks to you, I’ve been doing damage control with my boyfriend.” I kept my voice low and practically hissed the words at him.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that,” he said, the sarcasm clear in his voice.

“You could try to sound a little less pleased.” I turned on him. “You don’t get to break up with me when it suits you and then expect me to want you back as soon as it works for you. I’ve moved on, and I’m happy.”

Noah frowned, and I knew I’d hit a nerve.

“You’re happier with Wesley Montfort than you were with me?”

“Wesley Montfort doesn’t come with drama.”

Noah tilted his head. “Is that the only reason you’re with him? Because he’s safe?”

“Of course, it’s not the only reason.”

Noah shook his head. “I know I hurt you, but I will never do that again. You would be safe with me too. Can’t you understand why I had to do the things I did?”

“Just because I understand them doesn’t mean I forgive you,” I said. “You could have told me what was going on. Instead, you chose to break my heart and keep me in the dark.”

"To protect you.”

I released a sigh and glanced down at my overflowing plate as I gathered my thoughts. I must have really been distracted because there was

a bizarre variety of food in front of me.

"The reason is irrelevant," I said as I looked up at him once more. "Like I said, we're over, and I've moved on. You need to respect that."

Noah ground his teeth together as he met my gaze. "I can respect that," he said. "But I don't like it."

"I didn't say you had to."

I went to walk away, but Noah reached out and touched my arm, stopping me. "I haven't given up on us," he said. "I can step back and let you play house with Wes if that's what you want. But when you realize he's not enough. That he doesn't make your heart race like I do. That you're done playing it safe. I'll be here."

His words rattled me. I shook him off before I turned and marched over to my table. I could feel Noah's eyes on me as I moved away from him. He had said he'd respect my relationship with Wes, but I got the feeling he wasn't going to leave me alone. That he was well and truly done keeping his distance.

As I made my way to English after breakfast, Veronica pulled me aside in the hallway. She jerked her head toward the girls' bathrooms, and I followed her in. I hadn't spoken to her since she asked me to keep quiet about the fact she'd been caught with a boy in her room. A boy who wasn't her boyfriend. I now knew that she'd never even been in a relationship with Noah. Maybe she was finally going to explain her side of the story.

She checked the stalls were empty before she turned to me. "You weren't with Noah at breakfast," she said. The accusatory tone to her voice made me frown.

"Uh, no. Why would I be?"

"Because he's in love with you, obviously." She rolled her eyes. "He told you that me and him were never together, right?"

"He did…" I replied. "So, you really weren't cheating on Noah then?"

"Clearly."

"But I thought you were in love with him."

She laughed. "Why on earth would I love someone who isn't the least bit interested in me?" Her eyebrows slowly lifted. "You think someone like me would really pine after a guy who was in love with another girl? Please, I'm amazing, and if a guy can't see that, he's not the guy for me."

She pulled a lipstick out of her bag and began to apply it, checking her reflection in the mirror and pursing her lips as she did.

I shifted slightly on my feet, uncomfortable with the way she was so openly talking about Noah's feelings. How did she even know Noah had confessed his love for me? Was it that obvious?

"But I don't understand," I said. "Why would you agree to pretend to date him?"

"He's not the only one who needed to hide things from his family," she said. "And pretending we were in a relationship suited my own purposes just as much as it helped him."

"What were you hiding?"

She let out a laugh and put her lipstick back in her bag. "Like I'd tell you."

"You told me about getting caught in another boy's room..."

"Of course, I did. I knew Noah was about to tell you the truth, so I figured I'd do you a favor. I suspected you might not believe him when he told you everything with me was faked, so I decided to give you a hint first."

I stared at Veronica, the frown becoming more apparent on my face. I was never going to understand this girl. When I'd first gotten to this school, she'd taken it as a personal insult that I got close to Noah. Now she seemed to be pushing us together.

"Not that any of this matters to me anymore," she continued. "Thanks to your father buying out my father's investment in Hastings Laboratories, I don't have to keep pretending I worship the ground Noah walks on."

"Your father was the investor Matthew bought out?"

"Yes." She looked down her nose at me like I was stupid for missing it. "And thank God. That company was a sinking ship."

I stared at her, still in shock. "That's why your families were always forcing you together?"

"Ugh, don't remind me. I'm so glad that's over. Maybe now my mother will be a little less interested in who I spend my time with."

I shook my head at her. "You know, I really thought you'd accidently revealed to me that you got caught in that boy's room."

"Oh, Isobel." A deliberate smile curved her lips. "Nothing I do is by accident."

She flashed me a smile before she strode past me and out into the hallway. It took me a moment to gather my thoughts and trail after her. I couldn't decide whether Veronica was slightly unhinged or brilliant. It was probably a little of both.



WHEN I GOT to math class, I was greeted by another surprise. Luther was apparently talking to me again. As I entered the classroom, he linked his arm through mine and led me to the back of the room, ushering me toward the seat next to his.

"Oh, so we're friends again, are we?" I asked.

"Yep." Luther grinned. "Noah reneged on the whole pick a side thing. Isn't it great?"

He let go of my arm, but I refused to take the seat he offered me.

"No, it's not *great*," I said. "You really hurt me when you decided to ditch me the way you did."

Luther's expression dimmed. "I know," he said. "But you didn't see the state Noah was in. He wouldn't tell me what was going on, and the way he was acting had me really worried. He's been my best friend for a long time, and I knew he wouldn't ask me to do something like that unless he had a good reason. I had to trust him."

"That doesn't make it okay."

"I know, newbie. I know." Luther sighed. "But I'm just hoping you'll forgive me."

I folded my arms across my chest as I looked at him. I wasn't sure what to do. I knew it wasn't fair Luther had been forced to choose. And I understood now that Noah was just doing everything he could to convince his grandfather he wanted nothing to do with me. Still, watching Luther and Kaden turn their backs on me had been horrible.

"You're pausing way too long there, newbie…"

"Because I'm thinking."

"You're still not convinced." He nodded and slowly started to smile. "Maybe it's because I haven't said sorry yet. Luckily, I've prepared a little something to help with that."

"What are you—"

Luther clapped his hands together to cut me off and then pointed at a kid sitting nearby. The guy pulled an acoustic guitar from beside his desk and started to strum several chords.

“Oh no,” I gasped with horror as Luther jumped up to stand on his seat and put one foot on top of his desk before he reached out his hands toward me. “Luther, don’t…”

But it was too late. He was grinning broadly as he launched into a rendition of “Sorry” by Justin Bieber.

I was mortified, and my cheeks grew hot with embarrassment as Luther serenaded me from his perch on the desk. He wasn’t the best singer, but that didn’t appear to bother him one bit.

Everyone had turned in their seats to watch him, and my embarrassment only multiplied when I saw people gathering by the door and poking their heads in from the corridor. Luther’s voice was probably going to attract the whole school.

“Luther, stop,” I pleaded.

He paused for a moment, but the guitarist continued to play in the background.

“So, you forgive me?”

“Uh…” I hesitated for a second too long, and he jumped right back into the verse.

“Please, Luther,” I begged after he sang two more lines. The crowd at the door was growing larger and people were starting to spill into the classroom, but Luther didn’t take any notice as he kept singing.

“Luther, you don’t have to—”

A huge cheer went up from the class as Luther leaped off his desk and landed in front of me. He dropped to his knees before he belted out the chorus.

“Oh my gosh, okay,” I shouted to be heard over his voice. “I forgive you. I forgive you!” I did *not* need to hear him go any further.

He grinned as he climbed to his feet and nodded at his guitarist who thankfully stopped playing. Luther then bowed as the students watching us gave him a round of applause.

“I’m glad we could sort that out, newbie,” he said calmly as though nothing unusual had just happened. “Now are you sitting with us?”

“Only because I’m terrified you might sing for me again.”

“Please. You know you loved every moment of it.”

As I settled into my seat, Kaden entered the classroom, squeezing his way through the dispersing crowd by the door. His face lit up with a bright smile as he approached. “You guys made up,” he said, taking his usual seat on the other side of Luther.

“Yes, but I really don’t want to talk about it,” I replied.

“You missed my apology,” Luther said. “It was beautiful.”

“I heard it from halfway down the hallway.” Kaden laughed. “I thought you were joking about the song.”

“Why would I joke about that? Newbie deserved more than just a simple *I’m sorry.* Didn’t you, newbie.”

Luther winked at me, and I shook my head as I laughed at him. It felt good to be sitting with the boys again. After the weekend’s events, I wasn’t sure what was coming my way next, but this was one change I could get on board with—so long as Luther never sang for me again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Noah was sitting at the desk right behind mine when I arrived at our business management class later that day. He hadn't sat there since before Halloween. As I entered the room, he gave me a hopeful smile. I didn't return the look. I didn't want to encourage him. But as soon as I sat down, he leaned forward to talk to me.

"We should get together and work on our project soon," Noah said. I had planned to try to ignore him for the duration of this class, but that wasn't exactly an option when we had an assignment to complete together.

I turned in my chair to face him. "I thought you wanted us to work on it separately?"

"Maybe I changed my mind."

"Maybe that doesn't matter," I replied. "I've already done my part of the assignment anyway." It was a total lie, but he didn't need to know that. I was sticking to my plan of keeping as much distance from Noah as possible.

"You haven't emailed it to me."

"I'm just putting the finishing touches on it," I lied again.

"Okay, I guess we'll just have to get together so you can help me with my part."

"You don't need my help."

"I do. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"You literally just stole your grandfather's company out from under him," I hissed. "I'm sure a business management class project is well within your capabilities."

He shrugged and smiled at me. “Are you willing to take that chance? What if we fail?”

He knew me far too well, and I grunted reluctantly. “Fine. We can meet in the library on Tuesday night to work on it.”

“It’s a date,” he said.

“It’s not a—”

“Good afternoon, class,” the teacher said, interrupting me as he entered the class.

“It’s not a date,” I finished before turning to the front of the room. I could practically feel Noah grinning behind me. Lily was sitting beside me, and she shot me a confused look. I whispered to her that I’d explain after class.

But when the bell rang, I noticed Noah getting ready to annoy me again, and I made a beeline for the door. I didn’t want him repeating that our study session was a date. Especially not where other people might hear.

Lily must have been super curious about my interaction with Noah because she caught up with me as I was making my way across the courtyard back to the dorms.

“Hey,” she said, sounding slightly out of breath. “You took off after class. Are you okay?”

“Sorry.” I shook my head. “I’m fine. I just didn’t want to get cornered by Noah.”

“Right.” She nodded, clutching her books to her chest. “What was up with him today?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I thought you guys were over,” she continued. “He’s been so off with you since you broke up, but now he’s sitting near us again. And he was making eyes at you all class. *And* he wants a study date with you.”

“Like I said, it’s a long story.” I’d talked her ear off enough times about Noah in the past, so I knew she deserved an explanation. I did my best to summarize the wild weekend in New York as quickly as I could.

She listened intently as I told her about Noah’s move against his grandfather, how he’d hidden his feelings for me, and how he now wanted me back. Lily’s eyes slowly grew wider and wider as I spoke. It was a crazy story, but it was even harder to comprehend when you were from a humble background like the two of us.

“I’d heard about the takeover,” she murmured. “Everyone’s been talking about it. But, wow, Noah’s really had feelings for you all this time?”

“Yeah.” I glanced down at my hands. I’d come to terms with most of what had happened in New York, but that part was still proving difficult.

“What are you going to do?”

I looked up at her once more. “What do you mean?”

“About Noah? He clearly still loves you.”

“I’m not going to do anything. I’m with Wes, and I’ve made it clear to Noah that nothing is going to happen.”

She frowned slightly, and I wondered if she disagreed with my decision.

“Wes is really good for me,” I added, trying to emphasize my point. “He’s a great boyfriend.”

“You don’t have to convince me.” Lily’s expression changed as she gave me an easy smile. “I know how much you care about Wes.”

“I do,” I agreed.

We continued our walk across the courtyard, but I couldn’t shake the feeling Lily thought I was making the wrong choice. In my mind there wasn’t even a choice to make. I was with Wes, and that was all there was to it.



I SPENT the whole of the next day dreading my meeting with Noah in the library that night. I’d already been struggling to alleviate Wes’s concerns about my ex, but it wasn’t like I had much choice in the matter. Not if I wanted to do well on our business management assignment.

I was mainly worried Noah would try to flirt with me or make eyes at me. Really, anything that might convince me to dump my boyfriend and be with him. If people saw that, they might start gossiping about it. But despite my fears and Noah’s attempts to call the study session a date, when the evening came, he was surprisingly subdued.

He sat beside me at the study table and focused completely on our work. He didn’t try to talk about what happened on the weekend or ask me how I felt. He didn’t even try to flirt. It was as though he really did just want to work on our assignment.

I couldn’t decide if I was relieved or annoyed. Had he already given up on me? Was that what I wanted? It’s what I was supposed to want, but I was shocked it had happened so fast.

We actually managed to get most of the assignment done. It took a lot longer than expected because we were practically starting from scratch despite my claims I’d almost finished my part.

We stayed in the library right up until curfew when all of the other students had already packed up their things and left. We were probably only just going to make it back to our dorms in time. I couldn’t complain though. We’d done some great work on our assignment, and it only needed a few final touches now. Thankfully, that could be done separately.

The weather had turned icy this evening, and I was wearing more layers than usual to try to combat the cold. Noah chuckled when he saw me putting on two jackets, a hat, and a scarf before we left.

“Can’t handle the cold?” he asked.

“It’s not cold. It’s freezing,” I said. “And I have no problem admitting I can’t handle it.”

He smiled. “You look like you’re dressed for a night in the arctic rather than Weybridge.”

“Are you sure we’re not in the arctic?” I asked. “Because it feels like it out there.”

We started back to the dorms together. We weren’t walking all that close to each other, yet my skin still prickled at his proximity. Despite the distance between us and the thick woolen jackets I was wearing, I could still feel him at my side. I wondered if Noah sensed me in the same way.

“I’m glad we got most of the assignment done,” I said as we made our way down the darkened corridor that led from the library. I was trying to fill the silence. Talking seemed so much safer than the quiet, which left me with only the tension between us to focus on.

“See, a study date with me wasn’t so bad, was it, Crash?”

“It wasn’t a date. And that’s not my name.”

He didn’t seem phased by my response, and there was a carefree smile on his lips as he glanced at me. “Whatever you say.” Clearly, he had no intention of listening to me.

He pushed through the door that led outside, and I immediately felt like my outfit was justified when the icy air struck me. “Stop calling me that nickname. I’m with someone else, Noah.”

“For now.” He shrugged.

“Noah…”

“I told you I would respect your choice to be with Wes,” he said. “And I care about you enough that I just want you to be with the guy that makes you the happiest. But I’m sure it won’t be long before you realize that’s me.”

“You sound awfully confident.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I know what we had. I know what we felt. Nothing else comes close.”

I stopped. “You can’t honestly be so certain of that.”

He’d taken a couple of steps past me, but he turned. “Isobel, I’ve known you’re the one for me since the moment you crashed into me in the woods. And every day since has only convinced me more. So, if I have to wait until you see that too, then I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

I shook my head at him. “Well, it’s going to take a very, very long time.”

“Perhaps,” Noah said. “But it’ll be worth it.”

As he spoke, a small white speck fluttered past him. And then another. I lifted out a hand and watched as a snowflake softly fell upon it. It was light and cold and tickled my skin.

“It’s snowing,” I whispered before glancing up at Noah, a wide smile on my face. Tiny flakes of snow were fluttering down around us, catching in our hair, and lightly settling on our clothes. All across the courtyard, the snow was silently falling through the air and coming to rest on the bushes and statues.

“Noah, it’s snowing!” I laughed. I knew I was probably acting like a small child, but it was hard to contain my excitement as I swung myself around, the tension that had been rising in my chest from our conversation suddenly gone.

He chuckled as he watched my reaction.

“Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?” I asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

Noah wasn’t looking at the snow as he spoke. He was looking at me.

I swallowed and tried my best to mask my reaction. I wanted to stay out here all night and watch it snow, but it was already past curfew, and it suddenly felt wrong to be out here with Noah.

“It’s late,” I said. “We should get back to our rooms.”

Noah released a breath and nodded. “We should.”

We didn’t move on right away though. For a moment, we simply stared at each other. Small snowflakes were caught in Noah’s hair, and his eyes were still bright from laughing at me. He was unbelievably gorgeous, and it was hard to stop my heart from beating a little quicker after all the things he’d just said.

As I looked at him, a part of me wished things were different. That our families hadn’t been enemies. That he could have told me what he was up to. That we could have fallen for each other in another place and time.

There was no changing the past though. Noah and I had our time, but it was over. No matter how much Noah might believe otherwise, I didn’t know if I could go back to that place. No matter how much this beautiful boy wanted my heart, I needed to walk away from him because I’d already given it to someone else.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Isobel, wake up!"

I was jerked awake as Cress shook me by the shoulders. I groaned as I slowly blinked my eyes open. It felt way too early even for me.

Glancing at the clock, I jolted upright. "What's wrong?" It was first thing in the morning, and the sun was only just coming up. Something bad must have happened for Cress to be forcing me awake at this hour. I really hoped there hadn't been another prank.

"Just get up. *Quickly*." She raced into the closet, and I scrambled out of bed to hurry after her. She sounded too serious for it to be a prank, and I was starting to get worried, but as I entered the closet, I found her grinning as she slid into her UGG boots.

A little of my apprehension disappeared when I saw her expression, but I still had no idea what was going on. "Seriously, Cress, what's the hurry?"

"You'll see. Just grab your shoes, your gloves, and a warm jacket. We're going outside." She threw a pair of gloves at me, and I caught them midair.

She hadn't bothered to change out of her pajamas, so I didn't worry about it either. Thankfully, I was already dressed in a pair of thick flannelette pants and a cozy top, so I simply pulled on my jacket, shoes, and gloves, and then a beanie for good measure.

When we got out into the corridor, Anna was waiting for us, bouncing up and down on her toes.

"Finally," she gasped, already starting to walk down the hallway. Cress and I hurried to keep up.

Other girls were emerging excitedly from their rooms, and there was a buzz in the air that was hard not to get caught up in. It was only once we left the building that I finally realized what all the fuss was about.

The flurries of snow I'd seen last night must have turned into a full blizzard because the courtyard was covered in a thick fluffy layer of snow. It glowed in the early-morning light and was so beautiful I barely noticed the biting nip in the air.

"Snowball fight," a boy screamed from somewhere on the other side of the courtyard, and the serenity descended into chaos as balls of snow went flying. I squealed as one came hurtling for me, but Anna grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me out of the way.

"Come on," she laughed. "We've got to get out of the firing line."

We raced away from the front of the dorm, laughter surrounding us as everyone in the courtyard joined in the fight. I followed Anna toward one of the benches lining the perimeter of the courtyard, and she ducked down behind it, gesturing for Cress and I to do the same. There was a row of bushes behind us, and it felt a lot more sheltered here than out in the open.

"Here's what you need to know." Anna clamped both hands on my shoulders and looked me square in the face. "The first snowball fight of the season is always brutal. Lives will be lost, but they won't be ours. Our team motto is hit them first, hit them hard, and take no prisoners."

I might have laughed if she didn't sound so stern.

The sound of a whistle screeched through the morning air, and the snowballs stopped flying. I peeked over the top of the bench to see Coach August standing in the center of the courtyard. He was still in his pajamas too, but he was also wearing a thick coat and snow boots. Had he decided to stop the fight before it even really began?

"The battlegrounds are contained to this courtyard," he called out, his voice projecting loudly across the wide-open space. "If you stray beyond it, you're out. If you get hit, you're out. No snowballs above the neck, so if you hit someone's head, you're out. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Coach." The answer was loud as everyone in the courtyard responded. It sounded like the entire school was out here.

"Good. Then let this year's first snow battle begin." He blew his whistle, and screams and shouts echoed across the courtyard as snowballs started hurling through the air once again.

“Right,” Anna said. “Let’s build up a good base of snowballs so we can defend our fort.”

She and Cress got to work straightaway as they started scrunching together balls of snow in their gloves. I’d never made a snowball before in my life, but it didn’t take me long to get the hang of it. Once we had a few in stock, Anna started flinging them at anyone who ran by. She had surprisingly good aim, and she managed to knock out three kids in a row.

She lifted her arm as two other people dared to make their way toward our bench, but she quickly lowered it when she saw it was Sawyer and Wes.

“Ladies, how are we doing?” Sawyer asked as he crouched behind the bench with us. Wes winked at me and knelt down beside me.

“So far, so good,” Anna said. “We’re three for three.”

“I’m five for five.” Sawyer grinned.

“I didn’t realize this was a competition,” I murmured to Wes.

“With Sawyer, it’s always a competition,” he replied.

“How many have you got so far?”

“Not one.” He wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “I was too busy looking for you. I was hoping you might need protecting.”

I smiled up at him. “Well, it turns out I’ve got two pretty good teammates here. Anna isn’t letting anyone get within twenty feet of us.”

He laughed and leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. “Well, then, I guess I’ll leave you girls to it. Good luck out there.”

“You too.”

Wes grabbed Sawyer, and the two of them took off again. They were in their element as they darted across the battlefield, dodging snowballs and returning fire.

From the safety of our fort, defended by Anna, I could see the courtyard was total chaos. There were some kids like us who had taken cover and were defending their positions. Then there were others like Kaden and Luther who were in the thick of the action. The two of them were dominating the fight from the center of the courtyard, and I couldn’t tell if people were simply too intimidated to try to take them out or if they were simply that good.

Cress let out a small sigh beside me, and I grinned when I realized she was watching them too. “Are you checking out Kaden?” I said, nudging her with my shoulder.

“Maybe.”

"Definitely."

“What?” She laughed. “I can’t help it. My boyfriend looks good in his snow gear.”

“Boyfriend?” I gasped.

“Yeah.” Her eyes glittered with excitement. “We made it official when I got back to school last night.”

“Aw, I’m so happy for you both.”

“Yeah, congrats, Cress,” Anna interrupted. “But can we gush about this later? We have a snowball fight to win.”

Cress and I shared a look and then laughed. Anna was taking this game far too seriously. Still, we both tried to focus on the task at hand, probably out of fear Anna might turn her snowballs on us if we didn’t.

I was distracted when I heard a giggle coming from somewhere beyond the bushes behind us. Cress and Anna didn’t seem to notice, but I turned and pushed the branches aside as I tried to see who was there.

There was a flash of long red hair as a girl ran past, closely pursued by a boy. He playfully tackled her to the ground right in front of me, and the snow went flying up around them as they landed.

“Got you.” He laughed as he hovered over her. They had their backs to me, so I couldn’t see either of their faces. I was wondering whether they knew they were out of bounds and would be disqualified from the snowball fight. But then the boy lowered his head and kissed the girl as she lay under him in the snow.

I quickly pulled back from the bush and resumed my place next to Cress. “Oh, my gosh,” I said. “I know Anna wants us to stay focused on the fight, but there are totally two students kissing on the other side of the bushes behind us.”

“Really?” Cress laughed. She turned to take a peek through the branches and giggled. “Wow, they’re really making out.”

“Okay, I have to see this,” Anna said, leaving her post at the corner of our bench. Given how seriously she was taking the snowball fight, I was surprised she was willing to take her eyes off the game for a second. Apparently, her curiosity was too great.

“Shit, that’s Veronica and Eric,” she said, jolting back from the bushes, her eyes wide with surprise.

“What?” I crawled up beside her and took a second look. The guy had pulled back to look the girl in the eyes, and now they were farther apart, I

could see Anna was right. And from the adoring way Eric was looking down at Veronica, this wasn't just some surprise snowball fight fun.

"Why is Veronica making out with a scholarship student?" Cress asked as I faced the girls again. "She's always hated them."

I knew that wasn't totally true. Veronica had told me she didn't actually have a problem with the scholarship students, and seeing her with Eric made me wonder if her cruelty toward them was just part of the carefully crafted persona she'd built for herself at this school. Still, I probably wouldn't have believed she was kissing a scholarship student either if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

"I guess she doesn't hate all of them," Anna replied, her eyes still bulging. "Do you think they're together, together? Or do you think they're just caught up in the moment?"

Cress glanced through the bushes again. "It kind of looks like they're together, together. Look at the way they're smiling at each other."

Anna and I crowded in to see. Veronica and Eric were covered in snow, and he was helping her to her feet. I'd never seen her look so lighthearted, and there was a bright sparkle in her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her, and the way he held her showed familiarity that couldn't be faked. But seeing as they didn't know anyone was watching them, why would they be acting anything other than genuine.

"Wow, I think you're right," Anna said. "People at school would lose their minds if they knew about this."

"Maybe we shouldn't tell anyone," I said as I pulled away from the bushes. I was starting to feel bad about intruding on their privacy. "They seem happy and clearly want to keep it a secret. Why would we ruin that?"

"Are you forgetting that Veronica put posters around the school of you in your café uniform?" Anna asked.

"She did." I shrugged. "But I don't really care anymore, and she kind of did me a favor. I hated keeping the truth about that from everyone, and my life's better with it all out in the open."

My friends nodded with understanding, and Anna let out a sigh. "Okay, so I guess we're keeping Veronica's snowy rendezvous with Eric a secret."

"Yeah, that's probably for the best," Cress agreed. "I hear her mom's a social-climbing nightmare. She'd probably freak out if she knew about this. And the two of them look so cute together; I'd hate to be the reason they broke up."

Veronica’s actions finally felt like they made sense to me. If she really was with Eric, then maybe she pretended to date Noah to hide her real relationship, especially from her mom. Maybe Eric was the boy that got caught in her room. It was actually all kind of romantic.

“Incoming!” Anna squealed as she noticed a group of guys charging toward us from the side. They were pelting snowballs at us in quick unison, and from the angle they were approaching, the bench offered us no protection. We’d taken our eyes off the game for a minute, and our fortress had fallen.

“Go, go, go!” Anna shouted, waving her hands at us.

I scrambled to my feet and started to run with Cress and Anna right behind me.

“Damn it,” Anna cried. “I’m out.”

“I’m down too,” Cress groaned.

I started to slow down and looked behind me so I could check on my friends, but the girls shouted at me to keep running.

“Save yourself, Isobel,” Anna cried out. “Live to fight another day.”

She looked deadly serious, so I did as she ordered and continued to sprint away along the perimeter of the courtyard. It was no use though. There were three boys and only one me. And they were fast. I had no hope. I ran until I reached the corner of the boys’ dorm. There was a walkway leading down the side of it, but I knew I couldn’t take it without being knocked out of the game. There was no escape for me, so I crouched down to quickly gather some snow together before I stood tall and turned to face the boys pursing me.

I kept my snowball cradled behind my back as they closed in. They were laughing as they slowed to a walk and surrounded me. Each one had a snowball gripped in their hands. My lone snowball would be useless against three guys even if I did trust my aim to get one of them out. Which I didn’t. I kept it hidden behind my back in case by some miracle they all missed and I had the opportunity to escape. It was a long shot though.

The three boys lifted their snowballs above their heads. With the wall to my back and the boys fanned out in front of me, there was no room to dodge out of the way and nothing to use for protection, and they were so close there was no chance they’d miss. I shut my eyes tight as I braced for impact. It was about to be game over for me. Anna would be so disappointed.

But then I heard shouting, and as I opened my eyes, Noah appeared in front of me. He was cradling a pile of snowballs with one arm, and he was launching them at the three guys with the other. He threw them hard and fast and with unnerving accuracy. Noah might have been brilliant at soccer, but I was surprised he wasn't also the star of the baseball team with an arm like that.

The guys had been so focused on me they weren't able to react fast enough. And by the time they realized what was happening, it was already too late. They were out of the game, and they groaned with frustration as they trudged off through the snow.

Noah turned to me, his eyes bright with excitement and his cheeks flushed from the cold.

"Thanks, Noah, but you didn't have to do that."

A playful smile was on his lips. "Maybe I like coming to your rescue?"

I scoffed. "I don't need rescuing."

"Well, maybe I just wanted to get you out myself."

I glanced down at the snowballs in his hands. He wasn't primed to throw them at me, but I'd just seen exactly how quickly he could move.

"Oh, are you going to take me out with one of those?" I asked, taking a slow step toward him. I still had one snowball behind my back. Perhaps if I could get him to let his guard down, I might be able to throw mine first. "You're going to hit a girl while she's alone and unarmed?"

"I never said I played fair." He taunted me as I came to stand before him. He tilted his head to watch me, his eyes narrowing like he was trying to figure me out. Trying to understand why I would walk toward him when he was threatening me with snowballs. He was so focused on my face he didn't see my arm as it sneaked out from behind my back.

I lifted the snowball above my head and crushed it against the side of his face. "I never said I played fair either."

There was a stunned look in Noah's eyes, but then he burst out laughing. The sound was so light and full of joy I found myself smiling too.

"You got me there, Crash," he said through his chuckles. "But you also got yourself. No snowballs to the face, remember?"

"Oh, I forgot about that." I shrugged but my smile didn't drop. "I think it was worth it."

"I can see that." He grinned.

It was strange sharing this moment with Noah. It was easy and fun. It felt like it shouldn’t belong to us.

“I guess we should join the rest of the spectators,” Noah said.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

And just like that, the moment was over. As we walked back to the dorms, where everyone who had already been knocked out was gathering to watch, I spotted Wes across the courtyard. He was frowning in my direction, and I had a feeling he’d just seen Noah and I together. We hadn’t done anything wrong, but why did my stomach twist uneasily like we had?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It snowed on and off over the next few days, and crossing the courtyard between our dorm and Esher Hall always felt like a risk. If it wasn't the icy ground that got you, a snowball from one of the skirmishes that regularly broke out near the boys' dorm often would. At least it was good practice for our upcoming ski trip.

Wes had been acting out of sorts too though. He'd seemed that way ever since my weekend in New York, and I knew Noah was the cause. Wes grew rigid whenever Noah glanced my way, and he always made a show of kissing me or pulling me close whenever Noah was in the same room. It was like he felt compelled to remind Noah we were together every chance he got.

I was trying my best to be understanding. We'd both been burned by past relationships, and I knew Wes was only acting this way because he didn't want to lose me. I didn't want to lose him either. I wanted to do whatever I could to make sure he felt comfortable.

I was almost glad when the last weekend before Christmas break passed and everyone at school turned their attention to finals week. Projects were due, tests were scheduled, and we were all desperate for the holidays to begin. I refused to let my love life get in the way of my grades, so I took to studying in the library most nights, and, to be honest, I welcomed the distraction.

The library was packed with students cramming most evenings. Even Cress and Anna, who avoided homework like the plague, had started joining me to study.

“I hate school,” Anna groaned one evening. “There should be a national ban on giving us this much work right before the holidays. Seriously, it should be illegal.” We’d been studying for hours, and her head was facedown on the table.

“We only have our English test left, and then we’re on break,” Cress reminded her. “This is the home stretch.”

“Yeah, but I still have to survive the test tomorrow.” She glanced up at Cress and me. “Do you think I can just bribe my English teacher to give me an A? I bet some students do.”

“I’m sure they try,” Cress said. “But, unfortunately, that’s something that *is* illegal. And you’re better than that.”

“Am I?” Anna replied.

“Yes,” Cress answered. “You’re going to get through life on your own merit.”

“Am I?” Anna parroted her previous question. “Because I’m quite certain I could easily just coast through on my parents’ coattails.”

Cress lifted her eyebrows. “Is that really something you want? To be successful because of your parents?”

Anna glared at her. “Cress, you’re supposed to be agreeing with me and helping me find a quick fix for my pain. Not making me consider the ethical implications of my actions.”

“Ethical implications? I’m trying to make you consider the implications on your criminal record…”

“Whatever.” Anna shrugged. “You’re making me want to do the work on my own, and I don’t like it.”

Cress laughed before letting out a sigh. “Yeah, I don’t like it either.”

The two of them had frequently broken out into conversations like that, and I was doing my best to ignore them. We had our English final in the morning, and I was trying to do a practice test. I’d just come to the end of it though, and I smiled as I placed my pen down on the table and glanced up at my friends.

“You guys are supposed to be studying, not chatting,” I said.

“Oh, welcome back, are you done with your practice test?” Anna grinned.

“Yeah, I just finished. You don’t seem to be making much progress on yours.”

“I got bored. I think I’ll do better if I just wing it.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” I replied with a shake of my head. “How are you getting on, Cress?”

“Terribly. Someone keeps distracting me.” She shot a look at Anna who lifted her hands in the air innocently.

“Hey, you were distracted because you wanted to be.”

“Maybe.” Cress laughed.

“I think I need a snack,” I said. “I’m going to go grab some cookies. Do you guys want anything?”

“Oh, get one for me,” Anna replied.

“Yeah, me too,” Cress agreed.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a minute.”

I put my phone in my pocket but left the rest of my things behind as I departed the library. With so many students studying in the evenings this week, they’d kept the dining hall open late. It was busy when I arrived, and I was surprised how many people were working in there, but given there was a buffet full of study snacks, it was probably the place to be.

I waited in line and got myself a coffee and then picked up some cookies for the girls before I started back to the library. I was passing an empty classroom when I heard a raised voice from within.

“Stop calling me. You need to accept this is happening, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

I recognized Noah’s voice and was surprised by the venom in his tone. He was always so good at keeping his composure, so I knew something serious must be going on if he was this flustered. The door was open a crack, and as I moved closer, I caught sight of him through the gap. He was pushing a hand through his hair, his eyes narrowed in a scowl as he paced the room.

“You’ll do what?” The urgency in his voice was growing, and then it became a low growl that sent a shiver down my spine. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He paused again as he listened to the caller’s response, but then he slammed the phone down on the desk in front of him. He kicked out at the chair next to him, sending it flying onto its side. His face was pale, and he seemed to be shaking with anger. I slowly pushed the door open wider and stepped into the room. Once I was in there and Noah’s wild eyes were staring into mine, I wondered what the hell I was doing. I shouldn’t be coming to console Noah, but it seemed I couldn’t help myself.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “I heard you from out in the hallway.”

Noah gripped a hand to his hair as he released a breath. “Do I look okay?

“No, not really. Who was that on the phone?”

“Who do you think?”

Given his irritation, I thought the answer was pretty clear. There was only one person who could make him feel this way.

“It was your grandfather.”

He nodded and swore under his breath. “I didn’t think he could sink much lower, but he’s really gone and done it now.”

My stomach sank. “What has he done?”

“He’s lost his mind,” Noah said. “He knows there’s nothing he can do to stop the takeover, so he’s trying everything he can to convince me to reconsider.”

“And…”

“And he says if I don’t put a stop to the takeover by Christmas, he’s going to turn my father’s memorial into a parking lot.” Noah squeezed his eyes shut as though he was trying to control his anger.

“No,” I whispered. “He can’t do that.”

“He can, and he will. The land is still in his name. And he’s desperate. I knew he wouldn’t take this lying down, but I didn’t realize just how far he’d go.”

“That’s horrible. I’m so sorry, Noah.”

His eyes were pained as he looked into mine. “I thought taking over his company would be justice for what he’s done and that I’d finally feel some semblance of peace. But he’s always going to be there. He’s never going to let me get over it.”

I edged closer to him and reached out to touch his arm. He looked like he was at breaking point. He was always so in control, but his grandfather’s vile threat seemed to have snapped his restraint. I desperately wanted to wrap my arms around him, but I knew that would overstep the invisible line I’d drawn between us. We might not be together anymore, but I still cared, and I couldn’t just stand by and watch him break down without giving him some form of comfort.

“It’s going to be okay, Noah.”

“I’m not sure it is,” he said. “That’s the thing about my grandfather. He always seems to win, no matter the cost.”

“That’s not true. You beat him once before. You took his company from him. Now you’ve got Matthew’s support, and he won’t let William get away with this latest threat. And you have me in your corner too. We’re not going to let him win.”

His eyes snapped up to mine. “I don’t *have* you though, do I?”

I released a breath and pulled my hand away. “We might not be together, but I’m here for you. Your grandfather’s hurt me and my family as well.”

He nodded, and though I’d done my best to calm him, I couldn’t be sure he felt any better. How could he when his grandfather was planning to destroy his father’s memorial. If anything, my presence had probably only reminded him that he couldn’t have me in the way he wanted.

“I should go. Cress and Anna need their cookies.”

He nodded again and managed a small smile. “You’re right. Maybe Matthew can help. I’ll reach out to him.”

I smiled back at him and then made my way to the door, but Noah called out my name.

“Isobel,” he said. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“Anytime.” I nodded at him and left the room. I could hear him righting the chair he’d kicked over as I let the door close behind me.

I turned to walk down the hallway back to the library when I saw Wes was coming toward me. He waved at me, and I returned his broad smile, but the sound of the classroom door opening behind me caught my attention. Noah stepped out into the hallway after me, and when I looked back at Wes, he’d paused; the smile on his face was gone, a concerned look now in its place. He’d clearly seen Noah and I come out of the same room.

Noah glanced at me and then down the corridor at Wes, but he kept his face neutral as he turned and wandered off in the opposite direction. I made my way to Wes, who took a few labored steps toward me. His eyes were looking past me, fixated on Noah’s retreating figure.

“Hey,” I said, trying to give him a genuine smile despite the heavy conversation I’d just had with Noah and the deep frown that was still etched on Wes’s face. “Are you done studying?”

“I was just taking a break,” he said, slowly pulling his gaze from Noah to look at me. “What were you doing with him?”

“We were just talking.”

His jaw seemed to tighten. "Just talking? That’s all?”

“Of course.” I took a step back from him. “I understand you don’t trust Noah, but he and I are going to talk sometimes, and you should trust me enough to know that’s all we’re doing.”

“What were you talking about?”

“Just stuff with his grandfather and my dad.”

Wes remained tense as he considered me, but then he dropped his arms from across his chest and let out a breath.

“Wes,” I said, stepping closer to him. “You have to trust me.”

“Sorry.” He exhaled loudly again. “You’re right. I wasn’t trying to accuse you of anything. It’s just hard to see you with him. I’m sure he’s trying to win you back.”

“It doesn’t matter what he wants. I’m with you.”

He ran a hand through his hair and looked away. “I know that, Isobel. It’s just every time I see you together I’m reminded what it was like when you *were* together. I know how strong your feelings were for him then.”

I tried to keep my voice level as I responded. “That was then. This is now.”

“That’s just it though,” he said, turning back to look at me. “The reasons you broke up aren’t there anymore. There’s nothing stopping you from being together.”

“*I’m* stopping it, Wes,” I said, taking him by the hand. “I’ve told Noah that nothing is going to happen, so it won’t.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything in reply. I wasn’t sure what more I could say to relieve his anxiety. I felt like we’d already had this exact conversation the night I got back from New York, and clearly it hadn’t helped.

“Listen,” I continued. “In just a couple of days, we’ll be on our way to Aspen, far away from this school and Noah and anything else that reminds us of what’s happened before. Just me and you and snow and open fires and hot chocolate.”

“True,” he said.

I leaned in close and placed my hands on his chest. “Let’s just look forward to our first holiday together.”

His body finally seemed to relax under my touch, and a slight smirk crept onto his face. “Okay,” he said. “I think I can do that.”

“Good.” I reached up onto the tips of my toes and pressed a kiss against his lips. It lacked our usual passion, and I suspected thoughts of the ski trip

hadn’t entirely pushed Noah from his mind.

“I’m sorry,” he said as I landed back on my heels. “I hate that I keep bringing this up. I hear myself talking and I feel like I don’t recognize my own voice. I know I’m being jealous. I just care about you so much. I guess I’m scared of losing you.”

I lifted a hand to touch his cheek. “You’re not going to lose me, Wes.”

“Okay,” he said. “But still, I’ll try and be better.”

“I don’t want you to try and do anything,” I said. “If you’re feeling upset, I want to know.”

“Deal.” He smiled. “Now, I’ve distracted you from studying long enough. The sooner we get through the English test tomorrow, the sooner it will just be us and the mountains.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait.”

He placed another kiss on my lips and grinned at me. “Kick butt on your test tomorrow.”

I laughed as he started to walk away. “You too.”

He continued down the corridor, and I smiled as I watched him go. I couldn’t wait for our trip, and Wes seemed so eager for it too. It was going to be good for us to get away from Noah, and I really hoped this trip would help Wes finally realize I wasn’t going to change my mind about us. A small part of me still worried though that, trip or not, we were going to be stuck in this perpetual struggle forever.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was such a relief when Christmas break finally arrived. My English final went pretty well, and I was glad all the studying I'd put in paid off. Once it was over and the bell rang to signal the end of the day, a huge cheer filled the room. We could hear similar celebrations from the classroom next door, and even Mr. Brenner seemed happy school was over for the semester.

I officially finished off my week by submitting the business management assignment I'd been working on with Noah. I was glad we'd been able to polish it off without meeting in the library again. I'd been doing my best to avoid him for fear Wes's concerns might return.

As soon as I'd handed it in, my thoughts went to the mountains. I was so excited about the ski trip and even more excited to get back to Rapid Bay after that. My mom had been so busy with the café over the last few weeks, and she always sounded so tired when we spoke on the phone. I had to wonder if she was still staying up late stressing about finances. She needed a break. And after weeks of studying for finals, fretting about college applications, and, of course, the ongoing tension between me, Wes, and Noah, I was more than ready for a break myself.

We flew out to Aspen on the Montfort family jet first thing the following morning. I thought I might eventually get used to seeing expensive homes after spending time at my father's properties and even Luther's family villa in Weybridge, but when we arrived at the Montforts' ski chalet, I was speechless. I hadn't heard much about the place, but Wes and Sawyer had spoken about it like we were headed to some quaint cabin

in the woods. We might have been surrounded by trees, but this was no cabin.

The house was at the end of a peaceful cul-de-sac lined with other massive homes, but none were as big as the Montfort'. They were all made of silvery stone and dark wood with huge glass windows that overlooked the towering snowy mountains. As we got out of the car, I was struck by the freshness of the cool winter breeze, and I gaped up at the tall peaks. I was still coming to terms with how beautiful this part of the country was. I loved the tall pine trees dusted in snow and the soft white blanket that covered everything in sight. The sky seemed so much bluer here, and the air tasted so much cleaner.

Most of all, I loved the rocky peaks that surrounded us and the way they jutted into the sky. I'd always thought of myself as a beach girl, but I was being easily charmed by the mountains. The only thing that might take some getting used to was the cold. I was wrapped up in my warmest jacket, but I could still feel the nip in the air.

"Gosh, I love it here," Cress said as she jumped out of the car beside me. There was a wide smile on her face, and her eyes sparkled as she looked out at the view. The house was up a gradual slope and had a gorgeous outlook across the resort.

"Me too," Anna said, coming around the back of the car to join us. "We have to put up with Sawyer, but it's totally worth it."

"I heard that," Sawyer shouted from the other side of the vehicle.

Wes got out of the driver's seat and came to place an arm over my shoulders. Maybe I would be able to put up with the cold if he kept close to me this way.

"You want to see the house?" he asked.

"I'm still trying to get over the view," I said, making him grin.

"Well, it's just as good from inside. And it's warm too."

"You probably should have led with that." I laughed. "Let's get inside."

Wes insisted he and Sawyer could grab the luggage, so I followed Anna and Cress into the house. The entrance opened onto a large kitchen living area, and all of us stopped as we saw the huge windows that stretched across the entire back wall of the room. Beyond lay a view unlike any other I'd ever seen before.

The house was elevated, so it felt like we were hovering above the trees with the whole valley stretched out beneath us. We could see the town,

which was currently in the shadow of the mountains that stood behind it. Just off the living area on the other side of the window was a large deck that was basked in sunshine. If the weather stayed like this, I could easily picture myself sitting on the long comfy sofas out there, snuggled under a blanket, with a hot chocolate as I admired the view.

"Can you see why we like it here so much?" Anna asked.

"Uh, yeah." I gasped. "This place is incredible."

"So beautiful," Cress agreed. "I could stay out here forever."

When the twins entered the house, Sawyer was muttering curses under his breath while he attempted to drag Anna's bag inside.

"I thought you were the strong twin, Sawyer," Anna joked. "Perhaps I should have asked Wes to get my bag."

Sawyer's face only grew darker. Wes chuckled and shot Anna a wink before gesturing for me to follow him. He led us up a set of stairs, lugging my duffel bag with him, and showed me to my room. We each had our own bedroom, which I thought Cress would be particularly pleased about seeing as I was always up at the crack of dawn while she loved to sleep in. No matter how quiet I was, I often woke her up while I was getting ready for my morning runs.

My bedroom was gorgeous. It had a huge fluffy white bed, and a door in the corner led to an en suite bathroom. I looked through the large floor-to-ceiling windows, and the view was even better now we were higher.

Wes left me to get settled while he went to help with the rest of our group's luggage. I spent a few minutes unpacking before there was a knock at the door. I turned to see him leaning against the doorframe, a smile on his lips as he watched me. "Do you like the room?" he asked.

"I love it," I said. "And the view…" There were no words.

"I thought you'd like that," he said. "And you're right next door to me."

His cheeks flushed slightly as he glanced away. The thought of Wes sleeping in the next room had me a little flustered as well. We'd joked a few times about getting caught in each other's rooms after curfew, but there were no teachers clamping down on the rules here.

"So, you're saying you'll easily be able to hear me snore then?" I asked.

He laughed, and the awkward tension that had briefly appeared between us dissolved. "I'm sure you don't snore," he said, stepping into the room. "And even if you did, I'm sure it would be adorable."

"You don't know that. I could sound like a freight train."

“I have always liked trains.”

I laughed as he gathered me in his arms and looked into my eyes. “I can’t wait to spend these next few days together,” he said. “It’s going to be great finally having time for just the two of us.”

“We’ll have to ditch the others,” I reminded him.

“I’m sure we’ll find a way…” He lowered his head and closed in on my lips, but a shout from downstairs caused us to pause.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Anna’s voice echoed from the living area.

Wes let out a sigh and pulled away from me. “I wonder what that’s about?”

“She’s probably just discovered she forgot her favorite hair straightener,” I suggested.

Wes didn’t seem so sure though. “I better go check she hasn’t broken my mom’s precious china or something. Sawyer can’t be trusted to keep an eye on things.”

When we got downstairs, Cress and Sawyer had also just arrived in the living area. Anna was peering out the window by the front door, looking at the driveway.

“Anna, what’s wrong?” Cress asked as she went to join her.

“You’ll never believe who just arrived at the house next door.” Anna pulled away from the window and turned to us. The surprise on her face became an uncomfortable grimace when her eyes fell on me and Wes.

Cress leaned past Anna, peered out the window, and squealed. “Oh my gosh!” She was far more excited than Anna, and she immediately opened the front door and rushed outside.

Wes and Sawyer hurried to the front door while I followed just behind, dragging my feet. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to see who was out there.

“Hey there, neighbors.”

My worst fear was realized as I stepped outside to be greeted by Luther’s gleeful voice. Anna groaned, and my stomach flipped as I looked across the driveway to see Kaden and Luther standing in front of large black truck parked outside the house next door. Luther was waving at us, and Kaden was grinning as Cress ran toward him. When she reached him, she threw her arms around him, and he lifted her off the ground.

“We’re neighbors?” Kaden asked her through shocked laughter.

“What are you even doing here?” she asked at the same time. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming.”

“We decided to come just yesterday,” Kaden said. He looked a little nervous as though he hadn’t been sure what Cress’s reaction would be. “Luther organized it,” he continued. “I thought it might be fun to surprise you. But I didn’t know we’d be right next door. I hope this is okay?”

“Of course, it is,” Cress replied. She couldn’t wipe the smile off her face.

I wasn’t sure anyone else felt that way. Anna was standing with arms folded, glaring at Luther. Sawyer had a confused expression on his face, and I couldn’t bring myself to look at Wes. I knew what he’d be thinking because I was thinking it too. If Luther and Kaden were here, then surely Noah was too.

As if he’d been summoned by the thought alone, Noah appeared from behind the truck. His eyes widened when he saw us, betraying his surprise, and he leaned in to whisper something to Luther, but his friend just smirked at him. Noah looked just as shocked to see us as we were to see him, but when his eyes met mine, I was convinced I saw the hint of a smile touching the corner of his lips.

Wes’s arm fell across my shoulders as Luther approached us. Noah, Kaden, and Cress hovered slightly behind him.

“What a pleasant surprise this is,” Luther gushed, shaking his head for dramatic affect. “I didn’t know you had a chalet on this street.” His comment was directed at Wes, who was still looking far from impressed.

“I didn’t know you had a chalet here at all,” Wes replied.

“I don’t.” Luther shrugged. “It belongs to a friend, of a friend, of a friend. I heard it was free this week, so I thought why not.”

“Yes, I’m sure it had nothing to do with the fact we were all going to be here this week,” Anna said, her voice thick with sarcasm.

“Nothing at all,” Luther replied. “It’s a big town. How could I have known our place would be right next door to yours? I guess it was just meant to be.”

Luther looked very pleased with himself. Clearly, he had known exactly what he was doing when he organized the trip. It wasn’t clear how much Kaden and Noah knew though. Kaden was still looking a little sheepish now he had realized just how surprised we all were, and even Noah seemed a little taken aback by Luther’s stunt.

I could feel Wes's arm tightening around my shoulders as we all stood in the driveway, unsure what to do next. This was not how I'd imagined our trip would begin.

"Well, this is a little too awkward even for me," Anna said. "I'm going inside to unpack."

"Good idea," Sawyer said, quickly following her.

"Me too," Luther added. "You guys should come over later. Our place has a great hot tub on the terrace."

"So does ours," Wes replied. He was usually so friendly and easygoing with everyone at school, but it wasn't hard to miss the hostility in his voice as he shot down Luther's invitation.

Luther simply shrugged again. "Well, the offer's always there. See you later, neighbors." He turned and made his way back across the driveway to the chalet next door.

Cress gave Kaden a kiss and skipped back toward us, but Noah hesitated. He caught my eye, an almost apologetic look on his face. He looked like he might say something, but then he seemed to decide against it and turned to follow Luther and Kaden to their house. Cress was still glowing with happiness as she made her way over to us, but her enthusiasm dimmed slightly when she saw the way Wes was still scowling at Noah.

When we all got back inside, Sawyer and Anna were waiting in the living area. "Seriously," Sawyer said. "What are the chances they'd end up at the place next door to ours?"

"Don't be an idiot, Sawyer," Anna scoffed. "The chances are *zero*. Luther did this on purpose."

"Why?"

"Because he's Luther, and he does whatever he wants."

Anna was right, but I felt like Luther wasn't just doing this to please himself. And I think she knew that too. It was obvious this wasn't a coincidence, and in the pit of my stomach I worried it had something to do with me and Noah. Kaden's and Noah's surprise was strange though. Surely Luther hadn't tricked them too.

"Let's just forget about them," Anna said, clapping her hands together. "We've got a holiday to get started, and I think we should begin by raiding the Montfort wine cellar."

She bounded over to Cress and me, grabbed us by the hands, and pulled us down the hallway that led deeper into the house. I was somewhat glad to

escape the tension filling the living area, most of it radiating from Wes. He hadn't spoken in a few minutes now and was obviously struggling to accept the arrival of our new neighbors. It was understandable. He wasn't the only one who still needed to wrap their mind around it.

"I'm really sorry the guys are here," Cress said once we were out of the twins' earshot. "I promise I had no idea what they were planning, but it feels like it's my fault."

"Uh, how could this be your fault?" Anna asked.

"Because Kaden wanted to surprise me."

"That's not your fault, Cress," I said. "It's sweet that he wanted to see you. But I'm pretty sure this was all Luther's idea."

"Yeah, he was definitely the only one of those boys who wasn't surprised," Anna agreed.

"You promise you're not mad?" Cress asked. "Because I feel terrible."

"I'm not mad," I said. "Not with you, at least. I kind of want to have a few words with Luther though."

"Yeah, me too," Anna agreed. "I can understand them coming to Aspen, but renting out the place next door to us just so he can try and get you and Noah back together is not cool."

I winced and turned to Anna. "You really think that's what this is about?"

"I don't know," she said. "But what else would it be about?"

I preferred the theory that Luther had engineered the trip to help Kaden surprise Cress, but Anna had voiced the fear that was churning deep in my gut. Luther had always seemed convinced Noah and I would end up together, and he'd been going out of his way to set us up since the first day I met him.

Whether or not Anna was right, it didn't matter. Noah staying in the house next door wasn't going to affect me, and I had every intention of avoiding all three of those boys as much as possible while we were all here. But the problem wasn't my feelings; it was Wes's, and I worried that Noah's presence might just drive a wedge into the cracks that already seemed to be forming between us. This vacation was supposed to help us fix them, not make them worse.

I tried to push my concerns away and smiled up at my friends. "I thought we were going to forget about the boys," I said. "Anna, weren't you saying something about a wine cellar?"

She grinned and nodded. “Come on, I’ll lead the way.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It turned out Wes and Sawyer's parents had prepared for our visit as there was a lock on their wine cellar door. The girls were disappointed, and Anna tried her best to pick the lock. But, unfortunately, her skills with a bobby pin were limited to doing her hair.

I was somewhat glad we didn't drink that night. Since Noah and the boys had arrived, Wes seemed frustrated and irritable. The house was tense, and I felt like drinking alcohol would have been similar to throwing fuel on a simmering fire.

I woke the next morning feeling a little more optimistic that the day would be a good one. The sun was out, and we were all going up the mountain. Wes seemed more himself, and he was struggling to contain his excitement about helping me learn to ski for the first time. It might have been cute if I wasn't so daunted by the task ahead.

I was buzzing with adrenaline as we headed up the ski lift, and Noah was far from my mind. I knew I'd need every ounce of my focus firmly on my skiing if I wanted any chance of returning to the chalet in one piece at the end of the day. Unfortunately, any hope of that came crashing firmly down to earth when I reached the top of the ski slope.

"This doesn't seem safe…" My voice trembled as I stared down the seemingly steep slope before me. This was meant to be the easiest run in the resort, especially for beginners, but to me it felt practically vertical. Wes might have given me painstakingly detailed instructions on how to navigate it, but now I was up here, everything he'd told me had faded from my mind.

“You’ll be fine,” Wes said, trying to encourage me. “I’m going to be there every step of the way.”

“You mean every fall of the way,” I replied, giving him a smile I didn’t quite feel.

“Yeah, I’ll be there for those too.” He chuckled.

It was a relief to see him so much happier today and to know Noah’s presence next door wasn’t going to completely ruin our whole trip. Perhaps Wes had realized that just because the boys were staying so close it didn’t mean we had to do anything with them. Last night, we’d all stayed in and watched a movie together. No Kaden, Luther, or Noah. And there was no sign of them down here at the ski runs either. So, there was at least one positive to standing at the top of the terrifying icy descent before me.

Sawyer and Anna were chatting to each other quietly as they waited for Wes to finish giving me directions. They’d insisted on coming to help teach me how to ski, and while I was grateful for their enthusiasm, it only seemed to be increasing my nerves. I didn’t want an audience to watch me make a fool of myself. At least I could be glad Cress had ditched us to ski with Kaden. That was one less onlooker to worry about.

“Seriously, Isobel, just give it a go. You’ll do great.” Wes gave me a reassuring smile. “It’s a lot easier than it looks.”

I responded with a small nod, knowing if I opened my mouth I’d only try to convince Wes this was a terrible idea. I was here now, and I suspected there was only one way I was getting out of this. And that way was down.

I took a deep breath, gripped my ski poles a little tighter to stop my hands from shaking, and prepared to move down the slope. Wes had shown me how to make a wedge shape with my skis so I could control my speed and stop, so that’s what I tried to do. But my skis refused to listen to me. They had a mind of their own and seemed to want to go in opposite directions rather than point together like Wes suggested.

"This doesn’t feel right,” I said to Wes, who was watching from beside me.

“Just get your skis in the pizza shape and then push off,” he replied.

“No, they’re supposed to be parallel,” Sawyer suggested as he slid up to us. “She’s not going to get very far like that.”

“She’s not ready for her skis to be parallel,” Wes said. “Don’t you remember we all started with the pizza?”

“I only remember being awesome from day one,” Sawyer answered, making Wes roll his eyes. “Maybe it would help if you tried skiing without your poles like those kids,” Sawyer continued, nodding at a class of toddlers who were snaking down the mountain behind their instructor.

“Sawyer,” Anna groaned. “That’s only how they teach little kids.”

I let out a frustrated laugh. “You guys, I think we have one too many chefs in this kitchen.” I knew they were just trying to help, but they were only confusing me more.

“Why don’t you both go on ahead?” Wes suggested. “I’ll stay with Isobel.”

Sawyer wished me luck before he took off, but Anna hung back. She appeared to be texting on her phone, but from the way she constantly glanced up at me, it seemed she was still keeping a close watch.

Wes stuck his ski poles into the snow and pushed himself closer to me. “Ignore them,” he said. “I’ll ski down a little way, and then you come to me. Just try to copy what I do.”

I nodded and gestured for him to go ahead. I was ready to watch him carefully as he skied down, but barely a second had passed, and it felt like he was halfway down the slope. He made it looks so easy. Maybe this run wasn’t quite as steep and long as I had imagined. Feeling slightly more confident, I prodded my ski poles into the snow on either side of my skis, bit my lip, and pushed off. I mimicked that part of Wes’s demonstration perfectly, but that’s where the similarity ended. As soon as my skis were pointing downward on the slope, they quickly picked up momentum. I did my best to twist them inward like Wes had shown me, but I was completely out of control.

“Pizza shape, Isobel! Pizza!” Wes shouted from below. I was trying my best, but I didn’t seem to be slowing down. All I wanted to do was stop, but I couldn’t seem to turn my skis anywhere other than directly down the hill. The longer I waited, the faster I was going, so I decided there was only one thing for it. I bent my knees and fell to the side, hitting the snow with a thud that sent my skis, poles, arms, and legs flailing in all directions.

I had snow in places I most definitely shouldn’t, and I felt like I’d landed myself in an extreme game of Twister. One ski was stuck in the ground, and the other had disappeared so my foot was flying free. One pole was in the snow behind me while the other was lodged underneath me. I was a mess. But at least I’d stopped.

Anna skidded to a halt next to me, my missing ski in her arms. “You all right?” she asked.

“I’m not hurt if that’s what you mean. But there’s snow up my backside, and it’s so cold I can’t feel my nose anymore. So not quite sure I’m okay.”

She laughed. “Look, despite what Sawyer says, we’re all terrible at skiing to begin with. You’re doing pretty well though. You’re halfway down the slope already.”

I looked back up the slope and was surprised to see how far I’d come even if I had fallen most of the way.

“Maybe I’m not cut out for skiing,” I suggested.

She placed my rogue ski on the ground alongside me and offered out her pole to pull me up. I gave her a grateful smile as she helped yank me to my feet.

“Just give it a few more goes,” she said. “If you’re still not enjoying it, I’ll happily bail with you. We can go check out hot guys in the village. Everyone is cut out for that.”

“Uh, I’m not sure Wes would like that.” I looked down the slope and saw Wes was frantically pushing his way back up the hill toward us.

“He doesn’t have to know,” she replied with a smirk and a shrug. “Guys in ski gear are hot, and it’s like ski trip blasphemy if you don’t at least check a few of them out.”

I laughed. “I meant Wes might not like it if I quit. He seems so excited to ski with me.”

“Ugh, fine,” she said. “Let’s get your ski back on then. But don’t forget, I’m ready to go search for hot guys as soon as you are. This place is pretty much a hottie buffet.”

I shook my head at her.

“Seriously though,” she continued, as she bent down to help me with my ski. “Just give it a little more time. It will get easier.”

“Okay, I guess I could give it another chance.” I felt better knowing Anna would gladly quit with me at any time, and it was reassuring to be reminded my friends had all started at the same level as me.

“Are you okay, Isobel?” Wes had finally reached us.

“I’m okay,” I said, looking up as my boot snapped into my ski and I stood tall once more.

“I’ll leave you guys to it,” Anna said. “See you at the lift.” She took off down the slope, making it look even more effortless than Wes. She was

practically flying across the snow.

“You were great,” Wes said. “You nearly had it. And on the first try!”

It seemed like a very generous appraisal of my performance.

“You just need a bit more practice,” he continued. “You’ll be racing me down the mountain in no time.”

“Maybe,” I said, with a nervous laugh. “I think I’d happily settle for slow and controlled though.”

“Just remember to create that wedge with your skis to slow you down. And it usually helps if you keep your eyes up so you can look in the direction you want to go instead of down at the ground.”

I nodded along like my life depended on his words. In all honesty, it probably did.

He reached over and dusted off some of the snow that had ended up all over my jacket. “You ready to try again?”

“Uh, I think so.”

“Great,” he said. “This time, I think we should aim for the bottom of the lift.”

My eyes widened as I cast my gaze down the hill. We still had about half of the slope to go.

“You can do it,” Wes added with a supportive smile. “It’s not that much further now.” He was being very sweet, but I thought he was too ambitious. My butt had spent more time on the snow than my skis so far. If he thought I could make it to the bottom of the slope unscathed, he had another thing coming.

“Maybe we should aim a little closer,” I suggested.

“You’ve got to believe in yourself,” he replied. “That’s half the battle.”

I suspected there was more to skiing than self-belief, but I wasn’t the expert here.

“Okay, I’ll do my best. See you at the bottom?” The inflection at the end of my sentence was a clear indication of how uncertain I was about actually making it down there safely.

“That’s my girl,” he said. "Now, watch me closely so you can try to copy what I do.”

Wes took off down the slope again, doing the pizza shape he’d taught me. He made it look so simple, but watching him didn’t really teach me how to replicate it.

When he reached the bottom of the chairlift where Anna and Sawyer were waiting, he waved for me to follow him. With a resigned sigh, I pushed myself forward and prayed this wasn't about to be another disaster. But the moment I tried to turn my skis into position again, I knew it was wishful thinking.

My skis refused to form the illusive pizza shape and took off straight down the slope. I was terrified as I picked up speed, but I was determined not to fall this time. I felt like I just had to survive for a few more seconds, and then maybe I would gain control. But I was going faster than I had before. Fast enough I was sure I'd really hurt myself if I fell. Panic set in. I kept trying to turn my skis, but they refused to budge.

I suddenly realized I was too focused on my skis. Wes had told me I needed to keep my eyes looking where I wanted to go. So, I glanced up, but as I did, I realized I was heading straight for a large orange sign, ironically labeled SLOW with a large exclamation mark for emphasis. There was no time to avoid it. Even a good skier might have struggled to swerve out of the way. All I could do was brace for impact, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I waited for the inevitable collision.

But the impact I felt was different than expected. A strong pair of arms wrapped around my waist, forcing me to an abrupt but comfortable stop.

"Whoa there, Crash. Are you okay?"

My breaths were coming in fast, and I was shaking with adrenaline. It took me a moment to realize I hadn't slammed into the sign. I was still standing on two feet, and my skis were still beneath me. I'd stopped, and I was safe. But my relief disappeared as quickly as it had washed over me. That was *Noah's* voice. *Noah's arms*.

I had to withhold a groan. Seriously? Hadn't I embarrassed myself enough for one morning? I slowly opened my eyes to find Noah standing in front of me grinning. His ski gear was covered in snow, and I assumed he'd already been up the mountain because his hair was messy, like he had just removed his helmet. It was unfair how he could be so disheveled and still look so good.

"Having fun?" he asked. "I know you like to crash into things, but it's not a great quality to have on the ski slopes."

"How is it that there's a whole mountain you could be on, and yet you somehow end up in the exact spot to witness my humiliation?"

His grin grew brighter. “Seems to me I was in the right place at the right time.”

He was still lightly holding me. I moved back from his grasp and went to take off my skis, but he kept a hand on my arm to steady me. “I suppose you’ve got some advice for how I can ski better?”

“Well, for starters, you’re supposed to avoid the slow down signs at the bottom of the slope,” Noah said. “But that’s just common sense. I’m afraid I can’t help you with the skiing part because I snowboard.” He nodded to a snowboard that was lying in the snow a few feet away. He must have dropped it when he’d come to my rescue.

“Oh.”

“And it seems like you’ve got enough teachers,” he said. “Although, you’d probably be better off with a professional instructor.” I glanced in the direction of my friends. They were all rushing toward us from the chairlift. They must have witnessed the whole thing.

Wes was a few feet ahead of the others, the look of concern clear on his face as he ran. As he approached, I thought he was going to reach out to me and check I was okay, but his outstretched hand was aimed at Noah, who was still holding my arm to steady me.

“Get off her, Hastings.” Wes roughly shoved Noah away.

“Wes!” I gasped. I’d never seen him act so aggressively.

Noah stumbled back slightly, letting go of my arm, but he barely batted an eyelid. Sawyer and Anna skidded to a stop when they reached us and glanced between the two boys. The tension in the air was thick, and it made me uncomfortable to see Noah and Wes standing off against one another this way. This was exactly what I’d wanted to avoid this holiday.

“I was saving your girlfriend from disaster,” Noah replied.

“You’re not even supposed to be here,” Wes snapped back.

“I was just walking past.”

“I mean in Aspen.” Wes’s expression was only growing darker. “In the house right next door to ours.” Clearly this was about more than just my collision with Noah.

“Lucky I am, otherwise there would be an Isobel-shaped hole in that slow sign.”

“Guys, stop!” I shouted over them, and they both turned to look at me. “Wes, it’s okay. Noah was just helping me.”

Wes’s eyes softened as he looked at me. Maybe he could see how desperately I wanted them to stop fighting. Maybe he remembered how much we’d been looking forward to a drama-free holiday. Maybe he could see how upset I was that he hadn’t even asked me if I was okay yet.

Whatever it was, the look on my face made Wes take a deep breath in, and as he exhaled, he turned back to Noah. “You’re right,” he said. “Thanks, Noah.”

It must have nearly killed him to show Noah gratitude. We were all briefly stunned into silence, but eventually Noah nodded.

“You’re welcome,” he said, bending down to retrieve his discarded snowboard. “I guess I’ll see you guys around.” He gave me a lingering look before he stepped away. “Stay safe out there, Crash.”

I watched him leave, my heart still racing from the collision and the argument between Noah and Wes. So much for today being a good day. It was barely 10 A.M. and it had already turned into a total disaster.

It was only once Noah was gone that Wes turned back to me. “Are you okay, Isobel?”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “Thanks for asking.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “I shouldn’t have reacted like that.”

I sighed and relaxed my shoulders, allowing some of my frustration to roll off them. I knew I couldn’t stay mad at him. “It’s okay.”

“No, I shouldn’t have let him get to me. I should have checked on you. Hell, I should have been the one to stop you from crashing.”

“Seriously, Wes, I’m fine. Nothing bad happened. But I think that’s enough skiing for me today.”

“Are you sure?” He sounded disappointed, but I felt like it was more with himself than me.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m getting a little hungry too, and Anna mentioned something about a buffet…”

“Oh, yeah, this place has the best buffet,” Anna confirmed with a grin. “I’m starved too, so I’ll come with you.”

I could have kissed her.

“You boys should head up the mountain and do some real skiing,” Anna added.

Sawyer quickly agreed. “It does look good up there, Wes.”

Wes hadn’t taken his eyes off me though. “I’m happy to stay with you…”

“No, it’s okay. You don’t want to be stuck down here all day. Go and enjoy yourself. It’ll be fun to hang with Anna.”

He seemed reluctant to leave me, but he eventually agreed. “Okay, but call me if you change your mind,” he said. “I’ll come find you.”

“I will.” I reached up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for trying to teach me today. I’m sorry I’m a lost cause.”

“You’re not,” he said. “Maybe teaching someone to ski just isn’t as easy as I thought.”

“Well, skiing certainly isn’t as easy as I thought.”

He shot me a smile. “Okay, see you back at the chalet.”

“See you there.”

Wes and Sawyer put their skis back on and skated over to the chairlift while Anna and I left our gear on one of the nearby racks and went to explore the village. She happily pointed out hot guys as we walked, but I wasn’t really listening to what she was saying. My mind was still focused on the showdown between Wes and Noah I’d just had to break up.

I was completely shaken from my disastrous attempt at skiing, and yet it wasn’t even the most stressful part of my day. Somehow, the conflict between Noah and Wes had been worse than any fall or crash. I couldn’t believe how Wes had reacted, and although I’d acted like everything was okay afterward, that was far from how I felt.

No matter what I did or said, Wes’s anxiety about Noah seemed to be constantly bubbling beneath the surface, and he was getting closer and closer to his boiling point.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After a few hours spent shopping and wandering the village with Anna, my sad attempts at skiing felt like a distant memory. She was an expert in the art of distraction and spent most of our outing pointing out cute guys. She was hardly subtle, and she really seemed to be leaning into her hot guy buffet analogy.

"Check out that slice of pizza," she gushed at one point. "Uh, is it just me, or does that cut of sirloin look delicious?" she added, as another guy walked past.

Her comparisons only grew more outlandish as the afternoon wore on. And I really struggled not to laugh when she asked me if I was ready for dessert because she'd just seen a "droolworthy piece of caramel-bottomed Guinness chocolate pie" walking past. I had no idea how she came up with this stuff.

It did make me feel better though, and by the time we got back to the chalet, the anxiety that had set up shop in my chest after watching Noah and Wes's confrontation had mostly eased.

Wes seemed to have enjoyed his afternoon skiing with Sawyer, but I worried he hadn't completely forgotten the morning's events. I couldn't tell whether he was embarrassed about what had happened or still irritated. Either way, something felt slightly off with him.

I was glad to see Cress when she also returned to the house later that afternoon. She'd spent the day with Kaden, and I was beginning to worry we might not see her at all this trip. I felt bad because it was my fault she was forced to choose between hanging out with her boyfriend and hanging

out with us. But given the tension between Wes, Noah, and me, there was no way we could all spend time together.

We decided to go tobogganing that evening on a small hill behind the twins' house. We'd been planning to get in the hot tub and soak our tired muscles after our day on the slopes, but when Sawyer turned it on, it let out a harsh choking sound before abruptly going quiet. No matter what he and Wes tried, they couldn't get the jets to work or the water to heat up. So, tobogganing it was.

There was enough light from the chalet that the hill behind the house was lit in a soft amber glow, and we took turns trudging up the small slope before whizzing back down on the two wooden toboggans Sawyer had brought up from the basement. It was surprisingly fast, and after a couple of turns, I decided to quit while I was ahead. My body had started aching in places I didn't know existed after my rough morning on the ski slopes, and I didn't want to injure myself more.

Cress and Anna didn't last much longer than me, and the twins soon turned it into a competition. I hung out with the girls at the bottom of the slope as we watched the two boys race. They were very evenly matched, and so each time there was a winner, the loser would propose an immediate rematch. We'd probably be out here all night.

"So, Cress, did you get the dirt from Kaden on how the boys conveniently ended up in the house next door?" Anna asked as she took a sip of hot chocolate from the thermos she'd brought along.

"We didn't really talk about it," Cress said.

"Come on, he must have said something," Anna insisted.

Cress let out a sigh. "I guess it kind of sounds like Luther was trying to do something to help get Noah and Isobel back together."

"I knew it," Anna gasped. Luther hadn't exactly been subtle when he'd arrived yesterday. It was obvious he was up to something. But I'd hoped Anna's prediction would turn out to be wrong. I still didn't understand what Kaden's and Noah's roles in all this were though.

"Did Kaden know that's what Luther was up to?" I asked Cress. "What about Noah?"

"Kaden said he and Noah were both unsure when Luther suggested a trip to Aspen, but apparently, he convinced them." A smile crept onto her face, and her eyes seemed to glaze over. "Kaden said he couldn't resist the thought of surprising me," she sighed.

“I’m sure Noah didn’t take much convincing,” Anna said. “He still has feelings for you, Isobel. And lots of kids from Weybridge come to Aspen this time of year. It’s not exactly unusual.”

“Yeah, but did they really have to be our neighbors?” I questioned.

“Kaden told me that was a genuine surprise for both him and Noah,” Cress added. “That was all Luther.”

“Of course, it was.” I shook my head. “I don’t know why Luther thought that would do anything other than piss me off.”

“He probably assumed you’d take one look at Noah in his ski gear and drop down at his feet to worship him.” Anna’s voice was playful, and she nudged her elbow into my side.

“Anna,” I groaned.

“What? Noah looked hot today. Way better than the other guys we were checking out.”

“Other guys *you* were checking out,” I said. “And Wes looked hot in his ski gear too.”

“They all looked hot.” Anna let out a breath and stared off into the night, mimicking the face Cress had made when she’d been talking about Kaden earlier.

“Well, whatever Luther planned, it’s not working. All Noah’s done so far is be a thorn in my side.”

“Except for the part where he rescued you today,” Anna said. “That wasn’t very thorny of him.”

“I probably would have preferred to hit the warning sign,” I grumbled.

Anna raised her eyebrows at me like she didn’t believe me.

“How’s Wes handling it all?” Cress asked.

“Not so well,” I said. “I thought he was going to fight Noah after he saved me on the ski slope today.”

Anna nodded. “Yeah, I’ve never seen him act like that before. It’s not like Wes.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I’m not sure what else I can do to put his mind at ease though.”

“I’m not sure there’s much you can do. Just keep being understanding and reassuring him,” Cress suggested. “I’m sure he’ll work his way through it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said. “But I’ve been having that conversation with him for weeks. He still doesn’t seem to trust me. And if this morning is any

indication, it's getting worse. What if he can't get past it?"

The two girls looked lost for answers, and it was clear they didn't know what else to say.

"I guess you'll have to cross that bridge if it comes to it," Cress said.

"I guess," I agreed. "It's not just about Wes though. Do *I* really want to be in a relationship where I'm always worrying about whether my boyfriend trusts me or not, and I constantly have to reassure him that he can?"

We all fell silent. I was surprised I'd said that out loud. I didn't even know I was thinking it, but I realized that was truly how I felt. I loved being with Wes, but I didn't know how long I could handle the constant cloud of anxiety that seemed to have enveloped our relationship.

Cress and Anna were watching me with concerned looks, but they stayed quiet as Wes jogged over to us. Sawyer was slowly trailing behind him.

"He finally got tired of losing," Wes said, nodding at his brother. His cheeks were pink with exertion, and his eyes were bright with mischief.

"We got tired of watching by the time you went for round five," Anna replied.

"Right." He chuckled. "Everything okay here?"

He must have noticed we were all sitting in silence as he approached.

"Of course," I said quickly. "Everything okay with you? You look a little out of breath."

Wes laughed. "It's hard work going up that hill time after time."

"Well, at least you won," I said as Wes slumped down to sit next to me. "What did you guys bet this time?"

"Who says there was a bet?" he asked.

"Because it's you guys. There's always a bet."

"True." He grinned.

"And…"

"Geez, Sawyer, put it away!" Anna screamed.

I looked up and saw Sawyer streaking toward the house. I immediately buried my head in Wes's shoulder.

"Why does it always have to be streaking with you?" Anna called after him.

Wes was grinning brightly, and I couldn't help but laugh. I didn't really enjoy seeing Sawyer's pasty butt once again, but it was hard not to find the

funny side of it. It was nice to laugh after the day we'd had, and for a moment, it felt like everything was back to normal.



THE BOYS HIT the slopes again the following morning while Cress, Anna, and I stayed back at the chalet. The weather wasn't as nice as it had been the day before, and the idea of sitting on the balcony drinking hot chocolates and admiring the view was a lot more appealing than skiing. If anything, I felt like the boys were the ones missing out.

I was curled up under a blanket reading a book, and Cress was on her phone, probably texting Kaden, when Anna opened the sliding doors and came out to the terrace.

"We've got a visitor," she said, her voice dry and unenthused.

"Don't pretend you're not delighted to see me, London," Luther said as he eased his way past her. Anna scowled at the sound of her nickname, but Luther simply grinned back before turning his attention to Cress and me. "How are we this morning, ladies?"

"What are you doing here, Luther," I said, ignoring his question.

"I just came to hang out with my favorite people."

"And I suppose that was your motivation for coming to Aspen too," I added, putting down my book and folding my arms.

"Of course," Luther said, dropping himself onto the couch beside me. "You made it sound so appealing when we talked about it in math. Why wouldn't I want to come?"

I knew talking to Luther in math was a bad idea—and not just for my education.

"Come on, Luther," Anna said. "We know you're only here to get Isobel and Noah back together. It's not going to happen. She's with Wes."

Luther let out an overly dramatic gasp. "I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing."

All three of us raised our eyebrows at him.

"Okay, fine," he admitted. "I just liked it when we were all hanging out together like one big happy family. It was fun."

"Go home, Luther," I said, picking my book up off the couch.

“Aw, don’t be like that, newbie,” he groaned. “I’m bored over there. Kaden and Noah are on the mountain, so I’m in the house all on my own.”

“Why didn’t you join them?” I asked.

“Because they’re crazy,” he replied. “They keep trying to kill themselves by going off-piste, and I happen to have a healthy respect for my life. Besides, I much prefer snowboarding when it serves a real purpose. Like picking up girls.”

“That sounds about right,” Anna said.

“Jealous, London?”

“Of what?” she fired back at him. “I’m not sure which you’re worse at —snowboarding or picking up girls.”

“Touché,” Luther replied. “So, what are we doing today?”

“We”—Anna waved between him and the rest of us—“are doing nothing. Us girls are having a quiet morning in.”

Luther scoffed. “Well, now I just feel sorry for you. That’s even more boring than what I was doing. I guess it’s lucky I’m here to save you from yourselves. Why don’t you all come back to my place and jump in the hot tub?”

I put down my book again and turned to Luther. What was he playing at? If this was all part of his little plan to get me and Noah back together, I wasn’t game.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea.” I responded before Anna or Cress could consider his suggestion. I did not want to get in a hot tub in Noah territory.

“Why not?” Luther asked.

“Probably because she doesn’t want to see her ex-boyfriend,” Anna replied.

Luther rolled his eyes. “Like I said, Noah and Kaden are up the mountain all day trying to kill themselves on some terrifying ski run. They’ll be gone for hours.”

"He’s not lying,” Cress said. “Kaden did tell me there’s some double black diamond run they wanted to check out today. It sounded like they’d be gone all day.”

“Of course, I’m not lying.” Luther sounded appalled by the mere suggestion he might not be being truthful, but after the stunt he pulled organizing the boys’ surprise trip to Aspen, I wouldn’t put anything past him.

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” he continued. “Our hot tub has an even better view than this.” He gestured out toward the mountains. “And I have tequila…”

Cress, Anna, and I shared an uncertain look.

“You know I’m only going to hang around here and bug you all day if you don’t come,” Luther added.

“I knew I shouldn’t have opened the door.” Anna groaned.

“It did kind of suck we couldn't get our hot tub to work last night,” Cress said, sounding as though she was coming on board with Luther’s idea. “It’s always one of my favorite parts of the trip.”

“Hmm. Yeah, that did suck,” Anna agreed. “And my muscles *are* sore.” She paused as she glanced at Luther who was grinning back at her. “And if we’re putting up with Luther either way, I will be needing tequila.”

“I’m going to pretend that’s a compliment,” he said.

“Oh, it’s definitely not,” Anna replied.

“So, you guys want to go?” I asked.

“It might be nice,” Cress shrugged. “But only if you feel comfortable going.”

“It does seem like the lesser of two evils,” Anna suggested. “Luther really will bug us all day.”

The girls had given in quickly, so I knew they must be keen to accept Luther’s invitation. I didn’t like the idea of going to the boys’ house when there was a risk I'd see Noah, but the thought of dipping my aching muscles in the warm hot tub was hard to resist. I also didn’t want to let the girls down, and I knew they would only go if I did.

“Come on, newbie,” Luther pleaded. There was a hopeful look on his face, which was reflected in Anna’s and Cress’s eyes.

“Okay, fine.” I let out a sigh. “I guess we’re going in the hot tub.”

Luther clapped his hands together and jumped up from the couch. “Brilliant. You grab your bikinis while I go get the hot tub ready.”

He was gone before I could reconsider.

Anna shook her head as she watched him leave. “All I can say is he better have good tequila.”

“And there better be no sign of Noah,” I added.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“There’s only one problem with this plan,” I said to the girls as we went back inside. “I didn’t bring a bikini.”

"What?” Anna looked shocked.

“We were coming to the mountains. It’s the middle of winter. How was I supposed to know I needed swimwear?”

“Okay, I guess that’s valid,” Anna replied. “But never fear, I have a spare bikini.” She went off in search of it before I could object while Cress went to change into hers.

I still had an uneasy feeling in my gut about going over to the boys’ house. The girls had made a pretty convincing argument for the hot tub, but Wes was so on edge about anything to do with Noah right now. I believed Cress when she said Noah wouldn’t be there, but what if Wes freaked out all the same?

I considered texting Wes to check, but I didn’t want to make him worry for no reason. The thought also made me feel a little silly. I didn’t need his permission to hang out with my friends. It was the last day of our trip, and he’d left me to ski with his brother all day. Was it really so bad I wanted to have some fun with the girls?

Anna fetched me her spare bikini, and I quickly changed into it before putting my clothes back on over the top. The swimsuit was far skimpier than my own bikini, and it revealed so much of my butt I decided I was going to have to make sure no one was ever standing behind me.

It didn’t help that the bikini was red, so it was hardly inconspicuous. It made me want to skip the hot tub altogether, but the girls were so excited,

and I knew if I bailed they'd feel pressured to miss out with me. Hopefully I'd be able to jump in the water before I flashed anyone too much skin.

I left a note for the twins, telling them where we'd gone and to come join us, just in case they arrived home early. When I was ready, Anna and Cress were already waiting for me by the front door, so we headed over to Luther's house together. The niggling feeling in my stomach still told me this was a bad idea, but I did my best to ignore it. I kept repeating to myself that I wasn't doing anything wrong and Wes would understand.

Luther was already stripped down to his board shorts when we arrived, and he waved us into the house, a bottle of tequila already in his hand.

Anna had been chatting away as usual on the walk over, but she went completely silent when she saw Luther standing there in all his shirtless glory. He was strong and muscular, and Anna certainly seemed to be noticing. Her gaze traced over every inch of him.

"Welcome, ladies," Luther said in greeting. "Please come in."

Anna walked right past him, swiping the bottle of tequila from his hand before taking a swig.

"Shoes off at the front door, please," Luther instructed. "Don't they teach you manners over there, London?"

Anna didn't look at him but kicked off her shoes and continued walking into the house, not at all bothered she had no idea where she was going. "So, where's this hot tub?" she called, disappearing down a hallway that led deeper into the house.

Cress and I hurried to take our shoes off so we could follow.

"It's out on the balcony," Luther shouted back before focusing on Cress and me.

"Does she always make herself at home like this?" he asked as we started down a long corridor that led to the kitchen and living area.

"It's Anna, so probably," Cress replied with a laugh.

When we arrived at the kitchen, Luther paused. "Can I get you girls a drink?"

"Just water for me," Cress said.

"Yeah, same," I agreed.

Luther went to the fridge while Cress and I searched for Anna. The balcony was just off the main living area, and the door outside was open. She was already in the hot tub when we reached her, still happily clasping the bottle of tequila.

“Way to take your time, you guys,” she said with a laugh. She seemed a lot more relaxed here than she had at the entrance when she’d first seen Luther topless.

“We can’t help that you practically ran through the house to get here,” Cress said. She was starting to strip down to her bikini so she could join Anna.

I hesitated for a moment, mainly because of the bikini I was wearing underneath my clothes but partly because of the view. Luther was right. The view was even better than at Wes and Sawyer’s house but only just. The balcony here was a little higher, so you could see farther down into the valley.

“Isobel, are you getting in?” Anna asked.

“Oh, uh, yeah.” Luther was still inside the house, thankfully, so I changed out of my clothes in record speed and darted straight into the hot tub. The air was crisp, but the water was warm and soothing, and as soon as my body was submerged, I knew it was going to be difficult to get out into the cold again when the time came.

Anna offered me the tequila bottle, so I had a tiny sip before quickly passing it back. I had no intention of getting drunk in a hot tub. That seemed like a recipe for disaster. Especially when I needed to keep my wits about me. I was behind enemy lines, after all.

Luther soon emerged from the house with our glasses of water. “You happy with the tequila bottle, Anna?” he asked as he passed Cress and me our drinks. “Or do you need a straw?”

She rolled her eyes and placed the bottle down on the table beside the hot tub. “I’m not going to drink the whole bottle.”

“Just half of it then?” Luther replied with a grin.

She shot him a scowl as he slid into the water next to her. It was probably a good thing the hot tub was so big and there was plenty of space between them because I got the impression Anna wouldn’t hesitate to dunk Luther under the water if he came too close.

“So, newbie, how are you enjoying your first trip to Aspen?” Luther said.

“It’s been…interesting.” I wasn’t sure how to describe the trip so far. I’d enjoyed the mountains, the snow, and hanging out with my friends. The surprises? Not so much.

“Are you having a good time?” I replied.

“Yeah, but I’m more of a sunshine guy myself,” he replied. “Which you would know if you’d spent any time at all with us…”

Luther knew exactly why I hadn’t spent any time with them, and I really didn’t want to get into the details of the awkward situation between his best friend, my boyfriend, and me.

“Well, I’ve been busy,” I said.

“Busy neglecting your BFF.”

“We’re hardly BFFs, Luther.”

“Yeah, we’re her BFFs,” Anna protested.

“Ah, but have either of you serenaded her in public?” Luther joked, wiggling his eyebrows. “Because I’m not sure you can truly call yourself a bestie if you haven’t sung to each other.”

“Please don’t remind me about that,” I groaned, which only made Luther laugh.

“Seriously, though, I’ve missed you this trip, newbie. We all have.”

“I’m on this trip to hang out with my boyfriend, and that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“Well, both you and your boyfriend are very boring,” he replied. “Maybe you should upgrade to a better model…”

“If you asked me here to try and push your Noah agenda on me, I’m leaving,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Yeah, Luther,” Anna said, splashing water at him. “She’s not going to dump Wes and start dating Noah again just because you asked.”

“It was worth a shot.” Luther shrugged, but there was a cheeky grin on his face. “But I guess I’ll try my best not to bring up how incredible Noah is. How handsome, noble, gracious, good at snowboarding…”

I lifted my eyebrows. “So, you do want me to leave.”

“No. Definitely not.” He lifted his hands and pretended to zip his mouth shut. Only two seconds later though, he was talking again. “I’m just sad this is the first time I’ve managed to drag you over here.”

“Luther…” I said. “You know why I haven’t come over here.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, because of No—” He stopped himself and pretended to cough in an attempt to cover up the fact he’d just been about to say Noah’s name. “You worry too much, newbie. Everyone knows you’re with Wes, and *you know who* respects that.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “Though I’m not sure Wes would agree with you.”

“Getting a little jealous, is he?” Luther grinned.

“You don’t have to look quite so pleased, Luther,” Cress scoffed.

“Pleased? Me? Never.”

“You’re pushing it, Luther…” Anna’s voice trailed off when we heard the sound of the front door opening.

“Luther? You home?” It was Kaden, and as I recognized his voice, the water surrounding me suddenly felt as cold as the snow around us.

I shot Luther a wary glance, but he had turned away from me to look through the door into the house, oblivious to my inner turmoil. I prayed Kaden was alone, and my heart raced with uncertainty.

“We’re out here,” Luther called.

“We?” Kaden looked confused as he stepped out onto the terrace, and then his eyes widened and he stopped in his tracks as he saw Anna, Cress, and I sitting in the hot tub. His gaze flicked straight to Cress, and his cheeks turned slightly pink. “Hey, Cress,” he said with a cautious smile.

“Hey, Kaden,” she replied, her cheeks flushing even more than his. “I thought you’d be gone all day.”

“That was the plan,” he said. “But the conditions were terrible up there. We probably would have killed ourselves if we’d attempted the run we wanted to do.”

“Well, I’m glad you saw sense.”

“Me too,” he replied. “Especially now that you’re here.”

I probably would have found the two of them adorable if I wasn’t so thoroughly freaking out.

“What’s going on out here?” My heart froze as Noah’s voice confirmed my worst fear. I sunk a little lower in the hot tub, wishing I could disappear as he emerged onto the balcony. He was still dressed in his ski gear, and I had to admit Anna had a point about him. Noah did look pretty hot in his baggy snow pants with his ski jacket hanging open to reveal a Weybridge Academy hoodie underneath. His hair was tousled, and his cheeks were pink from being out in the cold. I never thought a guy could look appealing in such messy, baggy clothes, but Noah somehow made it work.

He was grinning as he came out to see what was happening, but surprise flashed on his face, and his mouth cracked open slightly when he saw me in the water. I guess I was the last person he expected to be out here.

He got over his shock quickly though, and his gaze softened as he looked at me. There was a hint of a smile, and his expression seemed hopeful. I hoped me being here wasn’t going to give him the wrong idea.

“Isobel, you’re here.” He was speaking to me like we were the only two people out here, and I felt myself sink a little farther in the water.

“We were just about to leave.” I stammered out the words.

“No, you weren’t,” Luther replied. “You only just got here.”

I shot Luther a scowl, but he simply grinned before he returned his focus to his friends. “Are you guys getting in or what?”

“Yeah, I’ll just get changed,” Kaden replied.

Noah glanced at me as if he were waiting for my permission. I didn’t want him in the water with us, and I was still getting over the surprise of his arrival. But this was his friend’s house, and I could hardly insist he stayed inside while we were all out here enjoying the hot tub.

My hesitation didn’t give Noah any indication either way, and the silence left the door open for him to make a decision. Eventually he pulled his gaze from mine to look at Luther. “Sure, I’ll just be a sec,” he said.

Noah and Kaden disappeared into the house, and I tried to convince myself sharing a hot tub with Noah wasn’t a big deal. It’s not like we were alone, and I could always head home if it got too awkward. I still didn’t feel all that comfortable with the idea though.

Anna leaned across and punched Luther’s arm as soon as the guys were gone. “You told us they’d be out all day.”

Luther plastered a forced look of pain on his face, and he rubbed the spot on his arm. “I thought they would be,” he said. “You heard Kaden; they decided to come back early.”

Anna’s eyes narrowed on him before she sank back into the water. “I guess, but I’m still annoyed with you.”

Luther chuckled. “When aren’t you annoyed with me?”

Anna ignored him and turned to me. “Are you happy to stay?” she asked. “Because we can head back home if you want?”

I desperately wanted to leave, and Anna was clearly giving me a way out, but we’d only just gotten here, and I could see she wanted to stay. Cress seemed to be holding her breath as she waited for my response. Now that Kaden was here, I knew she’d want to stay more than ever. I also knew they’d both insist on coming with me if I left.

I released a breath and shook my head. “We can stay a while longer,” I said. “It’s too cold to get out anyway.” The cold wasn’t the only thing stopping me from getting out. I didn’t want anyone to see the ridiculously small bikini I had on, and at least the water provided some concealment.

“That’s the spirit.” Anna nodded and gave me a reassuring smile.

Only moments later though, I considered braving the cold and running for the hills as Noah emerged from the house without his shirt on. I may have wanted nothing to do with him, but that didn’t mean I was oblivious to how good Noah looked topless. It was a small relief when he got into the hot tub between Cress and Luther. But only small. He wasn’t sitting next to me, but he was right across from me, which meant I had to look at him.

I’d told my friends we could stay just a little while longer, so I was going to suck it up and stick it out for them. Still, I did my best to keep my focus on the view of the mountains and as far away from the boy sitting across from me who was watching me with his intense green eyes.

“I wonder what’s taking Kaden so long,” Cress said. “Maybe I should go check on him.”

“Oh, yeah, *check on* him,” Anna joked, earning herself a glare from Cress as she got out of the hot tub.

I rubbed my arms, feeling more and more unsettled. Guilt was starting to build within me. It was one thing to come over here when Noah was on top of a mountain somewhere but a whole other thing now he was in the water with me. I knew Wes would hate this, and I really didn’t want to upset him. It didn’t help that every time I glanced Noah’s way I couldn’t stop myself remembering the way he’d wrapped his arms around me when he’d rescued me from crashing on the ski slope.

“How are you feeling after yesterday?” Noah’s voice made me jump slightly as it interrupted my thoughts. It appeared I wasn’t the only one thinking about the moment he’d come to my rescue. There was genuine concern in his eyes, and I knew he was only trying to be polite, but I didn’t like the way my heart beat a little faster when he looked at me that way.

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine, thanks, but I should go,” I said, pushing myself up so I could climb out of the hot tub. The freezing air hit me as soon as I left the water, and a chill raced down my spine. I didn’t look in Noah’s direction once as I scampered across the terrace to grab a towel and wrap it around me. I didn’t want to see his reaction when he got a glimpse of my skimpy bikini.

“Isobel,” Noah called out to me, but I ignored him. “Did I say something wrong?”

I heard movement in the water and splashing as someone stood up. “Just let her go, Noah,” Anna said.

I didn’t wait to hear if he would listen to her warning and headed inside. I needed to get out of this house. I needed to get away from Noah. I wanted to hang out with my friends, but there were so many conflicting feelings churning inside me, and the swirling waters of the hot tub were just making it worse.

Once I was back inside, I realized I’d left my clothes on the balcony. There was no way in hell I was going back out there though. You couldn’t pay me enough to face Noah again in just a towel and this bikini. I spotted one of the boys’ sweatshirts on the kitchen bench, so I grabbed it without a second thought. I dropped my towel and pulled it over my head. Thankfully, the hoodie was big enough that it almost fell to my knees.

I headed for the entrance and quickly put on my shoes. I pulled open the front door but gasped when I nearly collided with Wes and Sawyer who were standing right outside.

"Guys, you scared me,” I said, placing a hand against my chest.

“We got your note.” There was nothing warm about Wes’s tone, and I got the impression he wasn’t pleased.

“Yeah, it was icy as hell up the mountain, so we came back early,” Sawyer said. “What’s this I hear about a hot tub?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s out on the balcony,” I said, gesturing inside.

Sawyer didn’t need any more encouragement, and he waltzed right by me into the house. Wes didn’t move though, and my stomach dipped unpleasantly as he frowned at me.

“Whose sweatshirt is that?” he asked.

I glanced down. I’d forgotten I wasn’t wearing my own clothes. That my legs were bare, and I’d stolen one of the boys’ hoodies. It was only now, as I looked down at the Weybridge insignia across the front of it, I realized it wasn’t just any boy’s hoodie. It was Noah’s. His initials were on the front, and I was guessing his surname was sprawled right across the back of it.

“Isobel?” Noah’s voice called out behind me, making me grimace. Wes was clearly already upset I was here, and Noah showing up wasn’t going to help. “Look, I’m sorry. I—” Noah’s voice cut off as he came to my side and saw Wes.

Both boys became rigid as they scowled at each other, and I wished Noah hadn’t chosen to stand so close to me. It somehow made everything look so much worse.

“Wes…” I reached out to him, but he took a firm step back as he glanced between Noah and me.

The anger in his eyes was palpable. “You’re here *with him*,” he said.

“I’m not here with him. Noah wasn’t even supposed to be here.”

“Right, and that’s why you’re wearing his sweatshirt?”

“Wes…” I tried to explain, but he wouldn’t give me a chance.

“If you’re not here together, why was he chasing after you?”

“Because—"

“Did you cheat on me?”

His accusation chilled me to the bone, and I let out a shocked breath. “No! I would never.”

Noah stepped forward as if to protect me from Wes’s words. “She didn’t cheat on you,” he growled. “And if you believe she’d even consider that for one second, you clearly don’t know Isobel at all.”

Wes stepped forward too, squaring up to Noah so they were inches apart. “This is none of your business, Hastings.”

Noah didn’t back down, and his scowl deepened as he stared at Wes. The boys were matched in height and build, and it felt like only the tension filling the air between them was stopping them from colliding.

“It became my business when you started hurling baseless accusations,” Noah continued. “When you started dragging my name through the mud right along with hers.”

“This is between me and my girlfriend,” Wes fired back.

Noah stood his ground though, maintaining the barrier he’d created between Wes and me. Standing between us only seemed to be aggravating Wes more though. Noah was making everything worse.

I pushed my way past Noah and turned on him. “Noah, would you please just go back inside?” I pointed into the house. Over his shoulder, I could see Anna, Sawyer, and Luther poking their heads out from the corridor that led through to the balcony. They’d obviously heard the commotion.

Wes let out a dry laugh when Noah didn’t immediately move. “Well, if he won’t leave, then I will.”

He turned on his heel and marched away from the house. I shot Noah a scowl before I took off after Wes.

“Wes, wait,” I called after him, but he continued powering across the driveway toward his house like he hadn’t heard me at all. “Wes, please.”

He didn’t look back, and it wasn’t until he got to the front door that I managed to catch him. I reached out to lightly touch his arm. “Would you just talk to me,” I said. “I can explain.”

Wes stepped back from me and shrugged off my grasp. “Explain?” he balked. “Isobel, you’re wearing Noah’s hoodie…”

I’d never seen him like this before. He was practically shaking with anger. “I didn’t know it was his,” I said. “It was the first sweatshirt I could find when I got out of the hot tub. I didn’t cheat on you. I would never.”

“You were still in the hot tub with him.”

“For about three seconds.” I folded my arms across my chest. “And it’s not like we were alone.”

His eyes were narrowed as he considered my explanation. “Is this why you didn’t text me to tell me what you girls were up to? So you could spend time with him?”

I was starting to get frustrated now. “No, I didn’t text you because I didn’t think I needed your permission. And like I’ve already told you, Noah wasn’t supposed to be there.”

He looked like he wanted to argue with that, so I cut him off before he got a chance. “I was just hanging out with my friends, Wes. And yes, Noah turned up, but I decided to leave once he arrived.”

“You didn’t think he’d be at the house *he’s* staying at?”

“Oh my gosh, Wes! Luther said he’d be gone all day, and Cress thought so too.” I shook my head. “But that’s not the point. The point is you don’t trust me. And if you can’t do that; if you can’t believe me when I say nothing happened, then something about this relationship isn’t working. It shouldn’t be this hard!”

“Yeah, maybe it’s just not worth it.” His face was stern, and his jaw clenched. He was deadly serious. I couldn’t handle this right now. I couldn’t deal with yet another heartbreak. So, I turned from him and ran down the driveway away from the house.

“Isobel!” Wes called to me, but I didn’t stop. And he didn’t chase after me. So, I kept on going. I ignored Luther’s place and continued down the road. I must have looked ridiculous wearing only my snow boots and an enormous hoodie in this weather, but I didn’t care. I was too upset to go back to Wes’s house, and Luther’s was the last place I wanted to be. So, I kept moving forward, trying my best to ignore the cold as I hurried away.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

I'd been walking for about ten minutes when I heard a car behind me. It started to slow, and some of the tension in my shoulders released as I realized Wes must have come after me. But when I turned, I didn't see Wes's car pulled up by the curb. Instead, it was the black truck that had been parked at Luther's house, and Noah was jumping out of the driver's seat.

I turned and kept walking. "I don't want to talk to you," I called over my shoulder.

"Okay, then don't talk," Noah replied. "Just get in the car. You're going to freeze if you stay out here dressed like that."

"I'm fine."

Noah caught up with me and grabbed hold of my arm, spinning me around to face him. "You're not fine. Stop being so damn stubborn."

"I'm not stubborn."

He ran a hand through his dark, messy hair. "We've been over this before. You are." His frustration seemed to fade as he looked into my eyes. It was probably because he could see they were moist with the tears I'd been fighting back since I'd fled from Wes's house.

"I'm sorry if I made things worse with Wes, but I couldn't stand back and watch him accuse you of something you would never do," he said. "Why are you out here? What happened with him?"

"Nothing happened."

"I beg to differ. Cress and Anna went after you, but you weren't at the twins' house. They came rushing back to see if you'd returned to Luther's,

but you weren't there either. Everyone is worried."

"Well, if *everyone* is worried, perhaps *everyone* should have come after me." It wasn't hard to tell I was only talking about Wes.

"Seriously, Isobel, what happened?"

"I told you nothing happened. Everything is just fine and dandy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get back to my walk."

I tried to leave, but Noah didn't let go of my arm.

"I'm not letting you walk away right now, Crash. You're going to freeze."

"Don't call me that," I said. "And don't tell me what to do. I'm just clearing my head. I'll come back when I'm ready."

Noah folded his arms across his wide chest. "I didn't want it to come to this, but you've left me no choice. If you don't come with me, I'm going to have to insist you give me back my hoodie."

I glanced down at the sweatshirt before looking up at Noah and scowling. If he thought his little threat could force me back to the house, he had another thing coming.

"Fine." I whipped the sweatshirt over my head and tossed it at him. I didn't want it anyway. It had already caused enough problems for me today. "Are you happy?"

I was left standing in nothing but my snow boots and my skimpy bikini, but I wasn't getting in the car with Noah, and I wasn't going back to either Luther's or Wes's. I probably wouldn't last long outside without Noah's sweatshirt, but I was fairly certain I'd seen a café not far down the road, so I'd just have to hang out there until my thoughts cleared. Until some of my anger dissipated. Sure, I'd be sitting there in nothing but a bikini, but at least it would be warmer than wandering out here in the snow.

Noah growled and gripped the sweatshirt tightly. He didn't look happy, and he didn't even seem to notice how revealing my bikini was. No, he was too busy glaring at me. "Well, I'm definitely not leaving you out here now," he rumbled. "Will you please get in the car?"

"That's not going to happen."

"Get in the car, Isobel."

"No." I turned and continued down the road, trying my best not to think about the view Noah would have of my butt.

He came right after me though.

"I'm not taking no for an answer," he said.

“I don’t care.”

“Well, you were warned…”

The next thing I knew, Noah was in front of me. He leaned down, wrapped his arms around my bare legs, and tossed me over his shoulder.

“What the hell, Noah?” I screamed as my butt went up in the air and all too close to his face.

“I tried to ask you nicely.”

“And I refused. Put me down.”

“Only if you come back to the house with me.”

“That’s not going to happen. I just want some space.”

“And you can have all the space you want when you’re not at risk of freezing to death.”

He probably had a point. And if he wasn’t pissing me off so much, perhaps I would have listened. I knew I was being stubborn, but fighting Noah was so much easier than giving in to him. For a moment, it distracted me. It helped me forget about the look in Wes’s eyes when he’d accused me of cheating. When he’d said I wasn’t worth fighting for.

But as I dangled in the air over Noah’s back, I realized this wasn’t a fight I would win. Noah was probably going to carry me the whole way home if that’s what it took. And it didn’t matter how much I bickered with Noah; eventually I was going to have to think about Wes. Maybe I needed to stop being so difficult and do as Noah asked.

“Okay, fine,” I huffed. “I’ll come with you. Just put me down.”

“Finally.” Noah grizzled as he came to a stop and he gently lowered me to the ground. I slid through his arms, and his hands flashed across my bare skin until they came to rest gently on my waist as he made sure I was steady on my feet. I tried to ignore how good it felt. How my whole body still tingled when he touched me.

As soon as I was standing, Noah handed me his hoodie. “Here, put this back on.”

I quickly did as he asked, not uttering a word of protest.

“Let’s go.”

I went to follow him, but my foot slipped on some ice, and suddenly I was sprawling forward. I probably would have fallen straight to the ground, but Noah was there in a second, grasping me tightly once again as he held me upright.

“Careful,” he said. “It’s icy. I—” He choked on his words as my feet slid out from under me again. Noah couldn’t seem to steady me this time, and we tumbled to the ground. Somehow, Noah was able to cage me within his arms as we fell, and my heart plummeted as I heard a resounding crack when I landed on top of him.

The world seemed to go silent, and I scrambled to my knees. “Oh my God, Noah.” He’d taken the brunt of the fall, just like he had in the woods when we first met. But this time, it wasn’t loamy soil we were falling on but hard ice.

His eyes were shut, and he was lying on his back. My heart raced as I looked him over. I reached out a hand to softly touch his face. “Noah, are you okay?”

He didn’t respond.

“Noah…”

He didn’t move an inch. He was so still, like he was sleeping peacefully, which only made me more concerned.

“Noah, wake up.” My voice became more urgent.

I squeezed his shoulders, desperate for a response, but still he lay motionless.

“Noah!” Tears stung my eyes, and emotion broke my voice as I tried to rouse him.

He needed to wake up.

I couldn’t handle it if he didn’t wake up.

“Noah, please.”

My tears were falling now, and I had no idea what to do. I needed to call an ambulance, but I didn’t have my phone on me. Perhaps Noah had one in the car.

I began to push myself up, but a soft wheezing noise made me freeze, and my eyes darted back to him. “Noah?”

I held my breath as I waited for him to respond, praying I hadn’t imagined the noise. Praying he would open his eyes.

He let out a low grown, and I thought that one small noise might just be the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. I fell back to his side, placing my hands gently on his face.

“Noah, can you hear me?”

He slowly opened his eyes, and my whole body exhaled with relief. His expression was dazed, and his eyes looked dopey, but he smiled as he

looked up at me. “If I’d known all I had to do to get your attention was fall and crack my head on the ice, I would have done it weeks ago.”

I released a laugh because it felt so good to hear his voice. “That’s not funny,” I said, but I was still smiling like an idiot. I’d never been more grateful to be able to look into his green eyes.

“Seriously, are you hurt?”

He lifted a hand to rub his head. “I banged my head, but I think I’m okay.”

He started to push himself up, and I wasn’t sure whether I should stop him. What if he’d really hurt himself?

“Should I call an ambulance?” I asked. “Maybe one of the guys? I’m not sure you should move after falling like that. I—”

“You’re stressing, Crash.” Noah waved me off. “I’m fine. Seriously, I…” He went to stand but stumbled and almost fell to the ground again.

I quickly moved to steady him. His eyes seemed unfocused, and he could barely keep his feet without my support.

“We need to get you to a doctor,” I said. “You were unconscious, Noah. Where are your keys?”

He looked like he might argue, but he must have felt worse than he was letting on because he nodded. “They’re in the truck.”

“Do you think you can make it back there if you lean on me?”

“I can walk.”

“I think you’ve just shown that you can’t. You nearly fell over again.”

With a sigh, he accepted my help. Noah was a big guy, and I was grateful we weren’t farther from the truck. I wrapped one arm firmly around his waist, and he rested his arm over my shoulder as we made our way back to the vehicle.

Any other time, I would have felt awkward being so close to him and my instincts would have resisted his proximity, but I was too worried about him to even consider how good he smelled or how nice it was to have his arm around me. I got him in the truck before I hurried round to the driver’s side and climbed in.

“Where’s the emergency room?” I asked as I fastened my seat belt.

“No idea.”

“Do you have your phone?”

He fished it out of the center console and passed it to me. I swallowed when I saw his background was a picture of the beach. It wasn’t just any

beach though. It was the secluded beach in Rapid Bay where we'd shared our first kiss.

I did my best to ignore the idea that he looked at the picture every time he unlocked his phone, and I searched online for the nearest emergency room. As soon as I had the directions, I glanced at Noah. "It's not far."

But his eyes were shut, and my heart stuttered. "Noah!"

"I'm awake, I'm awake," he groaned. "Just resting my eyes. My head hurts like hell."

"Please just keep your eyes open."

He slowly opened them once more and gave me a weak smile.

Seeing the pain in his eyes sparked me into action, and I started the truck. My hands were shaking as I slammed down on the accelerator, and we took off from the curb. I was so worried Noah was going to pass out again, and it was impossible to stay focused on the road.

I kept turning to look at Noah, checking he hadn't closed his eyes again. Thankfully, he kept them open, but his face was tense, and he kept lightly touching his head and wincing in pain. It looked like he was feeling worse now that some of the initial shock had worn off.

It took us less than ten minutes to get to the emergency room. As soon as we pulled up outside, I jumped from the truck and ran around to the passenger side to help Noah out. I was in such a rush to get him inside the building it took me a moment to realize he was smiling at me as I was helping him from the vehicle.

"What?" I asked.

"You drove." His smile became a little bigger.

"I…" I looked at the truck in surprise. He was right. I'd driven all the way here, and I hadn't once hesitated, or frozen, or refused to pull out of the parking space. I'd been so worried about Noah I hadn't even considered my driving fears, and the nerves that usually accompanied me whenever I got behind the wheel were nowhere to be seen. It had all happened so naturally. So easily.

"I told you," Noah mumbled. "You were overthinking it."

"You said that to tease me."

"I said that to help you, actually," he replied. "Now, can we get inside? I'd prefer not to pass out in front of you again."

"Right." I pulled my attention from the truck. "Of course."

When I got him inside, I spoke to the nearest nurse, and they directed us to a packed waiting room. Noah was quickly assessed by another nurse, who confirmed he probably had a concussion. However, she wanted him to see a doctor so he could be assessed for any more serious injuries and side effects.

We were told to expect a long wait though. The icy conditions on the mountain seemed to have resulted in a lot of injuries today, and Noah's fall appeared to be less urgent than the injuries of some of the other people in the emergency room.

Noah was patient though and didn't once complain. It took over an hour before a bed freed up, and we had to wait longer still for a doctor. Noah's eyes were far more focused now, but his lips remained tense. He kept trying to reassure me he wasn't in any pain, but I was convinced he was only saying that to make sure I didn't worry.

We talked constantly as we waited. I think we were both in need of a distraction. Noah from his pain and me from the memory of Noah passed out on the icy road. Whenever we grew silent, it left room for intrusive thoughts, and the image of him lying there overcame me. I didn't want to analyze the emotions that had stirred inside me when I'd seen Noah unconscious and unmoving on the ground. How the sight of his eyes blinking open when I was so worried they wouldn't had awoken something in my heart that I'd been desperately trying to bury.

"This trip can't end soon enough," I muttered as I checked the time and realized we'd been waiting for over two hours.

"When are you heading back to Rapid Bay?" Noah asked.

"In the morning." It felt like a relief. This holiday had been one disaster after another, and now all I wanted to do was to get home to my mom.

"I'll be heading back to New York then too," Noah said.

"How are things with your grandfather?"

"I haven't spoken to him since that night you overheard us," Noah said. "He's left me messages though. My voice mail is filled with his ranting and raving."

"Is he still threatening to destroy your father's memorial?"

"He is, but Matthew's been a great help. Despite his threats, William can't just build a parking lot there without getting certain approvals, and Matthew's got a lot of contacts. We'll stop him."

"I'm really sorry, Noah."

“Don’t be.” He shook his head. “He was always going to fight back, but taking him down was worth it. Not least of all because I don’t have to pretend around him anymore. It was exhausting.”

Noah seemed freer since everything that happened in New York. It was as if he was finally able to act like his true self now he wasn’t under his grandfather’s thumb. The person I’d previously seen in glimpses when it was just the two of us could now reveal himself to the world.

“So, what happened with Wes?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not talking about that with you.”

“You seemed pretty upset with him,” he replied.

"We just had an argument, that’s all.”

“It’s not just an argument when he throws unfair accusations at you and you end up trudging through the snow half dressed and freezing.”

“Noah…” I sighed, my tone a final warning that I couldn’t bring myself to discuss this with him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You probably think I’m cheering inside at the fact you and Wes had a fight, but, more than anything, I just hate seeing you upset.”

I glanced away from him, unable to hold his gaze for more than a few seconds.

“I’m not perfect,” he continued. “But, just so you know, I would never doubt you like that.”

I tried not to let his words get to me. I really did. But I suddenly found myself struggling not to cry. “I’ll be back in a moment,” I said, rising from my chair.

“Isobel…” Noah called after me, but I didn’t look back at him as I walked away. His words had wormed their way under my skin, and the tears I’d been keeping at bay threatened to fall.

I’d been trying my best not to think about my argument with Wes, but Noah was right. He had struggled to trust me since the start. And despite our best efforts to overcome that, he no longer felt I was worth it. He’d let me walk away and hadn’t come after me. What did that say about the way he felt about me? What did that say about our future together? I’d experienced too much heartbreak this year, and I wasn’t ready to face it again.

It felt like I’d been fighting for my relationship with Wes for weeks though, and I wasn’t sure I could keep going. I cared about him so much,

but I felt like he wasn't ever going to trust me the way I deserved. I didn't want us to be over, and while Wes hadn't said those exact words, the empty feeling in my gut warned me we probably already were.

By the time I returned to Noah's room, the doctor had arrived to see him. Noah kept trying to catch my eye, but my focus remained on the doctor.

She inspected Noah thoroughly and confirmed his concussion. Thankfully though, Noah hadn't done any serious damage to his head when he'd fallen, and the doctor was much less concerned than I had been when I'd heard his skull crack against the icy ground. She told him to make sure he got plenty of rest and was extra careful on the ice. Much to my relief, Noah was going to be fine.

Once I knew he was okay, I couldn't wait to get out of the emergency room. My haste was partly because I needed some space from Noah so I could try to process everything that had happened that afternoon. But also, it was because I was still wearing nothing but a bikini and Noah's sweatshirt. Not only was I uncomfortable, but I must have looked ridiculous.

"So, do you think we'll ever stop falling for each other?" Noah said with a grin as we made our way to the car.

The question elicited memories of us tumbling to the ground in the woods of him wrapping his arms around my waist to save me as my skis hurled out of control, of him staring lovingly into my eyes on the beach, and all those little moments when he'd share a fleeting smile that only I ever got to see.

They were memories I didn't want to think about right now. And I definitely wasn't ready to joke about what had happened today when we'd fallen on the ice and knocked him unconscious. Now that I knew he wasn't seriously injured, it felt like I could be angry with him again. That seemed like a far safer focus for my pent-up energy.

"You scared me half to death today," I said. "You know that, right?"

"It was just a little fall."

"Just a little fall? I had to rush you to hospital."

"Maybe if you hadn't been so stubborn and just got in the car like I asked, it wouldn't have happened," he said.

"Or maybe if you hadn't insisted on forcing me into the car against my will, it wouldn't have happened."

“You were being too reckless,” he said.

“You were being too persistent.”

“God, I love you, Isobel.”

I fell silent, and the blood rushed from my skin. My heart seemed to both swell and shatter at the sound of that word. How easily he said it. How he looked at me like I was everything to him. How he could still feel that way about me when I’d spent weeks telling him he shouldn’t.

He gave me a sad smile, like he knew exactly what was going through my head. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have…”

“But I’m not sorry that I did. Yes, it’s not fair of me, but I don’t really care. I love you, Isobel, and I would happily fall a million times over if it meant I got to hold you in my arms like I did today.”

I forced myself to glance away. “We should get home.”

He nodded, but as we climbed into the truck, he continued. “You can try to ignore this all you want, Crash. But that won’t change the way I feel about you. Nothing will ever change that.”

I refused to look at him. Refused to listen to him. Refused to let his words burrow their way into my soul. But it was growing harder to ignore how much he cared about me. And after seeing him hurt today, I was starting to realize there were feelings inside me that might also be too strong to ignore any longer.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

As I turned the key in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life, I felt calm. The nerves I was so used to feeling when I sat in the driver's seat remained at bay as I reversed out of the parking space and drove out of the lot.

Something had clicked when I'd been hyper focused on getting Noah to the hospital. The part of me that had been terrified of driving ever since I crashed my mom's car was gone. Maybe it was because I'd experienced a moment of true terror when Noah was unconscious, and my anxiety about driving paled in comparison. Or perhaps Noah was right, and I'd always been a capable driver, but my overthinking and worrying had gotten in the way. Now that I knew I could do it, my doubts no longer took control and convinced me that I couldn't.

The only time we talked as I drove us home was when Noah gave me directions to the house. I'd been trying my best not to think about the things he'd said to me in the parking lot, but they kept spinning around in my head. As we neared the end of the cul-de-sac and the houses we were staying in, I started to think about seeing Wes again.

We'd left things in such a mess when I'd stormed off earlier this afternoon. There was a huge dark question mark lingering over our relationship, and I wasn't sure I was ready to face him. I didn't want to stay confined in the car with Noah though either.

When I parked in Luther's driveway, Noah turned to me. "I know you're headed back to Rapid Bay tomorrow, and I'm off to New York. But please tell me you'll think about what I said over the break."

I stayed silent, and he took a deep breath before he continued. “I’ve been trying so hard to be patient. And I haven’t fought for you because you told me you were happy with Wes, and that’s all I want for you. But, if there’s a chance that’s changed, I don’t want you to have any doubt that I still want to be with you.”

“Noah…”

“Because when I opened my eyes after my fall today and saw the way you were looking at me, I thought I might be dreaming. For a moment, it felt like we’d slipped into a different world—a world where you cared for me as much as I care for you. And having experienced that for just a couple of seconds… Well, I want that with you so damn much.”

I hesitated. With everything that had happened today, my emotions were all over the place. I’d been so angry with Noah after we broke up and so hurt by the way he’d treated me in the aftermath. While I understood his reasons now, I’d honestly thought there was no way back for us.

But the strength of the feelings I experienced when I saw him get hurt today took me by surprise. I clearly still cared for Noah, and now that I realized how deep those feelings were, I couldn’t shake them. I could feel them rattling around inside my chest, and I wasn’t sure I could bottle them back up again. I still cared for Wes, but I felt something for Noah too.

“Just tell me you’ll think about it,” Noah asked. “Please?”

I felt completely confused and had no idea what I should do. Perhaps the best way forward was to take some time and space over the break to think, as he suggested. Try to make sense of what I was feeling. What I wanted. I gave him a small nod. “Okay, I’ll think about it.”

Noah gave me a hopeful smile before he got out of the car and slowly made his way toward the house. I followed him, making sure he got to the front door safely, before I handed him his keys.

“You going to be okay?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “A concussion is a small price to pay to spend an afternoon with you.”

“You’re crazy,” I grumbled.

Noah grinned and went to open the front door. As the door swung inward and he started into the house, he paused and nodded toward the sweatshirt I was still wearing. “You can keep my hoodie,” he said. “It looks better on you than it does on me.”

“I—”

He didn’t give me a chance to object. “I’ll see you after break, Crash.” He winked and closed the door.

With a sigh, I turned and started back toward the twins’ house. I didn’t have my phone with me, so I had no idea what to expect when I got there. Noah had messaged Cress to let her know what happened when we got to the hospital, so I knew she would have told everyone I was okay. I didn’t know what state Wes would be in though. We’d left things so badly when I’d stormed off.

When I reached the house, I cautiously opened the front door. I wasn’t sure why I was so nervous. It was probably because I was still in Noah’s sweatshirt, and I knew the moment Wes saw me in it he would probably get set off again. I’d never seen him so angry before. I’d certainly never had him lash out at me that way. Would he still be mad? Or would our time apart have helped him clear his thoughts?

When I entered the living room, a part of me was relieved to find it empty. In fact, I couldn’t hear a single voice. It seemed as though no one was home. The idea left me feeling much more at ease. If I could just change my clothes, then perhaps I’d find it easier to face Wes.

When I got to my room, I found the clothes I’d left at Luther’s sitting on my bed along with my phone. I quickly changed out of Anna’s bikini and into a pair of sweats. I felt so much more comfortable now I was in my own clothes. Next, I grabbed my phone to check for messages. There were plenty of texts and missed calls from the girls. Even some from Noah and Luther. But not one from Wes. The latest message was from Cress, telling me they’d gone to grab some dinner and would be back soon.

I started to go through the other messages but jumped when I heard a noise behind me. I spun to see Wes standing in the doorway, and I braced a hand against my chest.

“Wes, I didn’t realize you were home.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to catch you by surprise.” His voice was meek and his eyes downcast. His expression didn’t reveal much about what he was feeling, but I was glad he didn’t seem angry. Still, a pit began to form in the base of my gut. I was still dreading what came next.

He slowly entered the room and stopped several feet from me. Normally he would have stepped forward and pulled me into his arms.

“So, everyone’s gone to get dinner?” I asked.

“Yeah, they’re grabbing some takeout,” he replied. “But they should be back soon. I thought I’d wait here in case you returned while they were out.”

“Ah, thanks.”

He was looking at me but struggled to meet my eyes, and as the silence stretched between us, I grew increasingly worried about what he would say when it finally broke.

“I’m sorry I got so angry earlier,” he said.

I relaxed slightly, hoping that meant he was done with his caustic tone and bitter words.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot while you’ve been gone. About how angry I felt and how on edge I’ve been about you and Noah lately. That’s not who I am. That’s not the kind of guy I want to be.”

“I know that, Wes. And I’m sorry I’ve made you feel that way.”

He shook his head. “That’s the thing. You’ve done nothing wrong. I just think that after what happened with Sarah, perhaps I don’t know how to trust in a relationship anymore.”

He looked away, and as he broke eye contact, I felt like I was losing him. “Wes?”

“We both know we rushed into this relationship,” he said. “Being together made us both feel better. But I’m beginning to think that was a mistake.”

I stepped toward him. “You don’t mean that.”

He swallowed and finally looked at me again, his eyes glistening with pain. “I care about you so much, Isobel. Too much to keep you to myself when I know it will only make us both miserable.”

A part of me wanted to argue. To tell him he was wrong and that we wouldn’t be miserable. But another part of me wondered if perhaps he had a point. We’d fallen into our relationship so quickly—too quickly, perhaps. And when I thought about it, I knew he was right, and neither one of us had been ready. It didn’t stop me from caring deeply about him though, and it wasn’t easy for me to let him go.

“I can’t control the jealousy I feel when I see Noah looking at you,” he continued. “I want to lose my mind when I catch the two of you talking. And seeing you in his hoodie today? Well, it made me see red. I don’t want to be that guy in a relationship, and you sure as hell deserve better. I need

time to be single. To work on properly healing my heart before I start another relationship."

I cradled my arms around my body as I stared at him. I'd been preparing for these words all afternoon, and yet I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "So, you want to break up?"

"Yes. I think that would be better for both of us."

I did my best to swallow down the pain those words inflicted. Wes and I had been so good together, and yet somehow, we'd ended up here. "I don't want to lose you."

"You're not going to. I'm still here for you."

"What? As a friend?"

"I understand if you don't want to be my friend anymore, but yeah, I still want that for us."

I nodded, but I couldn't bear to meet his gaze.

Wes stepped to me and took my hand in his. "Isobel?"

I looked up at him.

"I really do think this is for the best. We were great together, but I don't think you've been honest with yourself. And I think with time and space you're going to realize that I'm not the guy you want." He winced as he spoke, and I could see how hard it was for him to admit.

"But you're perfect."

"I'm not." He released a sad laugh. "And even if I was, I don't think I'm the perfect guy for you." He slowly shook his head. "It's always been Noah. Since the moment you arrived at Weybridge. I know you think you've moved on from him, but I can tell you haven't even if you can't."

I didn't know what to say. If Wes had told me these things just last night, I would have denied them. But this afternoon had made me realize I still held feelings for Noah, and despite what I'd believed, I'd never really gotten over him.

"I really care about you, Wes."

"I know," he agreed. "And I really care about you too. But I think you know I'm right about us. We're not working together. Not as we are. Not at the moment."

I released a breath, and with it, all the fight I had left. "Okay." My voice sounded so small. *I felt so small*. I kept waiting for my heart to shatter, but maybe it had already broken too many times; maybe there was no longer

any part of it left to destroy. Instead, I just felt empty and sad. Most of all, I feared I might be losing a friend as well as a boyfriend.

Wes pulled me into a hug, and I held him tightly in return. I hadn't shed a single tear since we'd started talking, and I wondered if perhaps I was empty of those too. We stood there for five minutes. Then ten. When we finally stepped away from each other, I felt both better and worse. I didn't want to lose Wes, but he had spoken sense. Our relationship wasn't what it should be, and if we stayed together, it would only continue to deteriorate.

I needed time to look into my heart and work out what I wanted, and if Wes felt like he couldn't trust in a relationship right now and needed time to heal, then that was something he deserved. It didn't stop this from sucking though. It didn't stop it from being hard.

"I think I might go to bed," I said. "We've got an early start tomorrow."

Wes smiled and leaned over to give me a kiss on the head. I breathed in his scent, but he stepped away all too quickly.

"I'll see you in the morning."

I watched him leave the room and close the door behind him. Once he was gone, I climbed into bed and buried myself under the covers. I kept waiting for the tears to come, but they remained elusive, so I stared out the window at the sparkling village lit up below me and the isolated lights dotted here and there on the mountain.

When the girls returned with dinner, they came into my room and joined me in bed. They didn't ask me for an explanation, and they didn't try to distract me with talk of other things. They seemed to sense I wasn't ready to say anything, and instead they got under the blanket on either side of me and rested their heads on my shoulders as we stared out at the darkened mountain view together.

My heart had been battered yet again, but at least I had Cress and Anna. Breaking up with Wes wasn't what I'd wanted, and yet I felt at peace with the decision. I needed time on my own to sort through my emotions. I needed space to figure out my heart.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

It was hard saying goodbye to everyone the following morning. We were all going our separate ways and heading home for Christmas. I hated that I wouldn't see the girls for more than a week, and despite our breakup, I also found I was sad to leave Wes. We might not be together anymore, but he was still one of the people I was closest to. He gave me a warm hug goodbye, and I knew I was going to miss him over the holidays.

It was quite a long trip home, and it was late afternoon by the time Matthew's plane touched down at the private airport outside of Rapid Bay. I was exhausted because I'd barely slept all night, but my fatigue completely disappeared the moment I saw my mom. She was waiting by her car and grinned from ear to ear when she saw me emerge from the plane. I ran to meet her, needing a hug from her more than I needed air to breathe. She caught me up in her arms and laughed when I squeezed her extra tight.

"Miss me, huh?" she asked.

"You have no idea." I finally released her and went to load my bag in the car.

"How was the ski trip?"

"Well, I suck at skiing, and Wes and I broke up last night, so it probably could have been better."

She touched my arm to stop me. "You broke up?"

"Yeah." I let out a sigh. "But seeing as I'm not a devastated mess right now, it makes me wonder if perhaps it was for the best."

"You're not upset?"

"I mean, I am, but it just feels like the right thing to do for both of us."

“It sounds like you’re being very mature about it,” Mom said. “But this doesn’t have anything to do with Noah, does it?”

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts. “Noah definitely didn’t help the situation,” I said. “But I think it’s more that Wes and I rushed into our relationship when neither of us were ready, and it was starting to show. I thought about it a lot last night, and I think because we’ve broken things off now, we might have a chance at still being friends”

“Is that something you want?”

“It might be hard at first,” I said. “But I definitely still want him in my life.”

Mom smothered me with another hug. “How did I create such a grown-up young woman?”

I laughed and shrugged out of her hug. “*Mom*.”

She shot me a wink and got in the car.

“How’s the café?” I asked as she drove us home.

“Same as usual.”

“So, quiet?”

“Yeah.” Mom gave me a tight smile. “It’s been slow the last few weeks, but it’s picked up since the winter break started and people began filtering back into town.” The more she talked during the car trip, the more I noticed how hoarse her voice was sounding.

“Mom, are you feeling okay?”

“Fine, why?”

“Your voice is scratchy, and I’m trying to figure out whether you went to a heavy metal concert on the weekend without telling me or you’ve picked up a cold and are going to be sick for Christmas. Neither answer is acceptable.”

She waved off my concern with a laugh. “You worry too much. I feel perfectly fine. I probably just stayed up too late last night.”

“I hope you weren’t up watching *Downton Abbey* without me. You know we always watch it over Christmas together.”

“Of course not, I would never start our yearly Downton binge without you.” Mom smiled. “I mostly couldn’t sleep because I was too excited about you getting home today.”

“I’ve been pretty excited to get back too,” I admitted. “It’ll be nice to spend some time at home.”

“It will. It’s not the same here without you.”

“Nowhere’s the same without you, Mom.”

She reached across the car and took my hand. The way her eyes brightened at my words made me feel like she’d been truly touched by them.

“Now, tell me more about your trip,” she said.

“Well, you’ll be glad to hear I finally managed to drive without freaking out…” I launched into the story of my emergency dash to the hospital with Noah. Mom seemed more hung up on the way I spoke about Noah than my driving success though, and she kept sending me knowing looks. I decided not to tell her that he’d told me he loved me again. She’d want to know how I felt, and not even I knew the answer to that.

We arrived at the café in time for a late dinner, and I was pleased when mom told me Norma was finishing her shift early to join us. Frank also came, and it was so sweet to see how well he and Norma were getting along. They were so cute together, and it gave me hope that one day my love life might actually fall into place.

I didn’t bother unpacking after dinner. It was growing late, and I knew I’d have time to put my things away come morning. Mom and I were going to start our annual *Downton Abbey* tradition anyway. I put on a pair of cozy sweatpants and went to brush my teeth while Mom set up the TV. I couldn’t seem to find the toothpaste though.

“Mom, are you out of toothpaste?” I called out.

“I finished it this morning,” she shouted. “There’s a new tube in the cabinet above the sink. Maybe try the top shelf.”

I’d had a quick look in the cabinet before, but clearly, I’d been too tired because, when I checked again, the toothpaste was sitting right where she’d said. I went to grab the tube, but as I did, my attention snagged on a little white container sitting on the shelf beside it.

I normally would have ignored the bottle completely, but my father’s surname was written in large letters across the side of it. Why on earth would my mom have medicine made by The LaFleur Corporation?

I took the bottle off the shelf and turned it over in my hand. My mom’s name was on the prescription label along with instructions to take one tablet daily. It didn’t say what the tablets were for, but my stomach plummeted because my father didn’t produce run-of-the-mill pharmaceuticals. The focus of his treatments was cancer.

I rushed from the room, still clutching the little white bottle.

“Did you find it?” Mom asked. She was sitting in front of the TV, getting *Downton Abbey* up on screen.

“Mom, what are these?”

She turned to look at me, and the easy smile on her face dropped. She stood up and hurried over to me, snatching the container from my hand and shoving it in her pocket. “You weren’t supposed to see those.”

“Weren’t supposed to see? Mom, what are they?” It was hard to keep the fear and confusion from my voice.

"It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“It’s not nothing. I know the kind of drugs Matthew manufactures. Why do you have tablets that treat cancer?”

Her expression was torn, and when she didn’t answer immediately, my mind went straight to a very dark place. I knew something bad was coming, and I started to tremble. “Mom?”

“You better sit down…” She went to touch my arm, but I shook her off.

“I don’t want to sit down. I want you to explain.”

“Okay, okay.” She slowly blew out a breath. “I just want to start by saying you really don’t need to worry.”

I sank down onto the couch, no longer sure I could stand even if I wanted to. Her telling me there was nothing to be concerned about only made me more apprehensive.

“I’m fine,” she continued. “And I’m going to keep being fine.”

She wasn’t making me feel any better. Fine was the word you used when you were pretending everything was okay but it most definitely wasn’t. The word you used when you were in total denial. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“Just tell me what’s wrong,” I said. Her cautious explanation was only making me fear the worst.

She took a deep breath and sat on the couch beside me before gathering my hands in hers. “I have thyroid cancer.”

Her words paralyzed me. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. As soon as I’d seen those pills on her shelf, I’d suspected this was something bad. But it was one thing to speculate and another to have it confirmed.

Mom’s grasp on my hands tightened as she gave a reassuring squeeze. My body didn’t feel like my own right now though, and I could barely register the sensation.

“You have cancer?” I needed to hear it again. I felt like I was under water and her words were brushing over the surface. I wasn’t sure I’d understood her correctly. This didn’t feel real. How could it be true?

“I do, but it’s not the most serious kind of cancer,” she explained. “And we caught it early. My chances of a full recovery are high, and the treatment I’m on isn’t invasive. I’m going to live a long, healthy life, I promise.”

Tears pricked my eyes. Even if this cancer was less serious, it was still cancer, and despite what Mom said, that word felt like a death sentence. Perhaps she’d survive it now, but what about in the future? What if it came back? I was jumping ahead of myself though. I needed to focus on how she would get through it now.

“What treatment are you on?” I asked. “What exactly are your survival chances? Who’s your doctor? Can I talk to them?”

My mom gave me a soft smile. “I know you have a lot of questions,” she said. “And we can make an appointment to chat with my doctor if that will make you feel better.”

“It would,” I said, but it only felt slightly true. It didn’t change the fact I felt terrible she’d been dealing with this all on her own. She’d seemed tired for months now, but I’d assumed she’d been overworking herself. Had I gotten so caught up in my new life I’d failed to notice she was struggling for another reason? How could I have missed this?

She seemed to have a positive outlook, but I couldn’t imagine coping with something like this without the support of my family. How she’d handled the mental and physical load without me.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because you’d just broken up with Levi at the time, and you were devastated. I couldn’t dump this on you too.”

"I could have handled it.”

But she shook her head. “And then you were due to head off to Weybridge Academy, and I knew you would never go if you knew the truth.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t have,” I agreed. “Because this is the kind of thing you deal with as a family. Because you deserved to have some support, and I deserved to know. You should have told me.”

She shrugged. “Like I said, I’m fine. I feel good, and we’re monitoring it closely. Your father has been working with my doctor to make sure his

treatment is working for me, and if things keep tracking the way they are, I might never need surgery."

"Matthew knows?"

She grimaced.

"You could tell my estranged father but not your daughter?" It was hard to ignore the hurt that flashed through me. My mom trusted Matthew with this over me. And Matthew had kept it from me too. It's not like they hadn't had the opportunity to tell me.

My mom glanced away as she gathered her thoughts, and the way she refused to look at me made me anxious. I thought we shared everything, but could she really be keeping another secret?

"Mom, is there something you're not telling me?"

She swallowed and slowly returned her gaze to meet mine. "So, here's the thing…" She glanced down at her hands, and I could see she was struggling with whatever it was she had to say. She released a breath and looked at me once more. "Matthew never found my letter in his father's safe."

Her response surprised me, and it took me a moment to realize she was talking about the letter she had sent Matthew before I was born. The one in which she'd told him about me. The only reason he knew I existed was because he'd discovered the letter after his father died.

"I don't understand," I said. "What's that got to do with your diagnosis?"

"Because that letter isn't the reason your father came back into your life," she said. "He never saw it. Matthew suspects his parents destroyed it before they sent me the hush money. The truth is, Matthew didn't know you existed until I reached out to him earlier this year."

"Wait? *You* reached out to *him*?"

She nodded. "I'd just received my diagnosis, and I was terrified. So, I decided to get in touch with him."

"Of course, you were terrified. Mom, you should have said something to me."

She shook her head though. "I wasn't terrified for me. I was terrified for you. Hearing about the cancer made me realize that I'm not always going to be here. That something might happen to me, and you would be left all alone. I didn't want to be the only family you had, so I contacted Matthew. I told him about you. And I told him I was sick."

She quickly lifted a hand to her eye to stop a tear from escaping before she continued. “I hoped that maybe he’d changed his mind in the years since you were born and that maybe he would want to be in your life. To my shock, I discovered that he’d never even known about you. But from the very first moment he found out he had a daughter, he wanted to be a father to you.”

The blood rushed from my skin as I tried to understand what she was saying. They had both lied to me about this?

“Matthew kept all this from me too?”

“I asked him to,” my mom said. “I told him to tell you he found the letter and contacted me because of it. I wasn’t ready to tell you about the cancer. And when he offered to send you to one of the best schools in the country, I knew I needed to keep the truth from you a while longer. You deserved this incredible opportunity, and I wanted to make sure you went to Weybridge Academy and set yourself up for a future without me.”

My body started to shake as she hinted at a world where she didn’t exist. I stood from the couch and paced away from her. I couldn’t believe she’d kept this all from me. That she’d had to plan for life after she died. But most of all, I couldn’t believe she’d gone through this alone—and the guilt I felt was crippling.

“Isobel…” My mom moved to follow me off the couch, but I lifted a hand, gesturing for her to keep back. This was one thing too much for me right now. I hadn’t even begun to accept my mom had cancer. How was I supposed to come to terms with the fact my parents had both been lying and the reason my father was finally in my life was because of the cancer too.

“I just… I can’t… I need a minute.”

“Take all the time you need,” she said.

I went to my room without responding, closing the door firmly behind me. As it closed, tears started to flow down my cheeks. Apparently, the reason I hadn’t cried over Wes was because my body somehow knew this moment was coming and needed to be ready.

I knew I was probably dealing with this all the wrong way. I was supposed to be out there hugging my mom and telling her it was all going to be okay. But instead, I was in here crying. Crying because I was scared for her. Crying because she’d lied. I was crying because she’d let me leave when she’d needed me here all this time.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and found myself calling the last person I expected.

Noah answered on the second ring. “Isobel?”

I wasn’t sure why I’d called him. He wasn’t my boyfriend. He wasn’t even really my friend. But for some reason, he was the one person whose voice I wanted to hear right now.

I tried to come up with a response but a croaky sob was all I managed.

Noah swore. “Isobel, are you okay? What’s happened?”

Again, I couldn’t seem to muster the words to respond.

“Is this about Wes? I heard you two broke up.”

“Not Wes.” Finally, I found my voice. “I’m not crying about Wes.”

“Then what the hell is wrong?” He sounded somewhat panicked, but it was hardly surprising given I’d called him late at night sobbing without any explanation.

“It’s my mom…” I whispered. “She’s sick. She says she’s going to be okay, but it’s cancer, so how can she be sure?”

Noah swore again, and there was a brief pause before he spoke. “I’m coming to Rapid Bay.”

“What? No, you don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do. I might not have access to my grandfather’s jet anymore, but I’ll find a way.”

“Noah, that’s crazy.”

His voice became muffled, and it sounded as though he was talking to someone else, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying. When he came on the line again, I tried to dissuade him once more.

“You can’t just fly here because I’m crying,” I said.

“Yes, I can. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Okay?”

I didn’t have the energy to fight him. And if I was being honest with myself, I knew I wanted him here. “Okay. Thank you.” I glanced at the door behind me, knowing I should be out there with my mom. “I need to go.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

I hung up the phone and stared at it for several long moments. I wasn’t really sure what had just happened, but a part of me was relieved. This burden felt like too much for me to bear alone, and knowing Noah was coming, that he was going to be here, made it a little easier to breathe.

When I went back out to my mom, she was pacing the living room, chewing her nails. She went completely still when she saw I’d returned.

“I’m sorry for running out like that,” I said before I walked over and gathered her in a hug. She relaxed into my arms, and I held her even tighter. “I’m scared.”

“You don’t need to be,” she replied. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right from the start. I just didn’t want to worry you, and you had so much going on. I just wanted you to be happy. To fulfill your potential. To have an amazing life even if I might not be in it.”

“Mom, please don’t talk like that. I don’t care what’s happening in my life; you should always tell me this stuff. *Always*.” I shook my head. “But don’t worry about that now. How are you feeling?”

“I’m good,” she said. “The symptoms from the treatment have been mild. I probably wouldn’t even know I was sick if the doctor hadn’t noticed the lump on my throat at a regular checkup.”

I stared into my hands. “I can’t believe you went through all of this without me. That you reunited me with my father after all this time because you were scared you were going to die.”

Mom didn’t look the least bit guilty, and I got the feeling she’d do the same all over again if she had to.

“So, what is this trial? What are the drugs he’s got you on?”

“Look, why don’t we talk about this tomorrow,” Mom said. “You’ve had a really big day of travel, you broke up with your boyfriend, and now *this*. Matthew is getting here in the morning. It might help if he’s here to answer your questions too.”

I did feel exhausted, but I wasn’t sure if I could sleep. Not when I’d just learned my mom had been keeping a cancer diagnosis from me for months. If I went to bed right now, I knew I’d be up all night googling her symptoms and probably scaring the hell out of myself with whatever I found.

“Or we could watch more *Downton Abbey* together…” I suggested.

Mom wrapped an arm around my shoulder and guided me toward the couch. “That sounds perfect.”

Downton might not have the answers I was looking for, but it provided one relief: sweet distraction.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I woke to the distant buzzing of an alarm. I didn't think I'd set one seeing as I was on winter break, so I thought it was probably the clock in my mom's bedroom. I was still half asleep, and the beeping sound seemed like something out of a dream. I could feel the lulling pull of slumber trying to lure me back under, and I probably would have fallen straight back to sleep, but the alarm was persistent and annoying and refused to let up.

I'd passed out on the couch with my mom during our Downton marathon, so my legs were stiff, and my neck had an uncomfortable crook in it from sleeping at a funny angle. It probably made sense to get up and relocate to the bedroom, but my body felt exhausted, and I didn't want to move.

I let out a cough as I tried to take in a breath. The air felt hot and dry, and as I dragged in another breath, I coughed again. Ever so slowly, I blinked my eyes open. The room was dark and it took me a few moments for my sleep-addled mind to notice everything seemed hazy.

Something wasn't right, and I tried to push myself upright. My body felt like it was weighed down by leaden weights, and sitting up straight was far harder than it should have been. I was just so tired. And even though the world didn't look right, even though my breaths felt labored, all I wanted to do was lay my head back down on the pillow and sleep.

My ears honed in on the alarm once again. Why was it so piercing? Had my mom's clock always been so loud? It was only as I coughed once more that I finally realized what had woken me up—it was a fire alarm.

I was suddenly more alert, and as I glanced around the room, panic slowly began to set in. All the lights were out, and the TV was off, so the only source of light was a streetlamp outside that sent a dim glow through the thin curtains covering the window. The haze in the room gave everything a blurred appearance, and as I searched for the source of the smoke, I realized it was gathering thickly around the door that led from the apartment.

My chest already felt constricted, and I gagged on a cough as I gasped. This wasn't just a case of some burnt toast setting off the smoke alarm. This was serious.

"Mom." I coughed as I crawled over to her. She'd been snuggled on the couch beside me and was somehow still asleep. "Mom, wake up!" Couldn't she hear the alarm blaring? Couldn't she smell the smoke?

"Please, wake up!" I tried to rouse her, but no matter how much I shook her, she wouldn't open her eyes. "Mom!" I screamed before coughing once again. I couldn't see any sign of a fire, but the smoke was thick, and I felt like I was choking on it.

I rushed for the window and attempted to push it open, but it refused to move. I remembered how the wood in our apartment had warped in the heat last summer meaning most of the windows jammed occasionally. I knew it was no use trying the window in the bathroom as that barely opened wide enough to fit a hand through. And the ones in our bedrooms were even worse than the window out here. Mom had been saying for months she needed to get someone to come out and look at them, but it had fallen to the bottom of the list of things that needed fixing around here.

I considered trying them anyway, but as I choked on another cough, I decided otherwise. Even if I could get them open, how was I supposed to get myself and my mom down to the ground from an upstairs window. The only thing I knew for sure was that I needed to get us out of here as soon as possible. I was already struggling to breathe, and I was sure I'd learned somewhere that smoke inhalation was more likely to kill you in a fire than the flames themselves.

There was only one way out of our apartment. I had to get across the room, down a flight of stairs, and then out through the café. I couldn't even be sure if that exit was safe. What if it was already engulfed in flames? I couldn't think about that though. I just had to concentrate on one thing at a time.

I rushed back to my mom and tried to draw her arm over my shoulder and pick her up. She was so small, but she was an absolute dead weight, and I wasn't strong enough to lift her. Tears stung my eyes as I tried to think of a way to get her out, and I rolled her to the floor so I could attempt to drag her from the room.

I felt so weak, and each breath of smoke I inhaled made me feel weaker still. My body felt so slow as I inched my mom closer and closer to the door. I was somehow going to have to manage the stairs when I reached them, but I had to get there first. I drew in another breath and collapsed to my knees.

I tried to shake my mom once more. "Mom?" I croaked. "Please wake up."

I could feel myself fading fast, but I refused to leave my mom behind. I couldn't seem to stand. How was I supposed to drag my mom from the smoke-filled room when I couldn't even drag myself?

"Isobel?" I heard someone shouting. "Isobel?"

I wanted to call back. To yell that I was here. But my lips couldn't seem to form the words. I was just so damn tired.

The door to the apartment burst open, and I struggled to focus on the person who appeared before me. The next thing I knew, I was being shaken, and my eyes popped open. Had they even been shut? I smiled as I saw Noah's features form before me.

"You came," I mumbled.

"I'll always come for you," he replied. "I have to get you out of here. The fire's spreading quickly downstairs."

The fire. Hearing the word seemed to clear the fog in my brain enough so I could think once more, and I shook my head, pulling away from him. "You need to get my mom."

"Help is coming."

My mom couldn't wait though. "Noah, please," I begged though the word sounded so faint.

A cough came from behind Noah, and I looked up to see Matthew standing in the doorway, his face smeared in ash. "Noah, go. I've got Candice," my father yelled at Noah, coughing again as he rushed to my mom's side.

Noah gathered me in his arms. "It's okay, Isobel, I've got you."

He rushed from the room as though I were as light as a feather. We reached the stairs leading down to the café as fire licked the banister and crawled up the walls. It was so hot it felt like my face might melt, but Noah charged right down the stairs, through the flame-lit corridor, and out into the fresh night air.

We were both coughing as we emerged from the building, and Noah set me on the ground as soon as we were free. He turned to head straight back inside, but my father followed right after us, cradling my mom carefully in his arms.

Sirens blared somewhere in the background. It was dark, but the fire cast a haunting orange glow across the quiet street. A few people were gathering on the other side of the road, staring up at the blaze in horror. But all I could focus on was my mom. Matthew had her on the ground and was already performing CPR. Tears streaked down my cheeks as I crawled over to her. My mom's life was hanging on the line as the thing she lived for burned down in the darkness behind her.

I held my mom's hand as Matthew tried to save her life. I wished I could do something to help, but I could barely stay upright. I was still finding it so hard to breathe, and I felt so feeble.

"Isobel?" Noah's alarmed voice rang out.

I started to fall, and everything went black.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

For the second morning in a row, I woke to a beeping sound. It was far softer than the last one I'd heard. Far less urgent and annoying. I felt so groggy as I listened to the constant melodic beep, and even the thoughts that rose to the surface of my mind were sluggish. I couldn't seem to remember where I was. I couldn't recall how I'd fallen asleep last night.

I so easily could have drifted back to sleep, and I had to fight toward wakefulness. My eyelids were heavy, and my body felt numb, but I gradually blinked open my eyes.

The room was bright, and the beeping noise only sounded louder now I was more awake. There was something on my face, but I could also feel a weight on my legs, and as I glanced down the bed, I found Noah sitting in a chair beside me, his head resting on the bed as he slept. His skin was pale, and his clothes were rumpled. He looked exhausted, and I couldn't understand what he was doing in my room. Why he was asleep in a chair when he so clearly needed a bed of his own?

I dragged in a breath and felt the pinch of plastic across my face once more. I lifted a hand and was met with the hard shell of a mask beneath my fingertips. I drew in another frantic breath as I tried to work out what was going on. Why was I wearing a mask? My heartbeat quickened. Where was I? I started trying to pry the mask from my face.

"You need to leave that on for now."

I turned to the voice and saw Matthew sitting in a chair on the other side of my bed. He looked just as exhausted as Noah. His hair was a mess, and his usual pristine shirt and smart pants were covered in grime. There was

even a smudge of dirt on his face. I'd never seen him look so disheveled, and my confusion only grew.

What was he doing here? Where were we? And why was Noah here too?

I was still so drowsy, and I was struggling to think clearly. Perhaps if this room wasn't quite so bright, I could focus. My attention caught on a transparent bag hanging at my bedside, and my gaze followed a tube that snaked away from it to meet my hand.

"You're in the hospital," Matthew said softly.

"What hap—" My voice was completely hoarse, and the words came out a rough whisper.

"There was a fire," Matthew replied. "But you're okay. You and your mom are going to be okay."

The memory of the fire slammed back into me, and my eyes widened as I glanced around in a panic. "Where is she?"

I felt like I was choking on smoke all over again, and a nurse rushed in as the monitor at my side started beeping wildly. I clawed at my mask. I needed to get it off. I needed to get out of this bed. I needed to find my mom.

"Your mom's okay," Matthew repeated. His hands rested on my shoulders. "She's still in the ICU, but she's okay. You need to take deep breaths, Isobel."

Then Noah's face was above me, and he lightly touched my cheek. "Matthew's right. You need to breathe slowly," he said. "Copy me. In and out." He breathed. "In and out."

I stared into Noah's eyes, and as I mimicked his long, slow breaths, I found I was able to breathe more normally again. "My mom's really, okay?" I finally managed to croak.

"She will be," Noah replied.

The nurse took my father's place at my side as she checked me over, but I was still so addled and confused. It was only the sight of Noah, of his reassuring smile, that grounded me and made me feel like everything would be okay. The nurse was saying something to my father, and I wanted to listen in. But I was still fighting my exhaustion, and my eyelids felt so heavy. Her words grew increasingly distant until sleep pulled me under once again.

Time lost all meaning as I fell in and out of sleep. The next time I fully opened my eyes, the lights overhead had been dimmed and the mask was gone from my face. I felt far less lethargic than the last time I'd awoken, and the confusion that had clouded my mind was no longer there. I recalled everything that had happened in the fire with crystal clarity, and more importantly, I remembered Matthew insisting my mom would be okay. It didn't stop my heart from beating a little quicker though. I didn't think I'd be able to relax until I saw her with my own eyes.

"You're awake." Noah's deep voice drifted over to me, and I tilted my head to where he was still sitting in the chair next to my bed. A relieved smile brushed his lips as he shuffled slightly closer.

"My mom?" My voice was still so rough, and my throat felt like it had been rubbed raw by sandpaper. I sounded nothing like myself.

Noah nodded across my bed, and I turned to find we weren't alone in the room. My mom was asleep in the bed beside me. For the first time since before the fire, I felt like I could truly breathe.

"How is she?" I asked, unable to tear my eyes from her.

"It was touch and go when we first arrived at the hospital, but she's doing well," Noah said. "She woke up a few hours back, but she's been resting like you ever since."

"How long have we been here?"

"The fire was early yesterday morning. Now it's Thursday evening. You've been in and out of sleep for over a day."

I nodded, but I struggled to believe I'd been asleep so long. That I'd been passed out while my mom's life was hanging by a thread. She looked so peaceful as she slept, but her skin was all too pale, and I hated seeing the oxygen line on her face and the drip connected to her arm.

"I'm really glad you're finally awake," he added.

I glanced back at Noah, and as my eyes landed on him, I noticed a bandage around his arm. "Are you okay?" I nodded toward it.

Noah lightly ran a hand over the bandage and shrugged. "Just a small burn from the fire. But it's fine."

"You got burned?" Panic, guilt, and sadness whipped through me in equal measure. He wouldn't have been injured if he hadn't raced into the building to rescue me.

"Like I said, it's not serious. I'm fine."

I shook my head. "This is all my fault."

“You didn’t start the fire, Isobel. You’re the last person I’d blame.”

It didn’t reduce my feelings of guilt. “I can’t believe you ran into a burning building for me.” I shook my head. “You saved me, and saying thank you doesn’t feel like enough.”

He gave me a hesitant smile. “You waking up was all the thanks I need.”

My cheeks flushed, but I didn’t have to reply because the door opened and my dad walked in.

When our eyes met, Matthew let out a relieved breath and came to stand at my bedside. “How are you feeling?” He looked much better than when I’d first woken up in the hospital. He’d clearly showered since then and changed into a set of fresh clothes.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m more worried about my mom.”

“She’s going to be okay,” he said. “I’ve flown in a specialist doctor to treat her. She’s in really good hands.”

Of course, he had. If there had ever been a time where I was grateful for my father's ridiculous amount of money and privilege, it was now. I just wished that my mom would wake up so I could hear her voice and see she was okay.

“How did you both get here?” I asked Noah and my father while mom continued to sleep. “How were you in Rapid Bay?”

Their expressions seemed troubled by the question. Given the way they hesitated, it felt as though they were both in as much shock as I was over what had happened. They found it just as hard to think about the fire as I did.

Noah was the first one to speak. “After we talked on the phone, I called Matthew and asked for a ride here on his plane.” His voice didn’t sound quite as husky as my own, but it had definitely been affected by the fire. “He was planning to leave for Rapid Bay the following day, but I told him what you’d learned about your mom and that I wanted to be there for you. He agreed we shouldn’t wait, so he came to get me, and we left for the airstrip straightaway.”

“We arrived early that morning,” my father said. “We knew the café wasn’t open yet, but Noah insisted we go straight there. He said you always woke first thing in the morning, and he wanted to be there when you did. We were pulling up out front when Noah spotted the flames…”

I shook my head in disbelief. “What were the chances you would both arrive here at the right time? Just in time to rescue us?”

“I keep asking myself the same thing,” Matthew said. “I just wish we’d arrived sooner…”

I glanced at my mom once again. If they’d gotten here sooner, perhaps they would have made it to us before Mom inhaled too much smoke. Perhaps she’d be sitting here smiling with us now instead of lying in a bed with all these wires attached to her.

Matthew’s phone started to ring, and he glanced down at the screen. “I should take this,” he said before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

“So, how are you really doing?” Noah asked.

I tore my gaze from my mom to look at him. “By some miracle, we’re all still alive, so I’d say I’m doing okay.”

He was looking deep into my eyes as he nodded. “I can’t tell you how terrifying it was to see you collapsed on the floor in your apartment. And then you begging me to take your mom…” He shook his head. “That might haunt me forever. You honestly thought I could just leave you in there?”

“She needed help more than I did.”

“I still don’t think I could have left you. It was like you were asking me to leave my own heart to be eaten by the flames.”

The emotions between us were too intense, too powerful, and I glanced away, unable to bear them. They felt too big for me, like I couldn’t contain them and they might soon burst from my body. I didn’t know how I could have denied their existence for so long.

The door opened as Matthew returned, and I was relieved when Noah backed away and murmured something about going to get coffees. As he left the room, I wondered if he too was overwhelmed by the emotions between us.

“That was the fire chief,” Matthew said as he sat in the seat between my mom’s hospital bed and mine.

“How’s the apartment? The café?”

Matthew drew in a breath and rested his hand on top of mine. “Not good, I’m afraid. They were able to salvage some of your belongings, but they couldn’t save the café, and the apartment is unlivable.”

“What?”

“I’m so sorry, Isobel. The fire spread quickly, and by the time the firefighters arrived, the flames had already destroyed so much.” He gave me a sad smile. “I have more than enough room at the place I rented for the break. It’s just down the road from the café. You and your mom can stay with me once you’re out of here.”

My eyes grew wet as I nodded. I didn’t care about losing the material things in the apartment. Not one bit. But that café was my mom’s life. And that apartment was our home. Almost every single good memory I had growing up had come within those walls, and to know we wouldn’t be making any more happy memories there was completely devastating.

I glanced at my mom and struggled to withhold a sob. I didn’t know how she was going to get over the loss of her business and her home, and after everything she’d been through recently, I couldn’t bear to see her suffer any further.

“Don’t tell Mom about how bad it is until we get out of here,” I said to Matthew. “I want her to focus on getting better.”

He looked apprehensive at first, but he slowly started to nod. “If that’s what you think is best.”

“It is.”

I glanced at her bed once more. Despite the news about our home, I was so thankful we were both alive. I was filled with a tremendous sense of loss and gratitude all at once.

“Do they know how the fire started?” I asked, focusing on Matthew once again.

“Not yet. They think it may have begun in the café kitchen, but there will be an investigation.”

I suddenly felt exhausted. My mom already had enough to deal with, but this on top of everything else? Matthew rubbed a hand along my arm. I was surprised by how much I needed his comfort, by how much I needed him. I had no idea how I could have managed this on my own.

“Noah told me your mom let you know about her diagnosis,” Matthew said

“She did.” I’d been angry at him when I’d first found out because he’d known all this time and kept it secret from me. But surviving a fire really put things in perspective, and I didn’t care anymore that he’d followed her wishes.

“She said you have her in some trial?”

“That’s right,” he replied. “We’re hoping to avoid surgery, and the treatment I have her on will hopefully do that. But we’re monitoring her closely, and if the tumor increases in size at all, she’ll have it taken out.”

“And her outlook is good?”

“Very good. I know it can be scary, but I promise you I won’t let anything happen to her.”

The way my father spoke, it sounded like he’d move heaven and earth for my mom, and I believed him. I still wanted to be there to help though.

“I want to move back home,” I said to Matthew. “I want to be here with her through all of this.”

A crease formed in Matthew’s brow. “We’ll have to see what your mom says.”

It felt like he was trying to put me off as though he thought I could be talked out of it. But I had already made my mind up, and there was nothing either of my parents could say to convince me otherwise. So, I simply nodded, knowing it wouldn’t change anything.

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you about her condition sooner,” Matthew said. “But it was what your mom wanted, and I had to respect her request.”

“Yeah, she told me, and I understand,” I said. “She also told me you never got her letter about me, and she made you lie about that too.”

“Yes.” Matthew’s cheeks pinked slightly with embarrassment. “Your mom was the one to reach out to me. I wish it had been under better circumstances, but I can’t tell you the way my heart leapt out of my chest when I heard her voice for the first time in so many years.”

“I’m surprised you remembered who she was,” I said.

“How could I ever forget your mother?”

I swallowed because Matthew sounded so serious as he spoke, as though it was truly impossible for him to have let my mom slip from his mind even after all those years. Still, there was also a soft look in his eyes like I’d never seen before.

“I thought about her constantly over the years,” he said. “Sometimes I wondered if perhaps time might have morphed my memories of her. Made her into some sort of dream or fantasy that didn’t really exist as I imagined. But the moment I heard her voice and the first time I saw her... Well, she was everything I remembered and so much more.”

I smiled at him. I knew how incredible my mom was, but I’d never heard someone else talk about her like this.

“I’ve always regretted that life took us away from each other,” he continued. “And I wish I’d had the courage back then to walk away from my family’s legacy and stay with her. I wish I’d known about you and could have spent every day of these last seventeen years in Rapid Bay with you both. I made a mistake when I let her go. It’s not one I intend to repeat.”

I frowned, wondering what he was getting at.

“Isobel, there’s something I want to ask you.” His voice suddenly sounded anxious, a light tremor rippling his words. If this was more bad news, I wasn’t sure I was capable of hearing it.

“I know this might not be the best time. But after everything that’s happened, I don’t know if I can wait.”

I swallowed down my nerves and nodded for him to continue. “What is it?”

He was staring down into his hands, and he slowly lifted his eyes to mine. “I want to ask your mom to marry me, and I’m hoping you’ll give me your blessing.”

My eyes went wide with shock. “You are?”

He nodded. “I never got over your mother, and from the moment I saw her again, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. And with you. I want us to be a real family.”

I was speechless, and it took me a moment to realize I wanted the same. Somewhere along the way, I’d grown to love my father and couldn’t imagine my future without him. I wanted us to be a family too, and the thought of him being with my mom only made my heart swell. Her happiness was the most important thing in the world to me, and I felt like she would have that forever with my dad.

“So, what do you think?” Matthew asked. My silence seemed to be making him even more nervous. “Do I have your blessing? Because I would never dream of asking your mom without it. I—”

“Yes, you have it,” I grinned, my eyes wet with tears. “Of course, you have it.”

A smile flashed onto his lips, and his eyes sparkled. “Really?”

“Yes.” I sat upright and pulled Matthew into a hug. It was somewhat awkward because I was sitting in a hospital bed, but the way he embraced me made the tears in my eyes start to fall down my cheeks.

He seemed ignited with both excited and nervous energy as he moved back from me. “What do you think she’ll say?”

“I think she’ll say yes.”

My heart leaped at the sound of my mom’s voice. Matthew stood and spun round to reveal her. She was still lying in the hospital bed across from me, but her eyes were finally open, and she was smiling up at my dad.

“Yes, Matt, of course, I’ll marry you,” she said.

I spluttered a laugh through my tears as my father closed the distance between them. He knelt by her bed and took my mom’s hand in his.

"I guess you’ll be needing this then,” he said as he pulled a small black velvet box from his pocket. He opened it to show her the largest, most beautiful diamond ring I’d ever seen.

My mom gasped, and her eyes grew glassy as Matthew placed the ring on her finger. He leaned over her bed to kiss her gently, and she lifted her hands to his face to pull him closer. She was smiling so brightly when he stepped away, and my heart felt like it was about to explode.

“Wow.” My mom was breathless. “Matt, I’m going to break my finger lugging this thing around with me every day,” she joked.

“It’s been wearing a hole in the pockets of my suits since Halloween,” he said.

“You bought this at Halloween?”

“Candice, I should have asked you to marry me all those years ago. As soon as I saw you, I knew I couldn’t afford to lose you again.”

My mom was speechless as she turned to me. We smiled at each other through the tears that were still gathering in her eyes and still streaming from mine. She was awake; she was okay. And I’d never been happier in my life.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

My mom and I stayed in hospital for the next few days, which meant we were there for Christmas. I thought it would be depressing to be in the hospital over the holiday, but Noah and my dad did everything they could to make it special.

Noah somehow convinced the hospital staff to let us have a tree in our room. Though, of course, Noah didn't take half measures, and when I woke on Christmas morning, there was an enormous tree in the corner of our room that was so tall the tip was bent where it hit the ceiling.

He also covered the ceiling with fairy lights and hung tinsel throughout the room. The place looked like a rival to Santa's workshop with all the Christmas decorations. I told Noah he was going overboard, but he insisted it was worth it. And, I had to admit, it did make it a little easier to spend the holidays in a hospital bed when your room wasn't quite so sterile.

Matthew was always in our room, and I loved to see the way he doted on my mom, like he'd been waiting for his chance to do so for years. He was constantly sitting next to her bed, holding her hand as they discussed their engagement or simply gazed at each other. I didn't think I'd ever seen my mom so happy. It was the best Christmas present I could have asked for.

My father also organized an incredible Christmas lunch for us, but neither my mom nor I had the biggest of appetites, and Noah ended up eating most of it. It was the most surreal Christmas I'd ever experienced, sitting around a hospital room, eating our turkey on our laps. But all my previous Christmases had been a little lonely in comparison with it being

just my mom and me. For the first time, I realized what it felt like to spend Christmas with your family.

The morning after Christmas, I was feeling much better, and my doctor said I could be discharged from the hospital. My mom was still on the mend though, so she needed to stay a little longer.

It was hard to leave her behind. And harder still to leave the hospital and know I wouldn't be going home. That I would never sleep in my own bed again. Matthew had rented a place in Rapid Bay, so I was going to be staying with him. The house wasn't far from the café, and I wasn't all that surprised when we pulled up outside one of the ridiculous mansions that lined the foreshore.

I'd always admired these homes growing up. They were only a few streets away from the café, and yet they felt like they belonged in a different world. I'd always wondered how two places so close to each other could be so different, and I never dreamed I'd cross the invisible line that ran through our town and enter one of these homes as though I belonged there.

It was so strange to wake up to an uninterrupted view of the ocean each morning rather than the overpowering smell of bacon and coffee wafting from the café downstairs. To look out over the beach I'd grown up playing on from the balcony of my bedroom rather than pulling on my apron to start my shift serving customers and cleaning tables. Rapid Bay was still my home, but staying in this luxurious mansion made me feel a little like a stranger here.

Still, the thing I was struggling with most was being apart from my mom. She was recovering well though, and Matthew and I spent every minute we had over the next few days visiting with her. Norma was there as much as she could be too, and the nurses often had to remove us all from my mom's bedside each night.

Mom had asked several times about the state of the café after the fire, but I'd avoided her questions every time. I wanted her to concentrate on getting better, and I knew the news would shatter her. The café had been totally destroyed by the fire, and despite what Matthew had said, our apartment wasn't much better. The firemen had managed to salvage a few things from the wreckage, but most of our possessions were gone.

I had thought Noah might return to New York now he knew I was safe, but he remained in Rapid Bay. He didn't even see me that much because I spent so much time at the hospital, but he was always at Matthew's when I

came home at night. And he got up at the same time as me every morning and insisted on making me breakfast. He even brought me lunch in the hospital. I got the feeling he wasn't sure what to do with himself, so he'd decided to make sure I was eating enough.

It was New Year's Eve when Mom was finally released from hospital, and I went with Matthew to pick her up so we could bring her back to his place.

My mom's mouth dropped open when we pulled up at the house. "This must be costing you a fortune to rent, Matt," she said as he helped her from his car. Her voice was still slightly husky, and she gripped his arm tightly, still needing assistance to walk.

"Uh, about that…" His expression turned meek. "I might have bought it."

"You what?" my mom and I gasped.

"I signed the papers yesterday," he replied. "It was a good investment, and I'll sleep a lot easier knowing you have a comfortable place to stay while you recuperate. The place is yours, Candice."

My mom's eyes widened as she glanced at the house again. "What do you mean it's mine?"

He let out a soft laugh. "Think of it as an early wedding gift."

My mom lightly slapped him on the arm. "You bought me a house? *This* house?"

"If it makes you feel better, I did practice some self-restraint and decided not to purchase the hospital you were in while you were sick."

"You wanted to buy the…" She paused and shook her head. "No, Matthew, that doesn't make me feel better." Mom let out an exasperated sigh, but as she looked into my father's eyes, a little of the fight seemed to leave her. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to your impulsive purchases, aren't I?"

Matthew shared a warm smile with my mom. "Probably."

She sighed again and glanced up at the house once more. "It is very beautiful," she said.

"It is." Matthew looked a little relieved, and I wondered if he'd been gearing up for a harder battle to convince my mom to accept his lavish gift. "And it's even better from the inside. Warm too."

"Yes, let's get out of the cold," my mom agreed before she leaned into Matthew and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she said. "For everything."

When we got inside, Noah was waiting for us with a massive bunch of flowers. He'd already given my mom a bouquet in the hospital, but apparently, he thought she needed some to brighten her room at home too.

"Aw, they're so beautiful." My mom eased herself forward so she could hug Noah.

"You probably don't want to hug me," he warned. "I've just been out running.".

"Nonsense," my mom replied, unfazed as she pulled him close. "This was very sweet of you, Noah."

"It's nothing." He scuffed a foot across the floor. "I'm glad to see you home again, Ms. Grace."

"Please don't make me tell you again; call me Candice."

"Right, sorry." Noah flushed. "Anyway, I better jump in the shower. Do you guys need any help getting settled?"

"No, we're good, thank you," Matthew said.

Noah gave me a smile before he headed upstairs. I'd been coming and going from the house so much these last few days it felt like we'd barely talked. He'd been nothing but supportive, and I wondered if now that my mom was home he might consider leaving.

My mind snagged on the thought. We were due back at school in two days, so, of course, Noah would leave tomorrow. But I'd told Matthew I intended to stay behind to help my mom, which meant I'd be saying goodbye to Noah in the morning. I didn't know when I'd see him again, and the idea left me feeling cold.

My heart might have been a confused, jumbled mess, but that didn't make my feelings for Noah any less intense. The thought of not seeing him every day felt like a gaping void opening in my chest.

I didn't know how to be without him, but I wasn't sure I was ready to be in a relationship with him either. Just a week ago, I'd thought Wes was the only guy for me, and I'd clearly been wrong. I didn't trust my own heart right now, and there was no way I was going to figure it out before Noah left tomorrow.

I silently mulled over my feelings as Matthew gave my mom a brief tour of the house. I'd expected her to want to rest after getting home from the hospital, but she refused to take it easy.

"I've been bedridden all week," she said after insisting on sitting with me in the living room at the end of the tour. Noah was still in the shower,

while Matthew had a few phone calls to make in the other room. It was just my mom and me, and she let out a happy sigh as she sat on the couch and looked out at the view.

She seemed remarkably at peace considering all that she'd been through, and I wished I could share just an ounce of her calmness. Ever since the fire, it felt like I hadn't stopped, and I could feel the weight of too much emotional baggage pressing me down.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"I feel good," she said. "Weak but good, all things considered."

I didn't want to say anything that might upset her when she seemed so happy, but now she was out of the hospital, I knew it was only a matter of time before she started asking about her café. I couldn't keep putting the conversation off, and this might be the only chance I'd get to tell her without anyone else around. Matthew and Noah were constantly hovering these days, and I was sure Mom would prefer a little privacy to come to terms with the news.

"About the café…" I started to speak, but Mom shook her head.

"I know it's gone," she said. "I know our apartment was destroyed too."

"What? How?"

"When Norma first came to visit me in the hospital, I told her to give it to me straight," she said. "You and your father kept babying me, and all I wanted was the truth."

My cheeks flushed as she lightly scolded me. "I didn't want to upset you when you were recovering."

"Oh, I know that, Iz." She smiled kindly at me. "You were only trying to do what was best for me."

"But how are you not a total mess about it?"

She released a sigh as she considered me. "It's hard to know the café is gone, but I guess it's also a little freeing."

"Your life burning down feels freeing?"

Mom nodded. "I've been killing myself for years trying to keep the café afloat. And now that it's gone, well, I guess I'm free to start over."

"But what will you do? Open another café?"

The corner of her mouth lifted, and her eyes seemed to glitter. "Actually, I've been thinking about getting a certificate to teach yoga."

"What?"

Her expression dimmed a little. "You think that's silly."

“No, gosh, no,” I quickly backtracked. “It’s just unexpected. I didn’t realize you were that serious about yoga.”

“I wasn’t, but that class I did in New York reignited my passion for it, and I’ve been doing an online class ever since. I think it’s time I started focusing on a slower pace of life. I know it will probably be a while before I’m good enough to run classes, but I was thinking it might be nice to teach on the beach. And, if that goes well enough, maybe I’ll open a studio.”

It sounded like she’d really thought this through. I guessed she’d had a lot of time to think while she was stuck in her hospital bed.

“You know you’ll probably still have to get up at the crack of dawn every day,” I said.

Mom chuckled. “I’m so used to it I think I’ll wake up at that time forever.”

It was hard to imagine my mom doing anything other than running her café. She’d been doing it my whole life, so it felt like as much a part of who she was as her curly hair or her stubborn sense of pride. But this did sound like a much easier existence for her. Maybe a change of pace would be good for her.

“It does mean I might have to leave Rapid Bay for a while though,” Mom continued. “There’s a course I’ve been looking at taking in New York. With Matt being based there and you within driving distance of the city, I think it might work out perfectly,”

“Wait, what?” I interrupted her. I thought she was only considering this for her future, but it sounded like she had it all planned out already. I’d realized there would be some changes now she was engaged to my dad, but the thought of my mom leaving Rapid Bay still caught me by surprise.

“It makes sense for me to be there,” she replied. “And now that I don’t have the café…” Her voice trailed off, and a wave of anguish flickered through her eyes. My mom was holding herself together well considering everything that had happened, but she was clearly still deeply affected by it.

“I didn’t think you’d ever leave Rapid Bay,” I said.

“Me neither,” she agreed. “But it won’t be forever. I know I’ll be back.”

I stared at my mom, feeling both sad for her and proud of her all at once. She was so incredibly strong. She’d had so much taken from her, but she remained unbreakably optimistic. I hoped I could be half as courageous as her one day.

“So, you’re really not going to stay here?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. Not once I’ve recovered from the fire.”

“Because I was planning to move home to be with you.”

“Matt told me.” My mom reached out and took my hand. “Isobel, one of the things I love most about you is the size of your heart. You’ve always been there for me and looked after me. I know you would sacrifice your own dreams for me without question. But what you don’t get is how much it breaks my heart to see you do that.”

“Mom…” I whispered.

But she shook her head. “I know you want to be here for me, and I love you, Iz, but that’s not what I want. I don’t want you giving up your future for me. I never have. Especially not when it isn’t necessary. I really am doing okay—fires aside.”

“But you shouldn’t be facing cancer alone…”

“And I’m not,” she said. “I never have been. You’ve always been a phone call away when I needed someone to make me smile. And now I have your father to hold my hand through it all.” She gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “And now that I don’t have the café to keep me tied down, I can come and visit you all the time.”

She was right. And it did provide me with a lot of comfort to know Matthew was going to help her through all this. “Can I at least stay in town until you’ve recovered from the fire?” I asked. “You nearly died.”

“But I didn’t,” Mom replied. “And I refuse to let you stay here any longer than you need to. I’ll be back on my feet in a few days, and the last thing I want is my teenage daughter missing school to play nurse.”

“Especially when you already have one,” Matthew said as he returned to the room. “I’m going to take really good care of your mom, Isobel.”

“So, are we agreed?” Mom asked, turning to me once more. “You’ll head back to school tomorrow?”

I let out a sigh. I didn’t want to argue with my mom when she was supposed to be recovering. It was hard to imagine leaving her, but as I looked at my father, I realized I wasn’t the only person she had to lean on anymore.

“Okay, I’ll go back to school. But I want daily updates on how you’re feeling, and I’m coming home if you deteriorate even slightly.”

“I’m only going to be feeling better from here,” Mom replied. “I promise.”

The doorbell rang, and Matthew went to answer it as my Mom groaned.

“That had better not be Norma,” she said. “I told her to give me at least one day at home before she started coddling me.”

“And you expect her to listen?” I asked with a laugh.

Mom gave a weak chuckle. “No, I guess not.”

While Matthew was seeing to the door, Noah entered the room. His hair was damp from his shower, and he was wearing a fitted Henley that molded perfectly to his strong chest. The boy was far too perfect to look at, and when my mom caught me staring at him, there was a knowing look in her eyes. I blushed and glanced away.

Noah took a seat on the couch across from me and gave me an easy smile before he focused on my mom. “Are you settling in okay?” he asked.

She didn’t get a chance to respond as my father returned to the room. There was a man following behind him wearing dark pants and a large jacket with the Rapid Bay Fire Department logo emblazoned on the front.

“This is Captain Paulson,” Matthew said. “He’s been overseeing the fire at the café.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Paulson said as he came to stand before us. He directed most of his attention at my mom as he spoke. “I know you’ve only just left hospital today, Ms. Grace, but I wanted to keep you updated on our investigation into the blaze. We found something today that I thought you should know about.”

My mom seemed to withdraw into herself as she stared up at the captain. She’d seemed so strong until this moment, but now I could see she was struggling. I wondered if seeing the fire official was suddenly making this real for her.

Matthew must have noticed too because he came to sit at her side and wrapped an arm around her before he turned to Captain Paulson once more. “What is it?”

The captain’s face was stoic, and I had a bad feeling whatever he’d found wasn’t good. Why else would he be making a house call on New Year’s Eve? A hint of apprehension flickered across his otherwise composed expression before he answered. “I thought you should know that we discovered evidence an accelerant was used in the fire.”

The room fell deathly silent as we all stared at him.

“What exactly does that mean?” my mom asked.

“It suggests the fire was lit on purpose,” he replied. “That it wasn’t an accident.”

My hand found my mom’s, and we gripped each other tightly while Noah and my dad shared a concerned look.

“You’re sure?” my father asked, looking up at the captain again.

“We are.”

“Why would someone do that?” My mom appeared close to tears as she spoke, and despite all her talk of the fire being freeing, I could finally see just how badly it had upset her. Matthew’s face had paled too, and he rubbed a hand along my mom’s arm.

“We don’t know,” Paulson replied. “But the police will get involved in the investigation now, and hopefully we’ll get some answers for you.”

“Do you have any suspects?” Noah asked. His voice was stern, and his expression was dark. He looked as though he wanted to stalk out into the night and bring whoever had lit the fire to justice himself.

“None so far. We’re still investigating the scene though, and you will be kept in the loop about what we find.”

“Thank you.” My father stood to shake Captain Paulson’s hand. “We really appreciate you coming out on New Year’s Eve to update us.”

The captain dipped his head and said goodbye before showing himself from the house. My father and Noah continued to trade cautious glances once he was gone. Neither of them appeared surprised by the news.

“Why aren’t you both more shocked by this?” I asked, my mind whirring as I tried to figure it out.

They looked at each other again, and my stomach dropped. “Wait, you already thought it was arson?”

My father hesitated while Noah clenched his jaw.

“We discussed it was a possibility,” Matthew finally said.

I’d been staying with them for days, and they hadn’t mentioned this to me once. I’d been so focused on my mom that the cause of the fire had barely entered my mind. I’d assumed it was an accident, but it seemed like Matthew and Noah had already discussed the idea that it wasn’t at length. “Why would you even suspect—"

“I think we all know who’s behind this,” Noah said, stopping me. “Who has the motive…”

It took me a moment to realize who he meant. “You think your grandfather did this?” I gasped.

“Who else?” Noah said. “He’s lost his mind since the takeover, threatening to do whatever it takes to get his company back. We already

know he’s gotten away with arson twice; it stands to reason he’d do it again. He probably figured threatening your lives would get him what he wants.”

“But he didn’t threaten our lives. He nearly took them. How would that get him his company back?” I glanced at my father, hoping he’d be able to make sense of it, but his skin had turned a shade of gray.

“If it wasn’t a strategy to get his company back, then it was revenge,” Matthew replied. He too sounded convinced it had been William, and the way he spoke of revenge made me feel nauseous.

“They’ve only just uncovered that it wasn’t an accident,” Matthew continued. “And I doubt William was stupid enough to leave any evidence tying him to the fire. I’m not sure we’ll be able to prove he was behind it.”

“So, we provoke him to reveal the truth,” Noah replied.

The two of them looked ready to do battle. Like they’d forgotten we didn’t live in the medieval ages and were preparing to storm a castle and threaten the mad king.

“A good idea, but it won’t be easy getting him to admit it,” Matthew said. “Maybe if he feels threatened himself. We could use the company to—

“The two of you will do nothing,” my mom said. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t have to. Her calm and decisive tone cut right through the mounting tension in the room. “I will not have you two acting like vigilantes trying to extract justice. We don’t even know that it was your grandfather, Noah.”

“It was him,” Noah replied.

“Maybe,” my mom said. “But we should let the fire department and the police do their job before we jump to conclusions. Before we take any action.”

“You want us to just sit back and do nothing?” Matthew asked.

“I want us to enjoy our last night together,” she said. “It’s New Year’s Eve, and Noah and Isobel are headed back to school tomorrow. I’ll be damned if we’re going to spend it plotting revenge.”

“You’re right,” Matthew said. his anger seeming to disappear with a long exhale “Let’s focus on having a good night together.”

The tension remained in the atmosphere though, and no matter what Mom wanted, it seemed none of us could get Noah’s grandfather off our minds. Had William Hastings started the fire? Had he tried to kill my mom and me? And worst of all, was he going to get away with it?

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We did our best to put the news Captain Paulson had brought us to the back of our minds as we celebrated New Year's Eve. Norma and Frank came round for dinner, and though my mom tried to stay up until midnight, she was asleep in bed by ten. My father didn't last much longer.

I usually watched the fireworks at midnight from the beach, but I was feeling jumpy after our conversation about William and didn't feel comfortable going down there on my own. So, when midnight neared, I asked Noah if he wanted to join me.

He was happy to keep me company, and we walked down to the sand together. Lots of people were already gathering on the beach close to the house, so we wandered a little farther down. Even once we were well clear of the crowd, we kept on going until it felt like we had the entire beach to ourselves. Suddenly I realized we'd walked so far we'd reached the secluded cove where we'd shared our first kiss.

Neither of us mentioned that fact, but it was impossible for either of us to ignore. I felt a wave of nerves as Noah lay out a rug on the sand. It was the first time we'd been alone since Aspen. The first time since my feelings for him had come roaring back to life.

We sat close to each other, tucking our legs under the small blanket I'd brought to ward off the cold. Even with the heat I could feel radiating from Noah, it was still chilly tonight, and I found I was leaning into him. I couldn't help myself.

We sat in silence as we stared up at the starry night sky and waited for the fireworks to go off. It was peaceful with the sound of the waves gently

lapping against the shore, and even though it was dark, the moon was bright, and I could clearly make out Noah's features. His expression was thoughtful as he looked out at the waves, and when he tuned and caught me watching him, he gave me a careful smile.

As he looked into my eyes, my body thrummed with a sense of uncertainty. All week he'd been so sweet and caring, but he hadn't once asked me if I'd done what he'd asked in Aspen—if I'd taken time during the break and thought about us. And if he asked me now, I wasn't sure how I'd answer. Because while this week had strengthened my resolve that Wes and I were better as friends, the thought of being something more with Noah still scared me.

"You've been quiet this evening," Noah said.

"You've been quieter."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I have."

"You still thinking about your grandfather?"

"Among other things."

The thought of William made me shiver, and as a chill ran down my spine, I pulled my arms a little closer around myself. "You don't honestly think he did it, do you?"

Noah lifted his eyebrows. "You know what he's capable of. You know what he's done in the past."

"I know, but why would William come after my mom and me? We weren't the ones who took his company."

"No, but Matthew and I were," Noah replied. "We took the thing he cares most about in this world, so he tried to do the same. I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you. He knows that."

"So, he had motive, but that doesn't mean he torched our home."

"He was also here in Rapid Bay that night…"

I drew back from Noah, and an icy chill wrapped around my body and seeped into my blood. "What do you mean?"

"Matthew has been paying off several people in my grandfather's employ for information on him," Noah explained. "He wanted to make sure William wasn't going to do anything stupid after we took his company. We know he hired a private charter plane the night of the fire. It was supposed to be going to L.A., but the itinerary changed at the last minute. None of our contacts found out in time to warn us…" He shook his head. "It's not the kind of proof that would put him behind bars, but it's pretty damning."

I suppressed another shiver as I stared out at the water. It was one thing to guess Noah's grandfather had started the fire but another to know he was in town the night of the blaze. It was certainly enough evidence to attribute guilt in Noah's eyes, and I was starting to feel convinced too.

"You know you can't go after him, right?" I said. "If he's crazy enough to start the fire that nearly killed my mom and I, who knows what else he's capable of."

Noah's mouth formed a hard line, and he didn't respond.

"Noah, I'm serious. He's dangerous."

"*I'm* dangerous," Noah growled. "I'd do anything to protect you, Isobel. *Anything*. And if that means going after my grandfather, I'll do it a million times over."

"Noah," I whispered, but he kept talking.

"After all we've been through this year, there's one thing I've learned: you are all that matters to me. I nearly lost you this week, and I won't let anything happen to you again."

My heart was racing, and my chest was swirling with butterflies. Noah had been telling me how he felt about me since he revealed the truth in New York, but it was only this past week I'd begun to understand the depth of his feelings. He really did love me.

A soft pink glow lit up the sky, and the crack of a firework exploding quickly followed. I didn't look upward though. I couldn't seem to take my eyes off Noah. He seemed unable to look away either, and he slowly lifted a hand to cup my face.

"Happy New Year, Isobel."

"Happy New Year, Noah."

His eyes dipped to my lips, and the look of longing in his gaze nearly broke me. I still felt so scared of my feelings for Noah, but right now, my heart didn't seem to care. There was only one person I wanted. Only one person I needed. And his bright green eyes were currently staring into my soul, asking for me to give him just one more chance.

My breath held as Noah lowered his head toward mine, and my heartbeat slowed to thump in tandem with the drawn-out pop of the fireworks in the distance. It felt like time stilled as he moved closer until his lips finally met mine. His kiss was perfect and beautiful, and a part of me felt like it was only now that I was truly at home.

Just one kiss, and I was overpowered by my feelings for Noah. They broke free of the carefully constructed cage I'd trapped them in and flowed through me so hard and fast I thought I might be swept away by them. I didn't know how to cope with the strength of them, but I somehow found myself pulling back from Noah.

"I need more time," I gasped as I broke our kiss. Kissing Noah felt far more perfect than I'd been prepared for, and I needed space to strengthen my heart and feel confident I was making the right decision before giving us a second chance.

Pain flickered through Noah's gaze, but it was followed by understanding, and he nodded as he pulled away from me. "Take all the time you need," he said. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be ready when you are."

His words alone made me want to kiss him again, but I turned my gaze to the fireworks overhead. They were building in number now, constantly crackling and flashing as they drew toward their dramatic conclusion. When the last one burst and they finally blinked out of the sky, the darkness that took over felt so much colder.

"We should probably get back to the house," I said.

Noah nodded and helped me from the sand. We made our way back up the beach, both of us quiet as we walked. I had so much to consider, especially when it came to my relationship with Noah. But I found my focus was on William Hastings.

After what Noah had told me about William being in town the night of the fire, I felt certain he'd been the one to start it. The blaze had nearly killed my mom, and I wasn't sure I could sit and wait for the fire department to do their job. Even if they somehow found incriminating evidence on William, I knew Noah's grandfather would probably make it go away with ease.

When we eventually arrived at the house, I reached out to Noah and stopped him before he opened the door. "I know you and my father are already discussing how to prove William started the fire, and I want in. I want to know your plans. I want to be a part of them. And if it involves confronting William, I want to be there."

"Isobel…"

"No, Noah. He tried to kill me. He nearly killed my mom. I deserve to be included in this."

He ran a hand through his hair, and his jaw tightened as he weighed the determination in my eyes. “I don’t trust you within a hundred miles of that man.”

“I don’t care,” I replied. “I’m not going to be kept in the dark on this. *Not again*.”

My gaze was like steel as I stared him down. I refused to back down. I had just as much right to go after William as either of them.

Noah released a hard breath. “I don’t like putting you at risk. But you’re right; this is your choice. If you want to be involved, we’ll include you in our plans.”

“Good.” I released a breath, and my exhaustion from the night seemed to hit me all at once. “Okay, let’s get inside and try to get some sleep.”

But despite what I’d said, I wasn’t sure I’d get much sleep that night—if any at all.



I WAS A CRYING mess when I had to say goodbye to my mom the next day. My parents might have convinced me I should return to Weybridge Academy, but it didn’t make leaving Mom when she was still recovering any easier.

Noah and I didn’t talk much on the flight back to school, and when we arrived on campus, he walked me back to my dorm before we parted ways. I’d thought a lot about the kiss we’d shared the night before. Everything about it had felt so right, and yet I couldn’t bring myself to accept that we should be together. It felt too soon after my breakup with Wes, and the last thing I wanted was to go back to Noah when it was exactly what Wes had feared. There was no easy way forward, and I figured the best thing to do was to give everything time.

Agreeing to be with Noah again felt like agreeing to jump off a cliff without checking my parachute first. I cared too deeply for him. He meant too much. And if we didn’t work out again, I wasn’t sure I’d survive the fall.

I’d also spent a lot of my trip home thinking about William Hastings. After the fire, I was scared about what he was capable of and what he might do next. I found myself worrying about my mom, about Noah and my dad,

about everyone who was close to me. William was still searching for a way to force my father and Noah to give him the company back, or punish them for taking it, and I was terrified of finding out how far he might go to achieve either outcome.

It was dinnertime when we returned, and I went to the dining hall to meet up with my friends. When Anna and Cress saw me across the room, the two girls launched from their seats and rushed over to hug me.

The three of us stayed bundled in that hug for nearly a minute, and when they finally let go of me, I was surprised to find their eyes were glistening with tears.

"I can't believe we nearly lost you, Isobel," Cress said.

"It's so good to have you back," Anna agreed before they hugged me close again.

I smiled at their enthusiasm. "A fire didn't kill me, but a hug from the two of you just might. I can't breathe, you guys."

They laughed and let go of me but seemed reluctant to stray too far. They kept close to my side as we walked over to our usual table. We'd talked a lot over the break, so we'd already covered what had happened back in Rapid Bay. But, even so, they still seemed to be reeling from it.

They had lots of questions for me, and we talked quietly about them as we ate our dinner. When they suddenly fell silent, I looked up to find Wes and Sawyer taking their seats at our table.

I'd had so much on my mind today I'd hardly considered what it would be like to see Wes again for the first time. He gave me a gentle smile, and though he didn't take his usual seat next to me, he didn't seem apprehensive about talking to me.

"I'm really happy you're okay, Isobel," he said.

"Yeah, Grace, you gave us all a scare," Sawyer agreed. "We're all so glad you weren't hurt."

"Thanks, you guys." I gave them both a smile. "How was your break?"

Luckily, the twins took the hint I didn't want to talk about what I'd been through, and Sawyer launched into a play-by-play of the Montfort family Christmas. I looked down at my plate of food as he talked, but I wasn't that hungry. I was exhausted and stressed, and food just didn't hold any appeal to me right now.

I sat back and listened as my friends chatted away, trying to relax as they smiled and laughed about their holidays. I didn't really feel up to much

conversation, so after a few minutes, I excused myself from the table and told them I was heading back to my room. I started toward the exit and was surprised when Wes jogged after me.

“Hey, can I walk you back?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Wes was silent as he wandered by my side. He didn’t speak until we got outside. “I just wanted to check on you. Make sure you’re okay.”

I smiled up at him. “I’m okay.” Wes was always so thoughtful—even now when we weren’t together anymore. “And thank you for the flowers you sent. They were beautiful.”

“That was the least I could do,” he said. “I feel like an idiot. I broke up with you because I couldn’t handle my jealousy, and then the next day, you nearly died in a fire.”

There were other students passing us on the main path we walked down, so I took him by the elbow and guided him to the edge of the courtyard and past the hedges to one of the small gardens that lay beyond. It was dark here, but at least there weren’t other students about. It felt like we needed a little more privacy for this conversation.

“Wes, you don’t need to feel like an idiot. You didn’t cause the fire, and you were right about ending our relationship. We weren’t working.”

“Yeah, I know.” He sighed. “I just don’t want things to be weird between us. You’re one of my closest friends.”

“They might be weird for a little while,” I admitted. “I’m not sure how they can’t be. But maybe if we can both accept the weirdness and agree to work on our friendship, we’ll get there in the end.”

He slowly started to smile. “With talk like that, you’re going to make me fall for you all over again.”

I laughed and shoved my shoulder into his.

My phone started to ring, and when I saw an incoming call from Matthew, I glanced up at Wes. “I should probably take this; it’s my dad. He might be calling about my mom.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll leave you to it.”

We smiled at each other as I lifted the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“There’s footage of William,” Matthew said, a grave tone to his voice.

“What?”

Wes hadn’t gone far, and he stopped and turned back when he heard the alarm in my voice.

“The police have contacted us,” Matthew said. “A store across the road from the café has CCTV footage of William on the street just before the fire started. He’s wanted for questioning.”

“Oh my God.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at school.”

“But where?”

The increasing panic in Matthew’s voice was worrying. “I just left the dining hall, and I’m walking to the girls’ dorm with Wes.”

Wes started back to me. “What’s going on?” he said, but I just shook my head. I barely knew myself.

“I want you to go back to the dining hall,” Matthew ordered. “Stay with Wes.”

I shot Wes a worried look. “Matthew, you’re really freaking me out here.”

“I had eyes on William, but he’s disappeared,” he replied. “I’m sure it’s nothing, but I don’t want to take the risk.”

I suddenly regretted pulling Wes away from the brightly lit courtyard. No one could see us because we were behind one of the hedges, and it was much darker here. The chances of William coming into the school weren’t high, but I suddenly started looking at the bushes surrounding us like he might jump out of them.

“Go back to where it’s crowded and there are teachers,” Matthew said. “Stay there until I call you back. I’m going to call Noah to come find you, and I’ve got security outside the school. They’re coming in now.”

“Okay, I…” My voice trailed off, and I lowered the phone from my ear as I looked behind Wes. My father’s men were going to be too late because William Hastings was already on the school grounds, and he was standing right across from me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I gasped at the sight of William, and Wes startled. He hadn't realized Noah's grandfather was behind him, and he spun to face the old man, taking a step back as he did.

At first glance, William looked calm, but he couldn't hide the fevered look that flashed through his eyes as his gaze landed on me. With just one look, I could see his blind hatred roiling beneath his cold exterior. I'd never had anyone look at me with such loathing before, but the thing that scared me the most was how someone so unbalanced could seem so focused and in control. It was terrifying.

Wes must have sensed something was wrong too because he was looking at William like he needed to tread very carefully. "Mr. Hastings?" he asked, his voice filled with both surprise and caution. "What are you doing here?"

I tried to catch Wes's attention. He didn't know William had set the fire. That he had lost his mind to vengeance and was potentially very dangerous. But Wes resolutely held his ground.

"Miss LaFleur and I have some unfinished business." William sounded polished, friendly even, which only made me more concerned, knowing what was bubbling beneath the surface. "Don't we, Isobel?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know how. This wasn't a man caught up in the furious haze of his emotions. No, William was as cold and calculating as he'd ever been, and I dreaded to imagine what he had intended for me. But more than anything, I didn't want Wes to get involved. I didn't want him to be hurt.

“We do,” I finally answered before glancing at Wes. “You should go back to dinner, Wes,” I said. “I’ll just be a moment with Mr. Hastings.”

Wes didn’t move even though my eyes pleaded with him to leave. He folded his arms across his chest. “I’m happy to hang here,” he said. “You’ll only be a moment, after all.”

“Your choice,” William said, as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun.

I wanted to curse Wes for not taking his chance to escape. I faced William but froze as he aimed the barrel in my direction. There was a menacing curve to William’s lips, and his face had transformed as his mask of composure fell, and he embraced the depth of his hatred for me.

I began to tremble as icy fear seized me. I knew I should have been trying to talk him down, but what did you say to someone who despised you so thoroughly? Who’d left their sense and compassion behind them a long time ago?

“Mr. Hastings…” I gently begged. My voice was quiet, and I slowly lifted my hands in front of me. I desperately hoped he’d realize this wasn’t the way to solve his problems, but I honestly didn’t know if this was a man that could be reasoned with anymore.

“Please, sir.” Wes sounded more confident than me, but there was no mistaking the fearful tremor in his tone. “Think about what you’re doing…”

William only continued to watch me with his menacing smile. “Oh, I’ve been thinking about this a while.”

“Lower the gun, Grandfather. Now.”

My heart stopped as Noah stepped from behind the hedges, his hands outstretched as he faced his grandfather.

“Noah.” William sounded pleased his grandson had arrived. “I’m so glad that you could be here for this.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you need to put the gun away,” Noah insisted. He was ever so slowly edging toward me, but I wasn’t sure what he had planned when he reached me. I couldn’t see a way out of this while William still pointed a gun at me.

“I would have thought it quite obvious what I’m doing.” William released a chilling laugh, and he tilted his head to the side like an animal observing its prey. “I’m doing what I should have done to begin with. I’m disposing of this infatuation of yours. This *LaFleur* tramp. If you hadn’t been so desperately obsessed with her, I would still have my company.”

“That’s not true,” Noah said, keeping his voice as calm as he could. “Isobel had nothing to do with this.”

"Nothing to do with it?” William’s voice was becoming more and more frantic. “This girl has corrupted you and ruined everything. The same thing happened to your father. I dealt with that, and now I’m going to deal with her.”

“If you want to punish someone for losing your company, it should be me. Point the gun at me.”

“That’s what you want, is it?” William spat, turning on Noah and waving the gun in his direction. “No, you can’t escape from this that easily. You took everything from me, and I want you to know what that feels like. I’m taking the one thing you care about most, and this time, I’m going to make sure it’s truly gone before I walk away.”

“You’re not taking anything,” Noah said. “Put down the gun.”

“Why would I do that?” William snarled. “The police are already after me for burning down that pathetic café. Then it’s only a matter of time until they find out about the other fires. If I’m going away for the rest of my life anyway, why shouldn’t I extract this last piece of revenge?”

William trained the gun in my direction once more, and from the determined look in his eyes, it seemed he was done toying with me. He was done talking. Noah had seemed so calm and in control until that moment, but suddenly his eyes became panicked.

“Grandfather, no!”

My heart was racing as terror flooded my veins. That gun wasn’t an idle threat. William had already proven he wasn’t afraid of pulling the trigger. Tears gathered in my eyes, and I wondered if these were my last breaths. If I would ever see my mom again. If I would ever get to tell my dad I loved him. If I would ever get to tell Noah my heart belonged to him. That it always had.

“Take your company back,” Noah pleaded. “Whatever you want, it’s yours. Just don’t take Isobel from me.” I’d never heard him sound so desperate before. “Please, you already took my father from me. Don’t take the girl I love too.”

William merely smirked though, and the air was heavy with dread as we held our breaths.

I prayed he’d listen to Noah.

That he would see sense.

That I'd live to see another day.

Then, without warning, everything happened at once.

The sound of a gunshot ricocheted through the air. Someone screamed. It might have been me. One moment I was standing, and the next, I was being tackled to the ground as Noah threw his body on top of mine. All the air left my lungs as I hit the grass, and Noah's weight was so heavy on me I couldn't move.

The sound of the gunshot still echoed in my ears. It was all I could hear. I was in a total state of shock, and my body felt numb. Had I been shot? I couldn't feel any pain.

"Isobel. Isobel, are you okay?" Noah asked. He pulled back to look at me. His eyes were already shining with tears as he held my face in his hands. "Please tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay."

As the ringing in my ears faded, the sound of yelling made me look past Noah. I saw Wes wrestle William to the ground and pin him down. There were screams in the background and the sound of many footsteps pounding on the path and the grass around us. Some men appeared from all around and hurried to help Wes keep William Hastings secured.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" Noah asked.

"I'm not hurt."

Noah's forehead relaxed into mine as he released a breath. "Thank God."

He went to lift himself off me, but as he drew back, my heart caught in my throat. There was blood staining his shirt.

I placed a hand against his chest, stopping him from moving. "Noah, you're bleeding."

Noah frowned as he looked down to where blood was pooling at his side. He winced as he pulled up his shirt to reveal a deep gash along his ribs. My stomach lurched with dread. Noah's face grew pale, and he sank down on his knees.

"Someone call an ambulance," I yelled at the gathering crowd. Tears welled in my eyes as I eased Noah onto his back and quickly put pressure on the wound to try to stop the blood from flowing.

"Ouch, that hurts," Noah groaned.

"Of course, it hurts," I gasped. "You've been shot."

“It’s not *that* bad,” he said. His skin was getting whiter by the second, and his voice caught on the words.

“Are you crazy?” I asked. “Why would you jump in front of a bullet for me?”

He was lying on the ground with a gunshot wound at his side, yet somehow, he was able to smile. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

He winced suddenly though. I didn’t have any idea how to tend to his wound, and I hoped I was doing the right thing. Thankfully, one of the men who’d been helping restrain William ran over. He pulled off his jacket and used it to help stem the flow of blood.

I moved out of the way as he took over, but I grasped Noah’s hand tightly as we waited for the ambulance to arrive. Noah kept trying to say he was fine, but I think it had to be shock. At least he was still talking, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to breathe properly again until I was sure he was going to be okay.

I was so focused on Noah I barely noticed as my father’s security detail began to lead William away. They had to walk right past us though, and the cruel smile William gave his grandson when he saw him lying on the grass was haunting. His eyes had been filled with such cold loathing as he looked at the two of us, and I knew I’d never feel safe until he was behind bars.

The paramedics arrived moments later, and William was put to the back of my mind. I tried to keep out of the way as they assessed Noah, but it was hard when I knew he was in pain. I wanted to be at his side, holding his hand, and when they lifted him onto a stretcher, I rushed back over to him.

“Are they taking you to the hospital?” I asked.

“Yeah, apparently these gunshot wounds are serious business.”

I shook my head at him. It was still too early to joke.

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

He gave me a weak smile, trying to reassure me he would be okay, but it was hard to watch him go. I’d almost lost my mom a week ago, and now Noah. I couldn’t bear to take my eyes off him for one second after what we’d been through.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but we have to take him now,” a paramedic said.

I slowly nodded and stepped back from the stretcher, but I felt so shaky, and my chest constricted as I watched them carry him away. Each step they

took from me, each little foot of distance that was put between Noah and me, felt like agony.

Wes came to stand at my side and rubbed my arm as we watched Noah leave. I wondered if he could sense the pain I was in. The shock I felt. If he knew just how much I was struggling.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m shaken but I’m fine.” Somehow, I was able to turn from Noah to focus on Wes. “Are you okay? I can’t believe you tackled him. Thank you. We might not be standing here if it wasn’t for you.”

“Yes, well, I wasn’t fast enough,” he said. “If I’d just done something before he fired…”

“You were fast enough that no one else was hurt. I hate to think what William would have done next if you hadn’t intervened.”

We both fell silent, and I pushed down a shudder

“You should be with him,” Wes said.

“What?”

“You should be with Noah.” He blew out a breath. “Didn’t you hear what he said to his grandfather before he was shot? He loves you. He jumped in front of a bullet for you. He ran into a burning building for you. Being with you might just kill him, but he loves you, and I think you love him too.”

“Wes…”

His lips curved slightly in a wistful smile. “I know you care about me, and this isn’t easy for me to say, but you belong with Noah. Don’t let me stand in the way of the two of you. You’re only punishing yourselves.”

I turned toward Noah, who was about to disappear from view as the paramedics wheeled him off. I felt the pull toward him. An undeniable string that connected us, tugging me closer. It beaconed me to go after him.

It felt like we were two parts of the same soul, and I wasn’t sure I could fight the need to be with him anymore. Loving him, being with him was a risk. But it felt like a far greater risk to my heart if I kept denying the way I felt.

Tears leaped to my eyes. It was so hard to accept my feelings for Noah and act on them, but I think Wes could see the realization dawning in me that he was right because he nodded toward the ambulance.

“Go,” he insisted.

I reached out and gently rested my fingers on his arm, a sad smile touching my lips, and then I was off. Racing after Noah like my life depended on it. Like I couldn't spend another moment with these feelings bottled up inside of me.

The paramedics had reached the ambulance, and by the time I caught up with them, Noah was in the back of it. They were beginning to close the doors.

"Wait!" I yelled.

One of the paramedics turned at the sound of my voice, but I didn't give her a chance to try to stop me as I barreled into the back of the vehicle with them.

"You can't be in here, Miss," she said.

But my eyes were only on Noah.

"I love you," I blurted out. "Noah, I love you so much. You nearly died tonight, and I just can't handle the thought of a world without you in it. A world where you don't know just how much you mean to me. I've loved you even when I've hated you, and I just needed you to know."

Noah's face was so pale, but a beaming smile widened his lips. "I already knew all of that, Crash. I was just waiting for you to realize it too."

I let a laugh break through my tears and lowered my head to his. Our lips met in a soft kiss that somehow soldered together the many cracks that had splintered my heart and forged it into something new. Something unbreakable.

When I pulled away, he stared up at me. His eyes were filled with awe, like perhaps my heart hadn't been the only one the kiss had mended. His lips slowly tugged upward into the kind of devastatingly beautiful smile that made me want to kiss him again and again. I reached over and placed a hand on his chest, and he lifted his own to keep it there.

The paramedic cleared her throat. "Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to get out of the vehicle."

I'd forgotten she was even there. But her voice shook me back to reality. The thought of leaving Noah's side was impossible.

"No," Noah demanded. "She's coming with us."

"Please let me stay with him," I begged.

"I'm practically dying here," Noah added. "You're really not going to let my girlfriend come to the hospital with us?"

The woman looked ready to argue, but she probably realized it was only wasting time. She huffed and closed the back door of the ambulance, shutting us in.

Noah winked at me, but then his expression fell, and he grimaced in pain as he glanced down at the wound on his side.

“I still can’t believe you took a bullet for me,” I whispered.

“When are you going to get it, Crash? I’d do anything for you.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The doctor kept saying how unbelievably lucky Noah was, and I had to agree. By some miracle, he'd only suffered a surface wound from the bullet grazing his ribs. He had a ton of stitches, and he was going to have to take it easy while he recovered, but he was going to be okay. I didn't know how either of us had walked away from William Hastings relatively unscathed, but I couldn't have been more grateful.

My father arrived at the hospital just before Noah was discharged. He'd flown straight from Rapid Bay and had almost had to sedate my mom to get her to remain behind. She was in no state to be flying, and it was only when he set Norma on her that Mom finally conceded.

When Matthew saw me in the hospital waiting room, he ran toward me and gathered me in his arms. Having my father hug me, having him wrap his arms around me and pull me close, set my tears off again. It felt like I'd been crying all night, and I was wondering if my well of tears was finally close to running dry.

"You're okay," Matthew said. "You're okay. You're safe."

I hugged him tighter.

"I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you." His voice was husky with emotion, and I swallowed down another sob. "This is all my fault. I should have kept better track of William. I should have kept you with us until this was all resolved. I thought posting a security team outside the school would be enough. But, I—"

"You couldn't know what he was going to do," I said, cutting him off as I pulled back to look at him. He was struggling to contain his own tears.

“This is no one’s fault except William’s.”

I wasn’t sure if he agreed with me, and from the torn look in his eyes, I could tell he was still blaming himself. “I’m just relieved you weren’t hurt,” he said. “I love you so much, Isobel.”

“I love you too.” The words were out of my mouth before I’d had a chance to think them over, and I was surprised to find I actually meant them. I wasn’t sure when I’d begun to love my father, but the feeling had snuck up on me, and there was no denying that he had a place in my heart right beside my mom.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I added.

“I’m glad I’m here too.” I’d thought Matthew might be uncomfortable with the way we were pouring out our feelings, but as he hugged me to his chest once more, I could tell how deeply he was experiencing every emotion we shared.

I stayed in his arms until my tears stopped running down my face. I never would have guessed my father was much of a hugger, but his embrace was comforting and filled with the love we’d only just expressed to each other.

I didn’t feel awkward when I stepped from his grasp. If anything, I felt a little surer of myself. A little stronger. And I felt like perhaps now everything would be okay.

Once Noah was discharged, Matthew drove us from the hospital. He insisted Noah and I stay at his home in Weybridge that night. He didn’t want to take us back to school so late, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to return there just yet either. The thought of going back to the place where William had shot Noah wasn’t something I could fathom right now. I was going to struggle to walk through the school courtyard without remembering what happened there for the rest of the year.

Despite my exhaustion, I struggled to sleep, and I sat on my bedroom balcony, snuggled under a blanket on the couch out there as I looked over the gardens. It was dark, but soft lights highlighted the trees that were dotted throughout the grounds, and the rest of the property was bathed in moonlight.

It was strange to sit here, feeling so at home, when just a few months ago I’d wanted nothing more than to escape the confines of this room in Matthew’s mansion. My life had changed so much in such a short amount of time, but of all the things I’d gained, there was only one that really

mattered to me: my family and my friends. I felt so lucky to have them. To have a father I loved, friends I couldn't do without, and a boyfriend who cared about me so much he would take a bullet for me.

I'd come here with a broken, fractured heart, but now it felt so big and full it might just burst at those repaired seams.

There was a light knock at my bedroom door, and I glanced up. "Come in," I called out.

The door creaked open to reveal Noah. He was dressed in a set of gray sweats. I had no idea how Matthew owned anything large enough to fit him, and I wondered if perhaps he had a stockpile of clothing on hand for whenever he had guests.

"You're supposed to be in bed resting," I said.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Yeah, me neither."

Noah shut the door behind him and came to join me on the balcony. His skin was still pale, and there were bags under his eyes. He looked like he'd been through hell, and yet somehow, he still managed a smile for me. He sat on the couch beside me, pulling my feet onto his lap.

"Are you in pain?" I asked.

"You kidding? I got all the good drugs tonight."

I chuckled. I was surprised I was able to laugh at all after the night we'd just endured. After the weeks of chaos we'd been through.

Noah lifted his arm, gesturing for me to come closer. I smiled and shuffled to place my head on his chest, making sure to stay clear of the wound on his other side. He wrapped his arm around me, and my head fit so perfectly between his shoulder and his neck it felt like that space had been carved out just for me.

It was hard to fully relax as he held me close. "Tonight's the third time you've ended up in a hospital because of me," I said.

"And I'd make the same choices all over again if I had to," he murmured.

"Still, I hate that it was my fault."

"You aren't to blame for any of this," Noah growled. "My grandfather has a lot to answer for. If one small positive came from tonight, it's that he'll be spending a long time behind bars for what he's done."

"It doesn't feel like enough," I said.

“No, and it probably never will,” Noah agreed. “But I think it will help me sleep better at night knowing that he can’t hurt you or anyone else.”

“True.”

I glanced up and found Noah staring down at me, a gentle look in his eyes. “I have a confession,” he said.

“Okay…”

“I didn’t come in here to talk about my grandfather.”

“Fair enough.” I didn’t particularly want to talk about William either. “Was there something you did want to talk about?”

“Nothing. Everything. Honestly, I just wanted to be close to you.” Noah let out a sigh as he considered the door. “I know I’m supposed to be resting, but I’m really struggling to be away from you right now.”

“Yeah, me too.” It felt like a part of me was missing when he wasn’t at my side, and I worried too much about him when he was gone. I’d been so awake and alert before he’d entered my room, but since he’d arrived, I felt calmer. I was safe with him by my side, and it was the first time all night I’d thought sleep was even a possibility.

“Would you stay here with me tonight?” I asked. “I know Matthew would probably freak, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to get any rest without you next to me.”

Noah swallowed.

“You don’t have to say yes if you don’t want.” I stumbled over my words when he didn’t respond right away. “I know you probably want to sleep in your own bed so you can recover.”

“No,” he replied. “No, I want nothing more than to be here with you. It just took me a moment to reply because I can’t believe this is real. That you’re in my arms and asking me to stay. Holding you is what I dreamed about when we weren’t together, and I just can’t believe you’re really mine.”

“I’m finding it hard to believe this is real too,” I admitted.

He gave me a small smile. “You told me you loved me tonight.”

“Because I do,” I replied. “You said it too. And then you proved it when you jumped in front of a bullet for me.”

“Well, if I’d known all I had to do was jump in front of a bullet to prove my love for you, I would have done it sooner.” He laughed but quickly stopped and put his hand to his injured torso.

I might have laughed with him, but the reminder he was injured stayed my lips. I hated he'd been hurt. That his life had been in danger.

"Please promise me you won't ever do that again."

"I can't do that, Crash. I'm always going to be there to catch you when you fall. But, I have to admit, as fun as it is to rescue you on a weekly basis, I'm really hoping that your brushes with death have come to an end now my grandfather is in custody."

"I really hope so too," I agreed.

He lifted a hand and gently brushed his thumb against my cheek. "I have a feeling we'll be okay." He lowered his lips to mine in a soft and sweet kiss. Our kisses had always been passionate before, but this one made me feel like I was truly adored. I wanted to hold him tighter. To kiss until we were breathless and my mind was completely muddled, but we had time to kiss that way tomorrow or the day after that. It seemed too much to imagine it, but I had a feeling we'd get a lifetime of those kisses.

I pulled back, trying to give him space as our embrace grew more heated. "We don't have to kiss right now. You're hurt…"

"Don't have to kiss?" Noah actually looked offended. "Do you have any idea how many times I've thought about this moment? I had big plans to sweep you off your feet. Clearly, that's not going to happen right now, but my lips aren't broken, and I'm more than happy to prove it to you."

"Hmm," I replied. "I could probably do with some convincing…"

He grinned as his lips found mine once more, and he firmly erased any doubts he might not be up to it. Despite everything we'd been through, it didn't feel like the end of something terrible. When I was with Noah like this, it felt like the start of something great.

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EPILOGUE

"How do I look?"

I gasped as my mom walked into the room in the most gorgeous long white dress. The silk glided effortlessly across her skin, and the simple silhouette was exactly how I pictured her when I'd imagined her marrying my dad. I'd been doing my best not to cry as we got ready for the wedding, but the sight of her looking so perfect had tears springing to my eyes.

"Don't cry. You'll ruin your make up!" Mom said. "Or worse, you'll make me cry, and I'll ruin mine."

"We can't have that." I let out a laugh and lightly touched the corners of my eyes to stop the tears. "You look beautiful, and the dress is perfect."

I'd helped her pick it out a few weeks ago, but it was one thing to see it in a store and something else entirely to see her wearing it with her hair and makeup done. The beaming smile she also wore was what truly completed the outfit. She'd never looked so happy.

When my father had asked my mom to marry him six months ago, it had been hard to imagine this day arriving so fast. Their lives had been so separate, and it felt like they had only just started rekindling their relationship. But it was amazing how much everything had changed and how quickly time had passed this year.

My mom was now living in New York with Matthew, and I had finally graduated from school. It had taken a while for Mom to recover from the fire, but as soon as she'd received the all clear from her doctor, she'd launched herself back into life with a vengeance. She was now a qualified

yoga instructor, and my father's treatment for her thyroid cancer was working well. The cancer was almost completely gone, and the doctors were confident she'd make a full recovery.

"You're sure it looks okay?" she asked, biting her lower lip nervously as she glanced in the mirror

I walked over and took her hands in mine. "Matthew is going to lose his mind when he sees you. You look incredible."

"Thank you." She released a breath and smiled. "I still can't believe this day is here. I know when we first set the date it seemed too soon, but to me, it felt like forever away."

"I know," I agreed. "But you and Matthew are meant for each other. And this wedding is long overdue."

She let out another relaxed sigh and checked herself in the mirror once more. "This may sound silly, but it feels like fate guided us back to each other. The way I got sick and freaked out so much I ended up calling him. It all worked out in the end though, didn't it?"

"It did," I agreed. "And it's definitely not silly to feel that way." I felt the exact same about Noah. It was as though we were destined for one another, and no matter what we went through in life, I felt certain we would always find our way back to each other.

Not that I had any plans for us to be parted any time soon. We were headed to college together next month, and things would get really awkward if we broke up seeing as Matthew had bought us a place to live in together.

"Would you mind getting me a glass of water?" Mom asked. "I don't want to run into your father before the ceremony."

"Yeah, of course. Is there anything else you need?"

"Maybe you could check in on Matt and see how he's feeling?"

"Consider it done."

We'd all returned to Rapid Bay for the wedding and were getting ready in the house my father had purchased for my mom on the foreshore. My mom was in her room upstairs, and I found my father down on the balcony overlooking the ocean. He was dressed in a gorgeous black suit, and he seemed to be struggling to put his cuff links on.

"Here, I'll help with that," I said.

Matthew smiled and handed me his cuff links. "How's your mom?"

"She's doing well. Can't wait to marry you, of course."

He seemed to relax at my words, and he glanced down as I slid his cuff link easily through the hole in his shirt.

“I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve put these on before with no problem,” he said.

“It’s okay to be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous,” he said. “I’m excited.”

“Yeah, Mom is too. Though I think she’s struggling to wrap her head around the fact that today’s already here.”

Matthew released a breathy laugh. “She’s not the only one who feels that way. It’s like this day has come up so fast but also not nearly fast enough,” he said. “I can’t wait until your mother is officially a LaFleur.”

“About that…” I murmured. “I’ve been thinking a lot, and…” I paused, not quite believing what I was about to say. But it felt so right to say it. “I think I want to change my name.”

“What?”

“I want to change my name to LaFleur.”

“Really?” My father’s eyes became glassy, and I was afraid he was going to cry. He had better not start. If he did, I’d probably cry too. And my mom had already warned me about ruining my makeup.

“Really,” I said. “Mom’s changing her name, and it feels right. We’re a family, you’re my family, and I want my name to reflect that.”

He pulled me in for a hug, and I held him tightly. I’d decided a few weeks ago when Mom and I had been talking about whether she’d change her surname. I figured I’d change my name at the same time too, and I was glad I didn’t have to wait too long before they were married. My adult life was just starting, and I wanted to live it as a LaFleur.

When my father stepped back from the hug, he was still beaming.

“I should probably get back to Mom,” I said. “But I’ll see you at the end of the aisle, Dad.”

He’d been trying to hold back tears, but when he heard what I’d called him, one broke free and rolled down his cheek. I shared a smile with him before I left him to finish getting ready. I went down to the kitchen to get my mom her glass of water and then returned to her room.

“How is he?” Mom asked, as I handed her the water.

“Good. Struggling with his cuff links but good.”

Mom smiled. “I never thought I’d see the day Matthew LaFleur was nervous.”

“I think it’s more nervous excitement. He can’t wait to be your husband.”

My mom beamed in response. “Well, the feeling’s mutual,” she murmured.

There was a knock at the door, and the wedding planner poked her head in. “Are you ready?” she asked. “We need to leave for the ceremony in five minutes.”

“I’m ready,” my mom replied. From the easy way the words left her lips, it made me think she’d been ready well before today.

The ceremony took place on the secluded beach down the road from our house. It was a small event, but my parents had extended the invite to my friends from school. They had flown in for the occasion, and it felt so good to have everyone I cared about in one place.

I was my mom’s one and only bridesmaid, and as I walked down the aisle, even though my dad was waiting at the far end, I was watching Noah. He stood at my father’s side, looking devastatingly handsome in his tuxedo. My heart flipped when he saw me, and the corner of his lips lifted in a smile. I was never going to get sick of his smile or the way his eyes lit up when he looked at me.

The ceremony was short but beautiful. And my parents’ love for one another radiated in their smiles as they exchanged their vows. I’d often wondered what my life might have been like if I’d grown up with my father, but in this moment, I knew I wouldn’t change the way things had ended up for anything.

The wedding reception was held in my mom’s old café—well, where my mom’s old café used to be. Matthew had spared no expense renovating the space as quickly as possible, and it was now run by Norma, with Frank at her side, after she had happily stepped up to fill my mom’s absence.

I spent most of the night on the dance floor with my friends. I’d missed Cress and Anna terribly since school had broken up a couple of weeks back, and it was so amazing to have them here. I knew it would only grow harder next year when they both went to different colleges, but we’d made a pact on the last day of our senior year that we would always remain friends, and I had no doubt we were going to keep it. We might be going our separate ways for now, but I had a feeling fate wouldn’t keep us apart for too long.

Wes and Sawyer had both come to the wedding too, and even though Wes despised dancing as much as me, he’d spent the night on the dance

floor with the rest of us. Things had never quite been the same with Wes after we broke up, but we had somehow managed to remain friends.

Even Kaden and Luther had come for the wedding. And while neither of them knew my parents all that well, they had charmed my mom so much at her engagement party in New York a few months earlier that she insisted they be here too. The guys spent most of their night by the bar, but Kaden made sure to pull Cress aside for a dance whenever a slow song came on.

"Having fun?" Luther asked as he came to sit beside me.

I was taking a break at one of the tables that had been pushed to the side when everyone converged on the dance floor. I'd been dancing all night, and my feet were killing me so it had seemed like a good time to rest.

"Yeah, tonight's been perfect," I said. "Have you been enjoying yourself?"

"Oh yeah, tonight's been great. Your dad has very good taste in whiskey."

"*That's* your highlight of the wedding?"

"Oh, and the company, obviously."

"Uh-huh, sure."

Luther relaxed into his chair, and a smile pulled at his lips as he watched Anna on the dance floor. There was an adoring look in his eyes as she burst out laughing at the dance moves the twins were pulling. I'd been seeing him look at her like that more and more throughout the year, and I wasn't sure I could go another night without saying something.

"Are you ever going to admit you have a thing for Anna?" I asked.

Luther's eyes practically twinkled as he glanced back at me. "And have her hold that against me too? I don't think so."

I shook my head. He was so confusing. "So, you do like her?"

"Like her?" He laughed. "That girl's going to marry me one day. She just doesn't know it yet."

My mouth dropped open. "What?"

He grinned at the shock in my eyes.

"How is she going to marry you if you won't even admit you like her?"

"Perseverance," he replied. "And it helps that we're going to the same college next year."

The music changed and Luther grinned as he glanced at the dance floor again. "That's my song. I better go see if my girl wants a spin."

He started to stand but then turned back to me. “Great party, newbie. I’m really glad I came.”

I glared at him but laughed. “Do you think you’ll ever stop calling me newbie?”

“Nah, you’ll always be the new girl to me.” He winked and took off after Anna.

I watched him go onto the dance floor and hold out his hand to her, inviting her to dance. I half expected her to roll her eyes and walk away, but the next thing I knew, she was in his arms. She had a horrified look on her face as he happily spun her around, and it was only after the song ended, when he bowed and walked away from her, that she smiled after him. Perhaps Luther’s perseverance was already starting to pay off.

“You look deep in thought,” Noah said, arriving to sit at my side. Norma had been dragging him around the dance floor for the last three songs, whispering who knows what in his ear. I had a feeling she was probably giving him her latest predictions.

“Just thinking about the future, I guess.”

“Well, I can tell you all about mine,” he said. “It’s got a gorgeous blonde with curly hair and bright blue eyes in it.”

"Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently, we’re going to have incredible adventures, successful careers, and then we’ll settle down and have five kids.”

I burst out laughing. “Is that what Norma’s been telling you?”

“And that we’re getting a golden retriever.”

“I mean, the goldie sounds great. But five kids?” I said. “Is she trying to scare you off?”

“Nothing could scare me off you.”

I smiled because I believed him. Especially after what we’d both gone through with his grandfather. It was a relief to know William was behind bars now, and we’d never see him again.

“Do you want to dance with me?” Noah asked, offering his hand. A slow song had just come on, and I glanced down at his feet.

“Yes, but I should probably apologize to your toes in advance.”

“Apology accepted.” He chuckled and led me onto the dance floor.

My mom and dad were holding each other and swaying slowly in time with the romantic song the band was playing in the background. They looked so in love as they stared into each other’s eyes, and I was glad we

didn’t have to wait any longer to see them married. That they’d finally reached the happy ending they deserved.

“I still can’t believe Norma told you we’re having five kids,” I said as Noah and I slowly danced. I’d never given much thought to having a family. I felt way too young for that. But I wasn’t against the idea of having kids one day as long as they got Noah’s smile.

“She’s just predicting the future as she sees it,” he said. “Maybe it’s wishful thinking, but it could also be magic.”

“You think?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “But she’s not the only one who can see our future.”

“You’re a psychic now too, are you?”

“I am when it comes to us.”

“And what is it exactly that you see?”

A smile slowly crept to his lips as he looked into my eyes. “Well, I see us going to college together.”

“We already know that.” I laughed. “What about after that?”

“Beyond that?”

“Yeah.”

He barely paused for breath. “Well, I see adventures, successful careers, five kids, and a golden retriever.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re not serious.”

“I could be.” He grinned and lowered his lips close to my ear. “But let’s be honest, Crash. As long as we’re together, I don’t care where we end up.”

It might have taken us a while to get to this point. Heartbreak, betrayal, secrets and a few too many brushes with death. But those moments had bonded us together, and made us so much stronger. I knew now that nothing could tear us apart and as Noah stared into my eyes, I felt like I could see our future clearly too. Our future, together.

Thank you so much for reading the Weybridge Academy series! I loved writing these books so much and sincerely hope you enjoyed Isobel & Noah’s story.

If you’re not ready to say goodbye to these characters yet sign up to my newsletter to receive a bonus chapter from Noah’s perspective!

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BONUS
Chapter

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LUTHER

December—Junior Year

“And just when I thought you couldn’t disappointment me any further…”

It wasn’t the first time I’d been told that, and I was quite certain it wouldn’t be the last. If there was one thing I excelled at in life, it was disappointing my father.

“You thought you could get away with slacking off this year, and I wouldn’t notice?” He slammed my report card down on his desk as he moved to the mirror to fix his bow tie. The guests would arrive for our Christmas party any minute now, but that didn’t matter to Lord Mikael Henderson. They could wait outside in the snow for all he cared.

No one in any room was ever as important as my father. In his eyes, at least. As a young man, he had supposedly tracked our family’s bloodline back for generations and unearthed some tenuous link to European royalty. He’d been referring to himself as a Lord ever since, and he wasn’t at all shy about making it known to everyone he met.

It made me shudder to think of my father actually ruling some unfortunate country as its king. If he treated his subjects with the same contempt with which he treated his own son, there would be a violent rebellion within days. Luckily, the likelihood of my father actually having royal blood was small. In reality, all his privilege, wealth, and power came from his parents, and their parents before them. The Henderson family had

been blessed with wealth ever since my great-great-grandparents first made their fortune generations ago. My father hadn't worked for anything in his life. Apparently, though, he would not allow me to get away with the same thing.

"I wouldn't call it slacking," I replied. "I've worked extremely hard to avoid all forms of schoolwork."

My father's eyes shot to mine as I smirked. When I was younger, a comment like that might have earned me a smack with his belt. Now that I was taller and wider than my father, those days were over. That didn't stop him giving me regular verbal lashings, though.

"Why can't you be more like those friends of yours?" he growled. As much as he seemed to despise the idea of me having close friends, he'd never outright objected to them. I'd befriended two of the most powerful families in the country, and my father wasn't stupid—he was more than happy to use my connections to his advantage in any way he could think of.

"Kaden and Noah?" I snorted.

"They, at least, do *something* to make their families proud."

"Well, maybe they've got parents who do something to make *them* proud."

Mikael's eyes narrowed, but he didn't respond as my mother took that moment to come bustling into the room.

"You're not ready." Her eyes were accusing as she looked over my attire. I was still in my Weybridge Academy uniform, having only just left school for the start of winter break earlier that afternoon. I'd taken my sweet time packing my belongings and coming here too. The less time I had to spend in this cold mausoleum of a house, the better.

"I haven't had a chance to change yet," I replied. I didn't look in my father's direction, but my mother wasn't an idiot. She knew I wouldn't be anywhere near my father's office if I hadn't been dragged in here the moment I got home.

She gave her husband a quick, nervous glance. My father wasn't any easier on my mom than he was on me. She'd spent my whole life being criticized and berated into submission. I often wondered if she'd once had some spirit—I must have gotten mine from somewhere, after all. But if she had, then many, many years must have passed since anyone had seen any hint of it. Agatha Henderson was simply my father's puppet these days. A pretty but vacant accessory he enjoyed carting around on his arm. I might

have felt sorry for her, but she'd never done anything to back me up against my father. Sadly, she seemed too scared to risk upsetting him, even when she could see how harsh he was being on me.

My mother bit her lip. She was clearly anxious because I wasn't ready for the party, but equally nervous about interrupting my father. When she was sure Mikael wasn't going to say anything else, she turned to me once more. "Well, you better dash up to your room and change quickly now," she said. "People will be here any minute."

"Yes, Mother." I bobbed my head at her before making a beeline for the door. I guess she deserved some credit. She'd at least given me the opportunity to escape.

"Luther," my father called, stalling my hurried exit just as I reached the door to freedom. "This conversation isn't over…"

"Yes, your *Lordship*." I replied with a dramatic bow and slipped out the door before he could reconsider letting me go. I would probably pay for that parting comment later.

It was going to be a long and painful winter break if my father stuck around town any longer than tonight's party. Thankfully, he rarely stayed in Weybridge for the holidays. Not when he could spend the time sucking up to other elite wannabes in the city or throwing money at questionable, doomed-to-fail investments. I was sure we'd be broke if my grandparents didn't maintain such a strict leash on our family fortune. They weren't getting any younger though, and it was only a matter of time before my father got his greedy hands on *all the* Henderson wealth. I'd come to terms with the fact I was probably going to inherit nothing more than an imaginary lordship.

I took my time getting changed. The telltale sounds of guests arriving downstairs echoed through the house, but I wasn't bothered about being there to greet them. The adults were only interested in my father, and the kids from my class at school who were coming were just as bad. They didn't actually give a shit about me as a person. All they cared about was my family name.

There was a knock at my door, and it opened before I had a chance to tell whoever it was to go away.

"You still not ready?" Noah asked, as he poked his head in through the gap in the door. "I told you he wouldn't be ready," he added, turning to look over his shoulder.

Noah pushed the door wide and came into my room uninvited, with Kaden trailing behind him.

“Please, do come in, make yourselves at home,” I said, downing the rest of the whisky I’d been nursing.

“God, you’re grumpy when your father’s in town,” Noah grumbled as he collapsed onto the couch.

“Because you’re so much better when it’s your grandfather,” I fired back.

“Yes, well, at least we can all be glad William’s not here tonight,” Noah replied. “He got caught up with work.”

“Mikael won’t be happy. What a shame.”

Noah smirked at my sarcastic tone.

“How about you?” I asked, nodding to Kaden. “Will the illustrious Beaumont family be joining us this evening?”

“Not tonight.” Kaden looked somewhat relieved, and I didn’t blame him. Like Noah and me, he had a complicated relationship with his family. He was probably the luckiest of the three of us, though. His mom wasn’t too bad, and his dad was always away working.

“I guess it’s just me who’s fortunate enough to have his family in town for winter break.”

“Guess so,” Noah agreed before he nodded at the tie in my hands. “Are you going to put that on and join the party?”

I considered the tie for half a second before I ditched it on the bed. “Screw it. I look better without it.”

“Yes, the lack of tie makes all the difference.” Kaden smirked.

“It really does,” Noah added, grinning along with Kaden. “If you want to look like even more of a mess than usual.”

“You guys are both jerks. Have I ever told you that?”

The two of them chuckled. They probably thought that was rich coming from me—I was usually the one giving my friends grief, not the other way around.

I followed the guys downstairs, wishing I could have found a reason to stay in my room a little longer. I knew if I didn’t show my face soon, though, my mother would come to find me.

The party was already in full swing at the front of the house. The place had transformed since I’d been here last month, and it looked like some picture-perfect Christmas scene from a Hallmark flick. A string band played

gentle background music, and there were fairy lights, winter garlands and wreaths strung up on every wall. Several Christmas trees were dotted around the space, including a monstrously tall one in the entrance hallway. The house looked vibrant and joyous—a façade about as realistic as the cheesy movies the home so closely mimicked.

The adults were all wearing smart suits or elegant dresses. They sipped from glasses of champagne as they mingled and did their best to impress one another. They reminded me of peacocks, slowly gliding their way around the room, ruffling their feathers and flashing their colorful accessories as they attempted to outdo one another.

I hated the world of privilege we lived in with a passion. It was probably what had drawn me to Noah and Kaden to begin with. Neither of them felt as comfortable as their families did with the gaudy expressions of wealth that always surrounded us. Like me, they wanted nothing more than to disappear at events like these.

“Let’s go out back,” I muttered, and my two friends nodded happily at the suggestion. My parents always hosted their guests at the front of the house, while anyone our age was sent out back. It was a little more relaxed around people our own age, mostly because they all knew better than to bother my friends and me.

We disappeared to the rear of the house, thankfully without my mother or father noticing. As we stepped out into the large entertaining area which was filled with Weybridge Academy students, Noah cringed. Veronica Cordeaux was waving in our direction. She immediately started making her way through the crowd toward us. The girl had a sixth sense for whenever Noah was near, and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. Her pursuit of him was relentless.

“Maybe you should just kiss her and get it over with,” I suggested. “Once she’s realized your lips have less life than a dead fish, she might give up.”

Kaden grinned, while Noah shot me a scowl.

“Hey, I’m just saying it might be worth it to get her off your back,” I continued.

“I’m not kissing Veronica.” Noah said, his voice firm.

“Hmm, that’s what you think, but I wonder what you’d say if your grandfather ordered you to.”

Noah’s eyes narrowed further on me, but he didn’t have a chance to respond as Veronica finally caught up with us.

“Noah, hey, you’re here.” She smiled up at him, a seductive glint in her eyes. “Can we talk?”

“I guess we’ll leave you two alone,” I said, nudging Kaden as I wandered away.

I could sense Noah’s look of shock even without turning to see it for myself. Yep, I was totally abandoning him. But I didn’t want to hang around Veronica either. Besides, it was time Noah manned up and told her nothing was going to happen between them. He wasn’t a child, and he didn’t need me holding his hand.

“What was that about?” Kaden asked, as he hurried after me. “You totally threw Noah to the wolves.”

“What?” I protested. “He’s a big boy. And more than capable of telling Veronica he’s not interested.”

“It’s not that simple,” Kaden continued. “You know his grandfather forces him to maintain a good relationship with her.”

I shrugged. My father told me to do a lot of things. That didn’t mean I just blindly followed his orders. In fact, I often did my best to do the exact opposite.

“He could learn to stand up to his grandfather too,” I replied. I often wondered why Noah listened to the old man. William Hastings was just as bad, if not worse, than my father. Noah clearly didn’t like him, but he never gave me a straight answer when I asked him why he was so loyal to someone he obviously despised.

Kaden shook his head at me, probably because he’d never had the balls to stand up to his own father either. Kaden was too much of a pacifist and did whatever he could to keep the peace in his family.

“Are you alright, Luther?” Kaden’s head tilted slightly. He was looking at me with concern.

“I’m going to get a drink,” I replied.

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

Alcohol and I rarely mixed well when my father was around. I usually avoided it, so I could keep my wits about me. But tonight, I really needed the distraction.

“It’s not just a good idea, it’s a brilliant idea,” I answered. “I’ll see you later.”

I headed off toward the bar before Kaden could stop me. If I was honest with myself, I'd say Kaden was right. I had thrown Noah under the bus, but I was dealing with my own issues tonight. The last thing I needed was a conscience. And a bottle of champagne was the quickest way I could think to lose it.

A few people attempted to stop and talk to me as I passed, but I simply ignored them as I went to grab my drink.

"Luther, Luther."

I grimaced as Vance Hackett attempted to wave me over. He was standing with his little group of friends. They were probably talking about their yachts, trying to settle the eternal debate over whose was the biggest.

I turned my back on him, pretending I hadn't heard, and walked away. I didn't want to talk about yachts tonight. I didn't want to talk about anything with anyone. So, I found myself headed for the kitchens and doing the oh-so-mature thing of ducking into the butler's pantry to hide out.

Thankfully, all the food was already prepped and waiting in the main kitchen or being served to guests, so none of the staff were coming or going from the pantry. I slumped down and sat on the floor, taking a swig of the champagne as I looked around the room. It was actually more like a large closet than a room, with prep benches and a sink across one wall and shelves stacked with non-perishable foods across the other.

It was one of the few places in the house my parents never bothered to enter, and yet it was still bedecked with all the same Christmas trimmings that were currently assaulting every other inch of their mansion. I could only assume the kitchen staff had decided to decorate it for themselves. There were little ornaments dotted around the shelves, tinsel lining the walls, and even a line of fairy lights snaking their way across the ceiling.

As I sipped on my champagne, I started to feel a little guilty about bailing on my friends. I was having a rough night, but I shouldn't have taken it out on them. I was supposed to be the one who backed Noah up when he needed it.

Before I could dwell on the way I'd acted too deeply, my solace was rudely interrupted and I was snapped from my thoughts by movement on the other side of the door. I sighed with frustration but convinced myself that whoever it was wouldn't need to be in here for long. However, as the door wrenched open, a smile pulled at my lips.

Anna Grant burst through the entrance, slammed the door behind her, and pushed her back up against it. Her eyes were wide, and she was puffing slightly like she'd been in a rush. Her flustered look was a stark departure from the confident expression she usually wore around school. And it was a far cry from the distaste that always made its way into her eyes whenever I was near. I was quite sure she couldn't stand me, which was why I always enjoyed doing whatever it took to get under her skin.

She hadn't noticed me yet because her eyes were focused on the ceiling as she regained her breath. I probably should have cleared my throat to let her know she wasn't alone in here, but something kept me oddly silent. I normally would have blurted out the first witty comment that came to mind, but this time, for some reason, I had no idea what to say.

Her sudden appearance surprised me, and the way she was staring up at the ceiling made me feel like I wasn't the only one in need of an escape this evening. Now that I'd been staring at her for a few more moments, I realized just how beautiful she looked tonight. She was effortlessly glamourous in a deep red gown, and her flowing, dark hair fell loosely down her back. Her long legs were bent slightly as she leaned on the door and they flashed a hint of skin at me through the long slit in the side of her dress.

My lips felt dry and I swallowed. Was I nervous? Around Anna Grant? This was new. Before I could analyze the feeling any further—and perhaps revel in it a little—she finally spotted me.

"Oh, God. What are *you* doing in here?" Her gaze had dropped to where I was sitting on the floor, and her green eyes locked onto mine as I stared up at her like an idiot. Luckily, her comment sparked me back to life, and I finally found my words.

"Well, this *is* my house," I replied. "And it's nice to see you too, London." I grinned as she rolled her eyes at the sound of her nickname, and I raised my champagne bottle in greeting. Before I could take another sip, though, Anna marched over and swiped the bottle from my hand.

"Give me that," she demanded before taking multiple long swigs. She was drinking the champagne like she needed it just as desperately as I did, so I didn't complain.

"So, what brings you to the butler's pantry this early in the night?" I asked.

Anna frowned as she lowered the bottle from her lips. “Me? Why on earth are *you* in the pantry at your own party?”

“I asked first.”

She repressed a shudder as she glanced over her shoulder at the door. “Angus Whitmore has been pursuing me all evening.”

I snorted before I mimicked Anna with my best attempt at a British accent. “Yes, I can see how being chased by that pompous fool would be absolutely frightful.”

“He’s not all bad…” she said, her eyes narrowing on me. “It’s only a problem when he speaks. He’s a lot like you in that respect.”

I gasped with mock surprise and continued my Anna impersonation. “Even with this oh-so-sophisticated British accent?”

“You sound ridiculous.” She rolled her eyes again, but the slight dimple on her cheek showed she was fighting back a smile. She was still standing, but she pressed her hip against the bench beside me, and seemed more relaxed than when she’d first barreled in here. I was surprised she hadn’t run right back out the door the moment she’d discovered me staring up at her from my spot on the floor. I didn’t ask her why she stayed, because, although I’d come into the pantry to be alone, I found I wanted her here. And I was worried if I did ask, it might scare her away.

“So, I told you why I’m hiding in here,” she said. “What’s your excuse?”

“Angus Whitmore was pursuing me too.”

Anna laughed and the sound struck me square in the chest. That was the other reason I was constantly messing with her. Her laugh. She usually kept her defenses up around me, always ready and waiting for my next cutting remark so she could quickly deliver a devastating comeback. But every so often, she’d let her guard down and simply laugh with me. She’d flick her hair, her eyes would sparkle, and she’d give me a wry smile, like she was daring me to make her laugh again. I felt totally addicted to it but never quite knew when I was going to get my next fix. As usual, the moment was over all too quickly, and she was soon back on offense.

“That can’t be it,” she said. “Angus has extremely high standards.”

“Clearly,” I mumbled, my eyes taking in every inch of her dress from where I sat at her feet.

She eyed me back with suspicion, but then slowly turned and lowered herself so she was sitting on the floor next to me. She carefully placed the

champagne bottle between us. Not only had Anna decided against fleeing the pantry as soon as she saw me, she was now making herself comfortable at my side. She must *really* want to avoid Angus.

"Come on, be honest," she said, nudging her shoulder against mine. "I told you my reason for hiding. The least you can do is tell me yours."

I hesitated.

"What's said in the pantry, stays in the pantry," she added, pretending to zip her lips.

"There's not much to say," I replied. "I'm just doing my best to avoid my father, my mother, and anyone else who annoys me."

"So, the entire party?"

"Pretty much."

She nodded, but then pursed her lips as she looked at me. "I suppose I've gone and ruined that for you, huh?"

"I wouldn't say that." Anna had far from ruined my night. Just seeing her seemed to have eased the weight that had been pressing down on me ever since my father touched down in Weybridge. She always made me smile so easily, mainly because I got so much enjoyment out of trying to make her do the same.

However, now that she was so close to me, with just a champagne bottle separating us, she was making me feel something else. Those nerves were back. The scent of her perfume was driving me a little wild. Her stunning dress was shimmering slightly under the fairy lights, and I had the urge to close the distance between us, reach out and touch it. I didn't, of course, and instead tried focusing on her eyes, which trapped me in her trademark glare. As I stared into them, I noticed little flicks of yellow splashed throughout their green depths.

"Don't lie. You know I annoy you," she replied. "At least as much as you annoy me."

"Aww, London, I annoy you?" I dramatically pressed a hand against my heart and felt myself gulp down those pesky unwelcome nerves. "And here I was thinking we were friends."

"We're not friends, Luther."

"What are we then? *More* than friends?"

She spluttered out a laugh. It wasn't the intoxicating laugh I craved to hear, though. No, this one was uttered in shocked disbelief.

“You wish,” she snapped back, quickly regaining her composure. But, as she reached for the bottle of champagne and lifted it to her lips to take another sip, I could have sworn her cheeks flushed with a hint of pink.

I wasn’t sure if the champagne was getting to my head, or if I was reading the room completely wrong, but it felt like the air between us was buzzing. Like the small space that separated us zapped with energy, drawing us closer and making my blood pulse faster. I wondered if she was feeling the same thing.

“Maybe I do.” I whispered the words almost instinctively, and I wasn’t sure whether I was still joking around with her or not. By the way Anna’s eyes flicked to look at me, I could tell she wasn’t sure either.

“I…” Her voice trailed off as something caught her gaze above me. Her nose scrunched with distaste. “Is that mistletoe?”

I followed her frown upward and saw a vase on the countertop behind us. There was so much mistletoe stuffed inside it, some of the branches and leaves were hanging over the edge of the counter and dangling slightly above our heads. It must have been left over after the house was completely covered in Christmas decorations.

“Looks like mistletoe to me...” I replied, unable to stop my gaze from instantly dropping to Anna’s lips. Again, I wasn’t sure whether I’d meant to make it so obvious. Was I still just trying to get under her skin, or was she getting under mine in a way I’d never expected?

She frowned at me in disgust. “If you think I’m going to kiss you…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it.” I lifted my hands in objection. “We’ll just have to deal with the year of bad luck.”

“Year of… what are you talking about?”

“You know, if you don’t kiss when the mistletoe wants you to, you get bad luck for a year.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Uh, it’s definitely a thing. Why else do you think I had to kiss my great aunt Mildred last year? It certainly wasn’t something I did willingly.”

Her frown deepened, and she cocked her head slightly as she looked into my eyes. “Are you saying you’d rather kiss your great aunt Mildred than me?”

“No…” For what must have been the first time, I didn’t know how to respond to Anna. It felt like our banter was straying into unfamiliar

territory. Now the topic had turned to kissing, I found myself lost for words. All I could think about was closing in on her lips and silencing us both.

The tension I'd sensed building between us ever since she'd sat down next to me was only amplifying, and I struggled to keep my heart from racing. Even though Anna's eyes were still narrowed on me in disgust, she wasn't pulling away from me. If anything, it felt like she was leaning closer. Like she was thinking about kissing me just as vividly as I was imagining kissing her. Like, as much as she hated it, she wanted it too.

"I've made enough mistakes tonight," she murmured, almost to herself. While her words suggested she was fighting the pull between us, her voice had softened, weakened, like she was slowly giving in.

"What's one more?" I asked.

She started to move toward me, and I edged closer to her. I struggled to believe this was really happening. Anna had never shown the slightest interest in me this way, and yet, it felt so right, like it should have happened long before this. Her lips were just about to brush mine when the door to the pantry burst open and Cress poked her head into the room.

"Anna, I've been looking everywhere for you," Cress said when she saw us. "Uh, what are you guys doing in…"

Before I knew what was happening, Anna had jerked away from me and, with surprising speed and power, slapped her hand across my face. My cheek stung, and my eyes flashed wide with surprise. Anna looked just as shocked as I was and glanced down at her hand in confusion. But then the puzzled look on her face vanished, and she jumped to her feet.

"As if, Luther," she said. "I think I'll take that year of bad luck.

Anna darted from the room, dragging a stunned Cress with her. As I watched the door close behind them from my seat on the floor, I found a goofy smile forming on my lips. Maybe I was buzzed from the champagne, or drowsy from being smacked across the face, but it felt like Anna had really wanted to kiss me. After all, she'd been the one to lean toward me, hadn't she? Sure, she had also slapped me and stormed off. But who knows what would have happened if Cress hadn't interrupted us.

I happily took another swig of my champagne before I pushed myself back to my feet. My night was suddenly looking a whole lot brighter, and it was all because of Anna. I'd felt something the instant she entered the pantry. Something new. And even the force of her slap hadn't shaken the sense that there was more to our banter than I'd first thought.

Most people would have struggled to recover from the sting of rejection caused by Anna's hand crashing into their cheek. But for me, it seemed to have struck a chord in my heart stronger than any kiss ever could.

As I lightly rubbed the red mark that was forming, I felt sure of one thing. I wanted Anna Grant. And the grin on my face grew because, even if she hadn't realized it yet, I was pretty certain she wanted me too.

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Alexandra Moody is an Australian author who writes romance novels for young adults. She lives in Adelaide with her husband, three kids and their naughty dog. When she's not busy writing, you'll find her reading or spending time with her family. She loves to travel, is addicted to caffeine and has a love/hate relationship with the gym. She can often be found on Instagram and TikTok.

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