

57 | Player Would Say

Chapter 57: Player Would Say

Luke, where are you? How long does it take to get a shirt?!

It's only been 10 seconds.

10 seconds of conversation with the girl who slept with my boyfriend. Feels like 10 years.

The circus continued around us. Magicians and acrobats, popcorn and cotton candy. Chadwick's charity event was in full swing.

"Haven't seen you around. You've been hiding from us," Kelly said to me, and only then did I notice the mascara stains on her cheek.

"Did someone else spill shaved ice over your face?" I asked.

OK, I could've been less blunt, but she did sleep with my boyfriend so...

"No," she snapped, and tried to wipe the mascara marks o her face, "You'll be happy to hear that he's cheated on me too now. I should've known, since we did it to you."

I felt a pang; not because of the insult, but more for the pain she was going through. I remember how I felt when it happened and I wouldn't wish that kind of thing on anybody. Except...

JK. No one. Really.

"What makes you think that?" I asked, while my eyes scanned the party for Luke.

Come on Luke, come baaaack.

"I'm not clueless like you, Millie. Call it a woman's intuition."

"I'm trying to help, so if you want to insult me, we can end this accidental reunion and plan to see each other never again."

She latched onto my wrist with manicured nails that were shaped like claws. "No! I'm sorry, I just saw him, that's why I'm like this. He was making out with her in the fun house. I didn't see who she was though. She was behind the mirrors and I tried chasing her but got lost in there."

Wow, that sounded like a Jordan Peele movie. Tears swelled up in her eyes again.

"No," I tried to tell the tears, "Please don't cry right now."

I saw Luke walking towards me with Chad beside him. Relief washed over me. Chad was holding a striped navy-blue shirt, and was chatting with Luke.

"FYI," she added, "I think he was seeing her while he was with you too."

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Mic drop.

...

"Someone need a shirt?" Chad joked, swinging the striped shirt on his arm. "Didn't know we were hosting wet t-shirt competitions here."

He could work on his timing.

Kelly thanked him with a wide grin, acting like the conversation we had never happened.

"You ok?" Luke asked me, resting his hand on my back gently, "You look shocked."

"I- I- uh- for- can't- only- for- yes," I paused and tried to reprocess the information. "I am shocked."

"Let's take a walk," he o ered, "You can tell me what happened."

I nodded again, and let Luke handle the situation. He said a few words to Chad and Kelly before we made our exit. The circus theme was still well under way in Chad's garden, with excited guests either very tipsy now or on a sugar high.

I was scarred by my conversation with Kelly I-smile-at-everything Mathers. Except that, this time, she hadn't been smiling.

We passed by the fun house and I unintentionally slowed down. My cheating ex-boyfriend cheated on his current girlfriend in here.... with a girl who he has been seeing since he was with me... oh my head hurts with this drama.

"The fun house?" Luke questioned, slowing down when he saw me stop beside it, "Should we have some adult fun in there?"

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Christopher Hayes was sitting on a bench beside the fun house with some of his friends. He saw Luke and me and then he scowled. I waved back.

The trumpets sounded over the entire party again.

"Doesn't this remind you of the daily wake-up call this summer?" Luke said, playfully pressing his hands over my ears to shield me from the sound.

"You mean the bugle call at camp?" I yelled out. Now that my ears were blocked, I had no idea how loud I was.

Luke was standing behind me. He smiled and kissed the top of my head.

An announcement was made. "The Chadwick Circus invites all guests to make your way to the basketball court for the ultimate showdown!"

A band blasted procession music as the curtains to the tent were ceremoniously flung open for the second time today. Now, instead of a dining room, a basketball court had been created; it was almost circular and the grass had been covered with polystyrene tiles.

"Good luck playing on that," I gave Luke a pat on his back.

He was so used to playing on a proper court that the other players may actually have an edge on him.

"You're gonna need that luck," Christopher Hayes said as he pushed past us, "Let's see you jump!"

Hayes was the tallest guy I have ever seen.

Luke kissed me on the cheek and went in the opposite direction to Chris. They were on opposite teams... as usual.

It was smart of Nicole's dad to get Christopher Hayes on his team. The one guy in town who could give Luke a run for his money.

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I entered the tent again, surrounded by all the fanfare. The acrobats were still performing (do they never get tired?) and waiters were still serving drinks and popcorn buckets. I reached down to touch the 'court.'

It felt like a hard yoga mat. At least the basketball would bounce.

I was on my knees, tapping my fist against the floor, when a pair of purple high heels stopped in front of me. I looked up at their owner. Charlotte Dawson.

I stood up slowly.

Charlotte was gorgeous like her brother. She had long blonde tresses that cascaded down her back and a little glitter on her cheekbones.

"Did Luke ever tell you how I like to meddle in his affairs?" she asked lightheartedly.

"He mentioned that you like projects," I said, remembering the day Luke forced me into his car because he was worried about his sister's curiosity in me.

"That's true," she laughed, "I am curious. Now that you have my brother wrapped around your little finger, what do you plan to do with him?"

Charlotte was bold. The same kind of boldness I saw in her brother, and she was fiercely protective of him.

"He's not wrapped around my-"

"Are you two exclusive or is it still a game?" she asked.

"It was never a game," I answered, as determined as she was. "We had an agreement in the beginning, when I owed him for something. But our relationship has changed since then."

She heard me and then sighed. "Millie, my love life is a sh't show. I take a er my dad in that department. And I don't want my little brother to follow in our messed-up footsteps. I don't want him to get hurt," she said, truthfully.

"I don't know what you want me to say but I can't promise the future," I said, "My dad also le a messed-up trail, and there's no way I'm following his footsteps."

Wherever those lead.

We could hear the crowds around us getting louder as the basketball players walked into the tent, wearing uniform Chad's father bought for the occasion.

Charlotte waited for me to continue. She would not le me leave like this.

"I like Luke," I told her, the most confident I have been in confessing it, "A lot. But we are still in high school. Having a crush can feel like the love of a lifetime. It consumes you, it's all you think about... but in a few years, what will it be?"

Too late to stop, the emotion was pouring out of me now.

"Luke's going to college next year and I'll be a senior in high school. Movies make high school relationships look like destiny all the time. Eternal love seems to be as common as my cornflakes."

Charlotte laughed a little at that last part. Her eyes widened, "You're a good public speaker. I didn't expect that a er you blurted out your confessions on our living room floor."

"About how I kissed Luke?" I blushed.

"Yeah. Tip for next time," she o ered, "Parents don't like hearing that kind of thing."

We both smiled. I guess this was us... bonding.

"You're right, you know," she sighed, "But why not enjoy it while it lasts? Isn't it a great feeling; the feeling that you're totally in love with someone? Even if it doesn't last?"

A deep voice said from behind us, "You should be with me."

My heart sank. Was he listening this whole time? Charlotte melted away.

I turned to the most attractive boy I had ever met and said, "That's a big statement."

"Why do you think I'm joking? What are you afraid of?"

Luke was the same caring, charismatic Luke I knew... now dressed in basketball uniform. His outfit reminded me of the competitive, aggressive player he turns into on court.

"I'm afraid of us not working out," I confessed.

"Why wouldn't it work?"

I thought about how best to explain my insecurities. I am not a confident girl. How do you reveal that to someone who has buckets of what you lack?

"It's hard to compete with all the girls around you," I said, still not sure this declaration was the right thing to do. "I know you don't think of it as a competition, but they do. And I've had to endure a lot of cr*p as a result."

And now I'm bringing out the receipts

I cringed as I said, "Tamara is a gorgeous girl and your relationship with her lasted three weeks. Jamie is your dream girl and she's the basketball coach's daughter."

"You want me to bring up Jake now or later?"

I had to smile at that. He had a point.

"I decide who I like," he said, "And I like you. If you don't like me, that's a di erent thing. And if you think it's too hard dealing with the fallout from other girls, you tell me who they are and I'll take care of them one by one."

I wish I could see a snapshot of his mind right now. He must think I'm crazy and, yet, he's not backing o .

"Maybe you're doing this because your brother asked me out first or because it was all a bet," I added.

My lack of self-confidence was really coming out now.

"That's a lot of ifs," he said, "But you missed one out."

"I did?"

He nodded and said the if I never expected, "What if it works?"

What if

I'd never imagined a world where Luke and I were blissfully dating, where we hung out together until we fell asleep together. A world where he didn't give me errands to pay down my debt on his laptop.

A world where I can always be the zen lemur.

"You focus on the downside," he said, "I'm placing my bets on the scenario where we make it."

The game was about to start. The crowds had gathered around the court. The players were getting in position.

"I'll miss every shot until you say yes," Luke told me.

The Coach yelled out his name. Chad's father was wearing a gold jersey with **Coach Chadwick** emblazoned on the back. Chad himself was the referee. I questioned how fair this game would be.

"Yes to what?" I asked.

"Say yes to a date with me."

I stood in front of him, totally shell-shocked. I couldn't process this quickly... but he was used to me by now. My reactions have never been on point.

"Say yes and the only game I'll play is basketball." He winked.

That's something a player would say.

The whistle blew and the biased referee, Chad, yelled out Luke's name. Chris Hayes joined in. They were all waiting for him.

Luke started walking towards center court.

"Take your time," he called back, "I got all night. Well, two hours actually."

Two hours of basketball. **Two** hours to confirm a date.

One more thing I wanted to add.

I watched him walk away and heard the crowd cheer as the game started.

I wished I had said one more thing to him. One more reason why I was holding back: I'm scared to risk our friendship. Whether he knows it or not, he is the best friend I've had, and I'm scared that if we don't work out...

I'll lose my best friend.

"Millie, why don't you come sit with us?" Oma approached me. I hadn't realized that I had been standing alone for so long. "We are all sitting there."

She pointed at the group, standing in prime viewing position.

Charlotte waved.

I joined the group, wanting to blend in with the cheering spectators. The basketball teams were comprised of all ages; a few high school players like Luke and Chris, but most were older. Employees at the bank and friends of the Chadwick family.

Chad was running around with a whistle and long black socks that showed o his shapely legs.

Luke kept looking at me before he aimed and... missed all the shots he took.

First time, I shook my head. Second time, I mouthed no. Third time, I put my head in my hands because everyone was going hysterical that Luke kept missing.

Chad kicked an opposing player. The guy dropped the ball and Chad's father picked it up.

"Foul by the referee!"

"Why does the coach have the ball?!"

Things were fast deteriorating. Nicole was screaming her lungs out near me, furious at our team's behavior and happy her side was winning.

Supporters on our side were looking dejected. I didn't want to give in to Luke's tactics... but...

That's when I saw Malik sitting in the front row, looking devastated. He was wearing a jersey Luke had given him this summer and miserably watching his idol fail.

The game may not mean anything to me, but it meant a lot to them.

The next time Luke held the ball in his hand, he wasn't looking as playful anymore. He looked dejected. He wasn't used to failing like this and he was beginning to su er from it, but he was stubborn.

Why couldn't he just forget his stupid bet and play?!

Someone passed to him, though he was waving not to. He didn't want to be passed the ball anymore. The crowd started to boo him.

He stood reluctantly with the brown basketball in his hand and glanced over to me. No hope in his eyes.

I nodded.

His eyes widened. He stood there, frozen in place, while the crowd yelled at him. He was holding the ball too long. That's something I would do.

"Foul!" spectators yelled out, "Five second rule!"

I thought that just applied to food on the floor...

"Really?" Chad stared at his stop watch and tapped it, "Maybe my clock is broken. I'll allow it!"

Chad was not about to foul his friend. They had each other's back.

Chris Hayes furiously took matters into his own hands. He knocked the ball out of Luke's hand and Luke's teammates failed to recover it. Luke just stared at me, waiting for me to change my mind.

I didn't. I nodded like crazy.

"YES!!" I yelled.

His face lit up. It was incredible to watch the transformation that came over him. He intercepted the ball with amazing speed. He handled it like an extension of his own arm, dribbling it between someone's arms and across another player's back. Everyone soon realized that this was not the same Luke Dawson who had been playing with them for the first half. Even Chris Hayes hung back to watch.

Luke ran across the court and hit a clean slam dunk. The first I'd ever seen him do.

The crowd roared and he raised his hands in the air towards us. Malik was jumping up and down screaming. Oma looked over at me once, and then twice.

"Hey Millie," she said, "weren't you wearing a necklace today?"

I immediately clasped my neck. It was bare.

The necklace was gone.

Mama's going to kill me.

A/N: Next one will be out on Saturday! I know I'm mixing the schedule up a little, but we're in the lead-up to the final few chapters!

Any remaining requests you have for scenes/moments, please let me know! And kindly consider to vote... it would mean a lot :)