

THE PROTECTOR

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**jordan ford**

*James*

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BARRETT BOYS #3

JORDAN FORD



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ISBN: 978-1-99-115004-2 (Paperback)  
ISBN: 978-1-99-115005-9 (Kindle)

Forever Love Publishing Ltd  
[www.foreverlovepublishing.com](http://www.foreverlovepublishing.com)

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***I dedicate this book to anyone who has ever felt like a loser. Don't believe the lie. You are handmade, crafted and designed to be just who you are.***

*“You are fearfully and wonderfully made.”  
~ Psalm 139:14*

*“Don't dilute yourself for any person or any reason. You are enough! Be unapologetically you.”  
~ Steve Maraboli*

## THE FIRST LETTER

*To the richest, most beautiful girl in the world,*

*You have everything, yet I know you are sad.*

*Why do you go on living when there is no joy in it?*

*I could make you happy. I could teach you how to smile.*

*But you would not want me.*

*I watch you from afar, knowing this truth. Hating this truth.*

*It kills me that we can never be together.*

*Castle keeps us apart. Castle controls it all.*

*But he has no power over death.*

*And if I should die, then why shouldn't you?*

*I shall bury you with me, and we will breathe our last together.*

*One final act of love before we are taken to a higher place where the world's troubles can touch us no more.*

*Your suicidal inamorato*



## WHEN A BOUNCER GETS BOUNCED

*Brody*

A HEAVY BEAT thumps behind me, the vibrations running up my legs as I hover near the door of Club Ultra. It's been around for a while now—a place where hot chicks meet suave guys, wallflowers throw back a few and turn into world-class hip shakers, and teenagers try to pass off their fake IDs in the hopes of a good story at school on Monday.

“Not gonna happen.” I hand the card back with a closed-mouth smile, nearly laughing when the skinny, pimple-faced guy tries to lie to me again.

“Come on, man. I'm twenty-one.”

“And my mother's the pope.” My voice is flat and deadpan, but he's too hyped up to truly appreciate the brilliance of my response.

Jake would think it was funny. My twin brother's good like that. He gets me.

The kid squirms in his sport coat that looks just a couple sizes too big. Wonder if he stole it out of his old man's closet or something. My quick assessment tells me he's trying, but not quite hard enough. You don't wear scuffed-up Vans with business pants when you're passing yourself off as a college graduate.

Seriously, this kid needs schooling.

I roll my shoulders, the suit jacket I'm forced to wear feeling uncomfortable. But bouncers at Club Ultra have to look the part, so we wear suits that accentuate our broad shoulders and solid chests. We shine our shoes and we take our job seriously, because the owner, Mr. Corstanz, won't settle for anything less.

He owns several clubs in the LA scene, and all of them are high-end with reps that can't be touched, which is why the Friday night line is only getting longer.

The kid with the stubby nose and twitchy eyebrows leans a little closer. "Please, dude. I told her I'd meet her in there."

"Sorry, kid, but you shouldn't have done that." I'm still holding his crappy fake ID, waiting for him to take it off me.

I wave it up and down near his face. He snatches it back with a huff. "He told me it was foolproof," he mutters. "I paid three hundred bucks for this."

"Yeah, you got duped."

I should know. I've been working this job for a few months now, and bad IDs stand out pretty easily. It doesn't help when the people trying to use them look like they're only just starting their puberty kick.

"Another time." I pat his shoulder. "Try again in like five or six years."

He glares at me. "I'm a senior, you moron."

"Right." I bob my head skeptically, but it could actually be true. My twin brother's always looked young for his age—fresh-faced, on the leaner side. People always think I'm a few years older than him and it riles him pretty bad, considering he's actually seven minutes older than me.

"Can we hurry this along!" a petulant voice hollers from down the line.

I take a quick look and see it's grown by another few groups.

"You need to move along, man."

The kid's eyebrows dip into a sharp V, and he flicks my hand off. His skinny fingers curl into a fist, and I stand from the stool I was perched on, tucking a lock of thick hair behind my ear and taking a step forward.

He shuffles back, a flash of uncertainty running over his face.

I guess I can be intimidating. That's probably one of the main reasons they hired me here. I tend to tower over people without meaning to. I've always been big for my age. When I was five, people thought I was eight. When I was eleven, they assumed I was in high school.

God made me big. That's what Grandpa used to say. "He's made you tall and broad for a reason, son. Own it and enjoy the ride." Then the glint in his eyes would turn serious for a second. "Just promise me you'll never use it for selfish gains. God made big men to protect the little ones. That's what I think he's got planned for you. Don't miss your chance to be the bigger man in your heart as well."

My insides twist uncomfortably as the warm memory of my grandpa

fades like ash, disintegrating in my hand. I'll never hear his voice again. All because of—

I sniff, forcing my focus back to the kid in front of me.

The kid—I don't know why I keep thinking of him that way. He's probably only a year or two younger than I am.

Clearing my throat, I lift my chin and point to the right. "Seriously. Move along. Don't make me walk you past all those pretty ladies, you know? There'll be other nights. Other girls."

Disappointment overrides his anger. He knows he's not winning this one.

Mumbling under his breath, he gives me one more sour frown before stalking away from the door.

A group of sparkling girls in dresses that barely cover their butts totter up next, and I check their IDs before ushering them in.

"Thank you." I get a few flirty smirks, an eyelash flutter, and an air kiss.

It makes me grin, and I can't help turning to watch them giggle their way into the club. Yeah, they're set to party. I make a mental note to check on them later, then turn back to finish my front-door shift.

About an hour later, I'm back in the club, doing my rounds. Sweeping past the toilets, I make sure no one's drowning in their own vomit or about to OD on drugs that we're meant to turn a blind eye to. I kind of hate that part, but I'm a security guard, not a cop, and I have to abide by the law of Mr. Corstanza when I'm working at one of his clubs.

"Hey, Bro!" Allie, the bartender, waves me over, her wide smile making me grin. She's always happy for some reason, which is why I like working the same nights she does. "Can you head down to the other end? Sounds like some couple is going off at each other, and it could turn ugly."

"Yeah, no problem." I move around the big guys blowing off steam after work and head down to the other end of the bar, where a couple is full-on screaming at each other.

The petite blonde with her fake nails and a dress so tight you don't even need an imagination is pointing at what I assume is her boyfriend, calling him every variation of loser she can think of. She's getting pretty vulgar, and the people nearby have actually stopped their own conversations to witness this fallout.

A guy with sharp features and smooth olive skin is glaring at her, his upper lip curling as she continues to insult him.

I move forward, intending to wrap this up before it can escalate.

Glancing around me, I look for backup in case this gets ugly, but none of the other bouncers are around. Turning back to the couple, I'm about four feet away when the boyfriend's nostrils flare and he lashes out with a slap that nearly knocks her off her feet.

"Hey!" I shout, wrestling through a group and grabbing his arm before he can hit her again. "That's enough!"

He tries to wrench free of my grip, but his twig arms are no match.

"I'm not letting you go until you calm down," I warn him.

"You let me go or you lose your job."

Yeah, whatever. This weasel has no say in my employment.

I stand my ground, my solid fingers not giving an inch as his girlfriend whimpers and dabs at her swollen lip.

"You bastard!" she screeches. "You cheat on me and then you make me out to be the bad guy! I hate you! You're nothing but a f—"

"Okay, miss." I raise my other hand, trying to shut her up. That mouth of hers is so not helping the situation. "I think it's best if we get you two out of here."

"The psycho bitch can leave!" the boyfriend shouts. "I'm staying."

*This little prick.*

I quell the surge of annoyance and force a closed-mouth smile, grabbing his jacket and hauling him toward the door. "I think it's best if you both go."

He tries to scrap with me, lashing out with his fist and beating my arm. I brush him off, not losing my step.

"Let me go!" he hollers right by my ear. "You have no idea who I am."

"Dude." I grab him by the collar, turning him to face me. "I don't give a shit who you are. All I know is that you hit girls, and that makes you scum. Now you are leaving this club!"

His dark eyes glitter, and the smarmy smirk tugging on his lips is punchable.

"That's where you're wrong." He snickers as two strong hands clamp around my arms.

"Let him go." I glance left and spot Adan. His deep voice rumbles in my ear. "Release him now and come with me."

"What the hell is going on?"

"It's time for you to go." His dark eyes are sad and resigned as he drags me to the back of the club.

I'm marched upstairs and moments later am being raked over the coals by

Mr. Corstanza, who just happens to be at the club tonight and who also just happens to be the father of that first-class putz who smacked his girlfriend. He saw the whole thing from his upstairs office window, and now he wants my head.

“You treat my son like some trash you can just throw out of here! Get out of my club, and don’t let me see your face again!”

Shock freezes me. I can’t speak. Move.

What did he just say?

He’s firing me?

But it was a mistake! I didn’t know who that little asshole was?

I try to open my mouth to appeal to him, but he’s already shouting into his phone.

“Yeah, Cyrus, it’s Lorenzo. Got one of your boys here. You didn’t tell me you were hiring dipshits at Alpha Security. When the hell did that start?”

I close my eyes, my insides simmering with dread as Lorenzo Corstanza ruins not only this job but my freaking life. Alpha Security contracts out its employees to different clubs around the city. They’re like a hiring service for bouncers and bodyguards, and getting a job with them at the start of this year was a freaking triumph.

It can’t be over.

“He better be off your payroll by tomorrow morning.” Corstanza’s sharp eyes land on me. “What’s your name?”

I don’t want to answer him, but Adan slaps his hand down on my shoulder and gives me a shake.

“Brody Adams,” I mutter.

“Adams. Make sure he’s gone by morning... I don’t care that you think he’s one of the best you’ve got. He just tried to throw my son out of here! Now you fire this asshole, or I’m not using your services again, and I’ll tell every frickin’ person I know to never use you again, you got me? Your business will be down the toilet by the end of the week!”

He throws the phone down on his desk and looks about ready to slaughter me. “What the hell are you still doing here? Get out!”

I follow his pointing finger and walk out of his upstairs office. Adan lets me stop at my locker. I empty it before handing back the stiff suit jacket and being escorted out the back door.

“Sorry, man,” Adan murmurs.

“I didn’t know it was his son.”

“Yeah, it’s a bad rap.”

I sigh, my chest deflating.

“Don’t sweat it. You’ll get other work.” With a final slap on the arm, he leaves me to slump against my crapped-out Dodge Durango.

He makes it sound so easy, but he has no freaking idea. Since graduating high school twelve months ago, I’ve worked four jobs. I hated bagging groceries, so I quit that after two weeks. Manning a gas station wasn’t much better. The sports shop wasn’t too bad, but I got laid off due to economic strain. They felt really bad about letting me go, but it didn’t change the fact that I was once again jobless. I had freaking rent to pay and I needed to eat, so I went back to the grocery store, but they didn’t have a job opening. Once again, I was out on my ass. I spent months applying for jobs until Cyrus was willing to give me a break. He knew I was young and unqualified, but he also knew what I was capable of. He saw my size, my strength, knew I’d be an asset, and he started hooking me up with bouncer gigs all over town.

Alpha Security gave me the break I needed, and now I’ve gone and screwed it up. Let him down.

Sort of. It wasn’t all my fault.

But I mean, even if I did know that little jerk was Corstanza’s son, would I have acted any differently?

He hit a girl! Slapped her across the face! She’s half his size. You don’t treat people that way. It’s not cool. I don’t care that she was yelling at him. There are other ways to deal with that kind of thing.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I stare at the cracked concrete beneath my shiny black boots and mutter a few curses. Now I’m back to square one. Thanks to Mr. Corstanza, I won’t be getting another bouncer gig anywhere in this town.

“Shit,” I mutter on repeat, getting into my car and yanking the phone out of my bag. “What the hell am I gonna do now?”

---

## AN ILLEGAL PROPOSITION

*Brody*

I STARE AT MY PHONE, wondering how much longer I'll be able to afford it. This job was covering the basics. I have nothing spare after that. How the hell am I supposed to make ends meet now?

Starting up the engine, I let the car rumble beneath me but don't pull out of the lot. Instead, I dial my brother, hungry for a sympathy call that will take the sting out of this totally shitty night.

"Hey, you've reached the voice mail of Jake Adams. You know what to do."

I hang up, throwing the phone down with a hard smack. I want to speak to him now and am suddenly uber pissed that he chose to do freaking summer classes instead of coming back to LA to see me.

His semester is going to start again soon, and the couple weekends we've seen each other over the last few months isn't enough.

I hate this.

I want to be back in high school again. Sure, I hated shifting from one foster home to the next, but at least they kept Jake and me together.

This bullshit long-distance brotherhood thing sucks.

It's impossible to just sit around shooting the breeze. Now I have to wait until he's ready to call me back or text me or some shit.

Gunning the engine, I reverse out of the parking space and see the gas light turn on.

The little orange warning pulls a string of obscenities out of my mouth.

They're gone by the time I reach the gas station, and I fill the tank

halfway, figuring I'll walk a little more this month. Anything to cut costs, right?

Thirty minutes later, I park against the curb and gaze up at my dingy apartment. I moved in when Jake left for college last year. It's hardly the Hilton. More like Trashville. But it's all I can afford.

Shouldering my door open, I cross the street and take the steps two at a time. The railing is too filthy to touch, and I know I should do something about that, but who wants to spend their free time cleaning?

"You've got plenty of time now, man." I grit my teeth and unlock the door, the smell of pot hitting me the second I enter the kitchen.

I wrinkle my nose in disgust, pinching my nostrils and making a beeline for my room.

I want to get out of this place. I was actually working toward it, hoping to save some spare cash and find something better. But life's expensive.

"Dammit!" I punch the air before flopping onto my bed and staring up at the ceiling. There's a brown water stain in the corner that always catches my eye.

It reminds of the brown circles on the carpet in the Mosebys' place. I always hated that carpet... and the yelling, and the cigarette smoke that permanently hazed the air. It was so caustic compared to the fresh, clean air in Montana.

I miss the ranch.

If I were there right now, I wouldn't be stressing about work. I'd have a job. A family to lean on.

Closing my eyes, I take myself back there, four brothers and Grandpa Ray materializing in my mind instantly. I'm standing in the field just outside the house, holding up my hands and screaming, "I'm open! I'm open!"

Deeks hurls the ball at me, a beautiful spiral that hits my chest. As soon as it's tucked against me, I start to sprint, Cooper coming at me like a silent bear. He tackles me just as I hit the line, my laughter muffled by a mouthful of grass.

My eyes pop open and I'm back in Trashville, my spirit deflating faster than a popped balloon.

I miss home.

I miss feeling like I belong in the place I'm living.

Shit, maybe I should have worked harder at school the way Jake did. But learning came easier for him. I was all about the sports. I wasn't good enough



to score myself any kind of scholarship, but I had fun. After we graduated, all I cared about was getting away from our latest foster home—finally being old enough to live on my own, make my own choices. Be a man.

A dry scoff punches out of me. So much for being a man.

With a soft groan, I slap my arm over my eyes, completely weighed down by the prospect of job-hunting yet again. I'm exhausted just thinking about it.

And what prospects will I even have?

I was a freaking good bouncer, and now I won't be able to do that anymore.

Why can't things fall into place for me the way they do for Jake?

I don't want for much.

Just give me a place to belong.

My phone starts ringing and I snatch it up, my stomach knotting when I spot *Alpha Security* on my screen.

"Hey, Cyrus," I mutter, rubbing my tired eyes, then mussing up my thick hair.

"Bro, I'm sorry, man. You got a rough deal tonight."

"No shit." Sitting up, I start unlacing my shoes.

"I wish I could help you, I really do. But I can't cross Lorenzo Corstanza, you know? I could lose my whole business. The guy's got influence."

"But this job was perfect for me," I complain, kicking my left shoe across the room. It smacks into the wall.

I remember joking when I got this job that I was born for the role. Grandpa would have been proud, you know? I was protecting people, just the way he thought I would.

"There are other clubs." Cyrus is trying to make me feel better.

It's not working.

"He told me I wouldn't get a job at a club anywhere in town."

"There are other security companies, though. LA is the city of the rich and famous, you know? Maybe you could become a bodyguard or something."

I frown. "Don't you have to be qualified for that?"

"Yeah, you need certain cards and permits, but you could train for that, right? It'd be a walk in the park for a guy like you. You find the right gig and you could be earning 60K a year."

"Sixty thousand dollars?" My eyes bulge, my insides thrumming. That's insane. That's like a proper living.

“Look, I’ll write you a good reference, okay? I’m pretty sure I can get away with that. I’ll even quietly ask around, see if I can find you something else.”

“My name is mud. Corstanza’s going to make sure of that. I’m totally screwed.”

“So, get a new one.”

I go still, my big toe pausing on the back of my shoe.

*What did he just say?*

“Get a new what?” I try to clarify.

“A new name.”

“Huh?”

He hesitates—I can hear him sighing through the phone—and then he lets me in on a secret I never saw coming.

“Look, I don’t usually tell people this, but just between you and me, my brother-in-law does IDs.”

My eyebrows pop high. This guy owns a security company and he’s telling me how to get a fake ID?

“Like I said, I don’t normally tell people this, but I like you, and I want to help you out. What happened tonight was plain unfair, and I want to be able to give you a shot someplace else.”

The thought is kind of enticing, but... “Isn’t that illegal?”

“Only if you get caught.” He snickers. “And you won’t with these. I’m telling ya, his work is flawless. Besides, it’s not like you’re gonna use the ID to do anything bad. You just need help getting a job. It’s no biggie. Just a name change, even just your last name, and maybe tack a few years onto your life. Shit, I could even give you the permits you need.”

“Well... how much would that cost me?”

“I can probably talk him down to five hundred.”

“I don’t have five hundred bucks.”

“So, pay me back.”

My forehead wrinkles. No way can it be that easy. I push my shoe off and flick it to land next to the other one. Their shiny sheen mocks me, and I scowl at them. “Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t know. Call it a soft spot for foster kids. I know it’s hard to catch a break sometimes, and I don’t want you to end up homeless.”

I don’t know what to say to that.

It’s really nice of him. I mean, it could help a lot.

But—

“Have a think about it, then get back to me. I can probably put something together in a couple days for ya.”

“Yeah, thanks, man.” I tuck a lock of hair behind my ear.

Why are my fingers shaking?

“Don’t worry about it. Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow’s a new day, you know?” He snickers. “My mom always used to say that.”

My eyebrows bunch, and he hangs up before I can respond.

Rubbing my phone over the bottom of my chin, I think about that kid trying to get into the club tonight. Part of the reason I questioned his ID was because he looked young. But not me. I’ve never looked young. I could probably pass for a guy in his early twenties.

And maybe that would help me out, open a few doors. People would be way more likely to hire me if they didn’t know I was nineteen.

The fact that it’s illegal niggles some. I lie back down, scratching my chest and wondering what to do.

Cyrus is right about me not using the fake ID for anything bad. I’m not trying to rip anyone off or commit some kind of crime. I just need a hand to get me a decent job, right?

I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that... right?

Rubbing a hand over my mouth, I feel the scratch of my stubble and spot that water stain on the ceiling again.

Sixty thousand dollars.

I bet people who earn that kind of money don’t live in houses that reek of pot and have brown water stains on the ceiling.

“Sixty K,” I whisper, for a moment letting myself imagine what it must be like to be rich, never having to worry about where your next meal’s gonna come from.

## TO THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN THE WORLD

*Indigo*

I FLIP from my stomach to my butt, shuffling back to lean against the ridiculous mound of pillows covering the top of my bed. I have no idea why Loretta insists on putting them here every time she makes my bed. I've tried to tell her not to bother, but she always comes back with the same answer.

"You don't spend money on something so beautiful and not use it. Your room is a sanctuary, *il mil topolina*. You must make it pretty."

My little mouse.

She's been calling me that ever since I was born. I'm still not sure why, but I guess it doesn't really matter. It's kind of nice having a pet name. No one else calls me anything but Indigo.

I swallow and read the text that just popped up on my screen.

*TABBY: One week to go! Are you nervous yet? I'm kind of freaking out, but just a little. But maybe totally. You know what I mean, right? I shouldn't be scared. I know a few people already, like Percy Walters and his older brother, Barnaby. You, on the other hand, should be petrified, because you know no one. I can't believe how brave you are. I mean, I'm leaving my family too, but at least I have friends here. My dad is driving me over to stay with the Walters on Sunday, then I'll move into the dorm on Friday. What day do you arrive? How long will the drive be for you?*

I grin at the way Tabatha words everything. She's always got so many things to say and so many questions to ask. But I kind of love it.

I love her.

At least I think I do.

Even though we've never met in person, we're like online besties.

At least I think we are.

The coolest part is... she doesn't know who I really am.

I'm not normally a liar, and I haven't like full-out lied to her. I've just omitted one little word and stayed quiet about a bunch of my family stuff.

I don't feel bad about it. Like hell I'm starting college with fame hanging off me like an ugly fur coat. Being the daughter of a super-rich movie producer, among other things, is a cross I never asked to bear. I've been counting down the days until I can escape this life.

That is why I've chosen to attend Montgomery University—this little college in Fitzroy, California—as Indy Bardot. That's just my first name shortened and my last name excluded. No big deal, right?

It's probably a really lame “disguise,” but I've set myself up with some glasses I don't need, I plan on wearing zero of my LA wardrobe while I'm there, and I'm figuring a small college town that's miles away from Hollywood is hopefully unaware of my father being a billionaire.

I had to fight for *months* for this chance. At first Dad didn't even want me to go to college.

“What do you need college for? I can teach you everything you need to know.”

I gave him a dry glare and crossed my arms. “Oh really? You can teach me how to be a large animal vet?”

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I wish I'd never taken you to that stupid ranch.”

“Well, you did! And I fell in love!”

“With animals!”

“Why wouldn't I?” Horses were beautiful and majestic, and they never judged you on your clothing choices or how your makeup was looking. Cows didn't gossip behind your back and believe every freaking headline written about your family.

“I don't want you being so far from home.” Dad frowned, trying on his stern face.

“It's a two-hour drive. Stop being so ridiculous!” I flung my arms wide.

“Kids leave home all the time to attend college, and some of them fly to the other side of the country.”

“But why Fitzroy? This Montgomery place? Surely you can get a degree at a better school than that! How do you think it’ll make me look? You’re the only daughter of Castle Shaw. You should be heading to an Ivy League school!”

Part of me wanted to tell him the truth—that no one will have heard of me in little ol’ Fitzroy—but I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, so I chose my rehearsed speech instead. “Archibald Montgomery was an amazing man who gave his life to the study of science and the natural world. His legacy is this college, and it has so many courses that I want to take. It’s been designed specifically for people just like me. And no one has to know I’m attending there. We can keep it out of the press.” It took everything not to fall to my knees and beg for that reality. “Please, Daddy, you gotta let me go.”

“You won’t know anyone.”

*Exactly!*

I kept the thought to myself and countered with “I know Tabatha. She’s going to Montgomery. And this place has all the prerequisite courses I need to get into vet school.”

He sighed and kept rubbing his forehead.

“Please.” My voice went soft. “Daddy, please. Come on. Please.”

It literally took months of arguing and pleading until he finally relented. I should actually be thanking his long-term girlfriend for that one. Angelica went to bat for me. It was an unexpected surprise and definitely softened me up toward her.

So, anyway, I refuse to be nervous. In fact, I should be happy dancing every time I think about it. And on the inside, I am.

*ME: The drive is like 2 hours. Plenty of time to listen to music and enjoy the scenery.*

Dad offered me the helicopter, but I was like “Hells no! I am driving there. In my car, with absolutely no driver.” Like I’m going to turn up in the back seat like freaking Miss Daisy.

*ME: I don't have the headspace to be nervous. I'm too pumped to be taking this next step, you know? We're going to be college girls! It's a whole new freedom.*

A scream from downstairs backs up my joy.

Ruby.

Ugh.

She's twenty years old and has been living in this house for two years. She calls herself my stepsister, but Daddy and Angelica aren't married, so she's officially not related to me.

Thank goodness!

Her drama is way too much for me to handle.

She likes to think of herself as an influencer, and some of the crap she puts on her social media accounts makes me shudder. It's a relief that I can honestly claim we aren't related.

Another wailing scream makes me wince. She's no doubt on one of her rampages again. She must have broken a nail or found out one of her friends bought the same dress as her. Or maybe one of her loyal followers has said something just a little scathing.

I roll my eyes and tip my head back, gazing up at the fairy lights covering my ceiling. It took me hours to string them, and I actually got told off for trying to do the job on my own. It pissed me off. Everything else in my room has been chosen and designed for me. But it's *my* frickin' room!

But only the best for the daughter of Castle Shaw, right?

When Daddy caught me stringing up the lights, he ordered me down and then got in a professional to finish the job. I sulked on my bed while this guy took my lame excuse for magic and turned it into something even better than my vision.

I grudgingly thanked him, and he no doubt left shaking his head and thinking I was just another rich, spoiled brat. The precious daughter of a billionaire.

Yeah, well, I never asked to be that.

Ruby is now wailing, and I'm so not in the mood.

My phone dings and I smile.

*TABBY: I so can't wait to meet you. I know I've seen pics, but it's not the same as meeting in person.*

I can't wait either. She's become my closest friend throughout this year. Not hard, considering I don't really have any. We met on Instagram, when I was searching for nature pics. Tabby loves taking photos of her family's wheat farm. She's so good she knows how to make crops look beautiful. It started by me liking and commenting on her photos, and then we got to messaging and I found out she was going to Montgomery University just like me, and now we communicate almost every day.

Messaging or texting is our usual MO, but we've spoken a couple times and done a few video chats, though I've made sure to put a filter over my face—cat whiskers with big glasses is my favorite one. It makes my eyes look all huge and distorted. We've also played with unicorn head, monster teeth, and a bunch of others. She thinks it's really funny and has no idea I'm just too damn scared to let her see my actual face.

I guess she will soon, though.

Crap, I hope she doesn't recognize me.

Tabby doesn't seem the type of person to follow Hollywood gossip or anything, so I'm feeling kind of safe in that regard. I've probed a few times, but she seems totally disinterested in that kind of thing. Get her talking about hiking, nature, farming and she basically won't stop. She's the perfect friend for me, and hopefully she has a whole bunch of other perfect friends who don't know me either.

My stomach bunches as nerves scatter.

"It's gonna be okay," I whisper.

A knock on my door startles me, and I quickly send a couple emojis to Tabby before dropping my phone on the mattress and trying to prepare myself for whatever's about to ruin my afternoon. "Come in."

Loretta appears, her lined cheeks paler than usual, her brown eyes swimming with worry.

"What's the matter?"

"Your father wants to see you downstairs."

Ruby's wail wafts up from below.



I cringe. “Is everything okay?”

“No, *il mil topolina*.” Loretta’s usually rolling her eyes with me at his point. The fact that she’s still looking worried has me climbing off my bed. “*Venire. Venire.*”

I follow her down the hallway, her short, stout body covering the distance faster than usual.

*What the hell is going on?*

Ruby’s alternating between sobs, wails, and high-pitched words that only dogs can hear.

I brace myself and walk into Daddy’s office/den, quickly surveying the scene.

Angelica is nestled beside her daughter in the oversized armchair near Daddy’s desk. Her arm is tightly around her shoulders while Ruby wipes tears from her eyes.

Dad’s sitting behind a thick barrier of mahogany, looking grave.

I glance at Azim. Our head of security usually gives me a little wink or headshake to let me know this is all just the usual drama.

Today, he gives me a grim smile.

“What’s going on?” I cross my arms, resisting Loretta’s hand on my back as she tries to push me farther into the room.

I plant my feet and stare at my father.

“A letter came today.” His deep voice reverberates throughout the room. “You’re in danger.”

My blood runs just a little chilly, which I hate.

I don’t want to be affected by the drama. I spend most of my time actively avoiding it. Everyone in this freaking family always overreacts.

With a sideways glance at Ruby, I reach for the plastic bag Daddy’s holding out to me.

I take it. The note has been typed, the font swirly and a little hard to read, if you ask me.

My eyes scan the text.

*To the richest, most beautiful girl in the world,*

*You have everything, yet I know you are sad.  
Why do you go on living when there is no joy in it?  
I could make you happy. I could teach you how to smile.  
But you would not want me.  
I watch you from afar, knowing this truth. Hating this truth.  
It kills me that we can never be together.  
Castle keeps us apart. Castle controls it all.  
But he has no power over death.  
And if I should die, then why shouldn't you?  
I shall bury you with me, and we will breathe our last together.  
One final act of love before we are taken to a higher place where the  
world's troubles can touch us no more.*

*Your suicidal inamorato*

My eyes bulge. “Wow,” I mutter under my breath. “This guy’s sick.”  
“He’s talking about you.” Dad points across the room.  
“Me?” I scoff and hand the note back. “Why would you—”  
“It’s not necessarily about her! It could be about me!” Ruby wails and starts tapping her chest. “The most beautiful girl in the world!”  
I clench my teeth, forcing myself not to say anything.  
“Indigo’s the one who never smiles. Gossip columns are always talking about how she’s so sad.” Dad’s glare catches me, feeling like a slap to the face.  
I look away from it, refusing to feel bad.  
I never asked to be photographed for the media. My smile is not public property, and I’m not just giving it away to a bunch of gossip-hungry people with nothing better to do. The last time I did that, they criticized every little thing about me—my outfit was too dated, my teeth were too big, my smile was too plastic. They read into every nuance and came to the conclusion that I was a try-hard Daddy’s girl. Some of the social media comments were brutal. It sent me into hiding, and when I finally came out, I decided I wasn’t giving the public another thing.  
“I told you it creates more of a story!” Dad shoots from his desk. “Why

do you have to be so damn stubborn!”

“Castle, we don’t know if the note is for her or Ruby.” Angelica rubs her daughter’s arm. “Someone might think Ruby’s glamorous smiles are fake and she’s hiding her sadness.”

“Exactly!” Ruby wails and sniffs.

I roll my eyes and focus on the artwork behind Azim’s head. It’s my favorite painting in the house: a mountain range in Montana, cattle grazing in the foreground, and a lone cowboy astride his horse. Every time I look at it, I feel peaceful. I want to escape into that painting. Especially in moments like this.

“I’ve already called the police. I don’t think anyone should leave the property without someone watching you,” Azim informs the family.

“What?” I protest while Angelica and Ruby nod in unison.

“I want security doubled,” my father clips.

*Ugh! No!*

We already have three guards working for us, plus a driver; do we seriously need more? We live in a gated mansion. We—

“No one is to leave the house,” Daddy says. “We’re all staying inside and safely out of harm’s way.”

“For how long?” I ask.

“Until further notice.”

“But what about college? I’m leaving next week. It’ll all be settled by then, right?”

Azim’s sad frown makes my stomach hurt.

Dread washes through me in a wave so strong, I can practically hear my father’s words before he says them.

He shakes his head. “No. Indigo, you’re not going. Not while there’s some lunatic out there after you.”

My lips part, a scream rising in my throat. But I clamp my lips together, refusing to set my rage and panic free. I will not give in to the drama. I won’t lower myself to their hysterical levels.

Instead, I swallow and force out my argument. Unfortunately, my voice is trembling. “You can’t stop me from going. I’ve been fighting for this for too long. You can’t keep me from this dream.”

“Indigo.”

“No! You promised me I could go!”

“I didn’t know there’d be a stalker on the loose when I promised you

that!” Dad roars. “You’re my only daughter, and I won’t put your life in danger. How do you think it’ll make me look if this letter gets leaked and people find out I let you gallivant around freely without protection? You stay here until I say otherwise.”

“No one is interested in me!” I point at Ruby. “She’s the one who wants all the fame and glory. The stalker’s after her. It’s obvious!”

“Shaw’s sad girl. His depressed daughter.” Dad gives me a pointed look. “That’s what they call you. And that’s what this note says.”

I shake my head. “It’s not for me. Why would anybody want me?”

“That’s what I don’t understand,” Ruby interjects, and for once I’m actually grateful. I’ll take the insult that’s no doubt coming if it wins me this argument. “Castle, it’s so obviously for me. Who would fall in love with Indigo? I mean in that totally obsessive, romantic way, like that letter says.”

Okay, so ouch.

With a short huff, I spin and walk from the room. Stomping up the stairs, I shout over my shoulder. “I’m going to Mont U!”

“No you’re not!” Dad hollers back.

“You can’t stop me!”

“Yes I can!”

My insides deflate.

I’m not ready to give up the fight yet, but dammit, I don’t want to go through this again.

I’ve already fought this battle once.

How am I going to win it a second time?

---

## A LOSER AT THE GYM

*Brody*

YEAH, it's official.

I'm a loser.

That's the first thought to pop into my head when I open my eyes.

My stale bedroom is dim and stuffy. Glancing at my clock, I groan and roll over, but there's seriously no point trying to get back to sleep. I've always been an early riser. No matter how late I go to bed, or how little sleep I get in a night, I'm always waking at freaking dawn. My body clock's a bitch.

Flinging back the covers, I sit up and scrub a hand over my face.

The idea of job hunting is a weight I don't want to carry.

And I still need to make a decision on this fake ID thing. Should I risk breaking this one little law to set myself up for the future?

"Shit," I mutter. I don't know what to do.

I need the gym.

Standing up, I quickly get dressed, then use the bathroom and brush my teeth.

If anything can make me feel better it'll be lifting weights and burning off some energy. I probably won't be able to afford the gym for much longer—it was my one luxury—so I may as well use it until the month runs out.

Job-hunting can start to-freaking-morrow.

Glancing in the mirror, I cringe at the greasy, shaggy mop on top of my head. There's no point having a shower before I work out, so I grab my beat-up baseball cap and shove it on backward to hide the mess. My collar-length

hair still sticks out at the sides, but I tuck it back behind my ears. It's only just long enough to put into a stubby ponytail, but the cap will work for today.

Now, where are my sneakers?

My phone screen lights up, catching my eye. I grab it off the floor, unplugging the charger and reading a text from my brother.

*JAKE: You awake?*

*ME: Of course I am.*

The phone starts ringing in my hand, and the first thing I hear is Jake's soft chuckle.

"I knew you would be. I just didn't want to wake you on the off chance you were sleeping. Miracles do occasionally happen."

"What the hell are you doing up?" I grin. "Unless you haven't gone to bed yet."

Jake laughs. "Study group actually finished on time last night, so I got some decent sleep."

"Wow, your Friday nights sound awesome, man. Way to enjoy the summer."

He laughs off my teasing, no doubt giving me the finger. "You don't know who's in my study group. My Friday nights are freaking awesome."

"Carmen," I mutter. "You manage to win her over yet?"

"Nah," Jake sighs. "She's still dating the dickhead."

"She'll figure it out eventually, man. Don't worry about it."

"I just don't get what she sees in him. She's so smart, you know? So interesting to talk to. Funny. Kind. And he's just this dumb... jock."

My eyebrows rise and I bite my lips together.

Jake goes silent for a second, then murmurs, "Not like you. I mean, you've got personality, you know, and wits and stuff, but he's just this conceited moron. And he's super rich, so he's all 'I was born with a diamond up my ass, so I have no idea how the commoners really live.'"

I laugh at the voice he's putting on, then shake my head. I can't stay mad with my little bro. He may be seven minutes older than me, but he's not the biggest unit. He's gained a little height in the past few years, but he's long and lean... which is basically my nice way of saying he's skinny.

"So, what's up with you? I missed your call last night."

The rock in my stomach instantly feels a thousand pounds heavier. "Yeah, I was just..." My voice trails off.

Do I tell him?

I should tell him.

I tell him everything.

It's just... I suddenly feel like a big dumb jock. Except I don't have any money either. So, where the hell does that leave me?

"Broski? You okay?"

"Yeah, I—" I tut and sigh. "I got fired."

"Why?"

"A misunderstanding. I tried to kick this arrogant wiener out of the club, but it turned out to be the owner's son."

"Yikes. Man, that sucks. What are you gonna do?"

I shrug. "I'm gonna go to the gym and work out."

"You know that won't pay the bills, right?"

"Yes, Jake. I know that." I tip my head back and groan.

My brother pauses. I can picture him licking his lips or adjusting his watch or pulling off his reading glasses to play with the arm. All his little habits. They're so clear in my mind.

"You know, exercise is actually a great idea. It's good for the brain, promotes plasticity by stimulating growth of new connections between cells. It also pumps more oxygen into your brain and releases hormones, which provide an excellent environment for the growth of brain cells."

I frown. "Did you just Google why exercise is good for the brain or something?"

"No, I read about it a while back. So, go work out, get pumped, feel better, and then call me. I'll start browsing for possible jobs for ya and see if I can make a list."

I shake my head. Here he goes again. Always trying to rescue me and solve all my problems.

"Nah, I'm good, man. I'm just gonna take the day to mope."

"You sure? I'm happy to help."

“Yeah, I know. It’s cool of you, but you’ve got to study and a girl to win over, so, you know... you’re kind of busy.”

“I’m never too busy for my lil bro.”

I snicker. “Your *younger* bro.”

“Whatever, man. I’ll always be older.”

“I’ll always be taller.”

“Not if I wear heels.”

I crack up laughing, picturing Jake tottering around in heels. “Later, brother. Study hard.”

“See ya.”

Grabbing my keys and water bottle, I head out the door, trying to ignore the pigsty my roommates left the kitchen in last night.

A little mess doesn’t bother me—I can leave rinsed dishes on the counter for a few days—but these guys are gross.

Slamming the door behind me, I head to the gym, figuring I’ll give my body the workout of its life. Anything to help my stupid, dumb-ass brain, right?

Fifteen minutes later I’m walking through the door. Hearing the sounds of people working out always improves my mood. The clang of weights, the grunts of hard-fought sets, the whir of the treadmill; it’s like the endorphins kick in just being here.

The gym I picked is a bit of a dump. Its chipped concrete walls and banged-up equipment would probably put some people off. But everything works, and I don’t need high class to lift weights. The people who come here aren’t interested in a fashion show or trying to get fit to look good. They’re here because they want to get strong and be healthy.

It’s pretty packed at this time of day, people getting in a workout before their day begins. I dump my stuff in an open locker space and smile at a few regulars I know.

Walking past the chest press, I grin. “Hey, Roni. How’s it hanging? Still busting balls in that executive office you call home?”

He finishes his set, then laughs. “You know it, dude.”

I don’t actually know what he does. I just know he walks out of here in a suit and tie. I figure his job is pretty high power since he always has one of those Bluetooth phone things in his ear and he’ll sometimes be having conversations even when he’s working out.

Not sure I’d like anything that intense.



But man, I bet it pays well.

“Hey, if you want to jump in the ring after you’ve warmed up”—he wiggles his eyebrows at me—“I wouldn’t mind finishing with a couple quick rounds. You up for it?”

I glance at the boxing ring in the corner and grin. “You’re on, old man.”

He’s not that old. At least I don’t think he is. I don’t actually know. His short black curls are starting to gray just a little above his ears. That tells me something, but he’s fit and strong and agile, so that tells me something too.

I jump on the treadmill to start my warm-up.

The steady rhythm makes the rock in my stomach feel a little lighter. With each stride, I get one step further away from my problems.

If only I could keep running on this damn treadmill for the rest of the day.

---

AN UNDERCOVER SOLUTION

*Indigo*

THE TREADMILL HUMS beneath me as I increase my speed one more notch and then turn up the music with the remote.

The little gym on the bottom story of the house is reverberating with music, and I try my best to run off the angst of my shitty day.

I can't believe Daddy still hasn't relented. What the hell is his problem?

It's one stupid letter. The police were here most of yesterday evening going over it. Security will be doubled and everything will be fine. It's not like the media knows I'm off to college. We've managed to keep that very much under wraps. For some reason, Daddy was actually happy to go along with that request. I thought he'd be boasting about how his daughter is going off to get a college degree, but I think he's a little embarrassed by the university I've chosen, so he's staying quiet.

I roll my eyes. I should be grateful, but I just wish...

Dammit! I hate that my family is famous. Why couldn't we just be normal?

Why couldn't my parents have normal jobs and be like all proud that their daughter is heading off to better her life?

But no, nothing I choose is ever good enough, because I'm not interested in becoming rich and being in the spotlight all the time.

They just don't get it.

But I had zero chance of my dreams coming true, didn't I?

By the time I was born, my father was already producing movies and my mother was an up-and-coming actress—Nova Abebe. The glamorous

Indian/African goddess who was taking Hollywood by storm. Well, she didn't really storm until I was about five. She got this epic roll, shooting in South Africa for three months. She never came home after that, not for more than a weekend at a time, and then it got even less.

She put her career before us, and I'm not sure I'll ever get over it.

I think it hurt Daddy pretty badly too.

The stream of girlfriends he's tried to replace her with never last long. And then Angelica came along. She and Ruby have been on the scene for over two years now. That's a pretty long stint for Castle Shaw, and I bet people will soon be speculating if wedding bells will ring anytime soon.

I have no idea.

I guess Daddy marrying Angelica's not the end of the world. She's not all bad.

Her daughter... yeah, I could do without her, but soon I won't be here, so it's not really my problem anymore.

"Except it is," I puff, pumping my arms a little harder. "Unless you can convince him to let you go."

My insides writhe like they have been throughout the previous night. I haven't cried or screamed, but my stomach roiled and melted down as I tossed and turned in my bed.

I drifted off eventually and woke up with the sun making the walls around my blinds glow. The problem slammed into me as soon as I sat up in bed, so I decided to burn off my angst on the treadmill. I've been running for nearly an hour, and my limbs are starting to protest.

"Rise" by Katy Perry blasts through the speakers, and I turn up the volume even more. Loretta will no doubt be cringing in the kitchen above me, shaking her head and wondering how I'm not going deaf.

Well, I'm sorry, but I need the inspiration right now.

I let the words sink into me, fueling my soul and firing me up for yet another fight. I can do this. I will win this battle. I have to, or I'm gonna be stuck here for another year, hiding behind these gates and miserably wondering what will become of my life.

Slamming the Stop button, I grab my towel, wiping the sweat off my face and marching upstairs with my nostrils flaring.

"Daddy. You have to let me go." I storm into his office, startling both him and Azim.

The tall Arab gives me a surprised frown, then looks like he's about to

start laughing.

My father is the opposite. His dark brown eyes glare me down.

I glare right back.

“You promised me.” I cross my arms, trying not to sound like a petulant child.

*Please, voice, don't shake. Stay strong!*

My father bites his lips together and is about to start shaking his head.

“It's not fair! I've worked so hard for this. Don't make me go into battle with you again. Please!” I nearly stomp my foot but manage to resist at the last second. “You should know I won't stop fighting for this. Even if I have to argue with you for another full year, two, three!”

Daddy's head jerks back.

“I'm going to college. I'm going to Montgomery University. And I know you don't like that, but you'll just have to get over yourself.”

“Indigo.” He closes his eyes, as if summoning the strength to stay calm. “I was prepared to allow this, but I won't risk your life.”

“What if I take a guard with me?” I quickly punch out a suggestion Ruby made. I dismissed it immediately. Honestly, her and her freaking bodyguards. She loves having them around. But I'm suddenly desperate, and the idea just pops out. “Someone could watch my back the entire time?”

“*Then paranoid Daddy dearest might just let you go.*” Ruby had given me a glinting smirk. “*Not that you need the protection.*”

Daddy's mouth drops open to protest, then closes.

*Are you freaking kidding me?*

*Ruby actually had an idea that could work?*

I keep rolling with this mini miracle, trying to sound logical and like maybe this was my idea in the first place. “You wouldn't let me live in the dorms, so you arranged an apartment for me. Burk found me a two-bedroom, remember? A bodyguard could live in the other room. Keep an eye on me, make sure I'm safe.” I hold up two fingers, emphasizing the benefit of two rooms while referring to Azim's second-in-command. The poor guy got sent to Fitzroy at the beginning of the year, when I wouldn't shut up about it. He checked out the town and looked into apartments near the Mont U campus. I think Daddy sent him with instructions to find fault in the place, but he came back with a glowing report, and that's when Angelica jumped in and started working on Daddy too.

Three on one became too much for my father, so he gave in.

I look to Azim, silently begging him to back up my plan.

“It’s not a bad plan, boss,” Azim murmurs. “She could have twenty-four-hour protection. The guard could follow her to class, take her shopping, whatever she needs to do. Then you’d know she’s one hundred percent safe the entire time.”

As grateful as I am for Azim’s help, it suddenly starts to dawn on me what I’ve just proposed.

Wait! Hit the brakes!

I don’t want this.

A guard following me around 24/7?

No! Ruby’s idea sucks!

What about my privacy? Not to mention the fact that it’s like attaching a banner to the top of my head.

*Oh look over there. That girl’s so rich and famous she needs constant protection.*

Crap, crap, crappity-crap!

“Um.” I swallow and try to figure a new way around this, but I’m struck dumb by my father’s assent.

“Okay. I can agree to that. As long as you have full-time protection, then you can go. But you have to promise me you’ll check in, and if anything feels off, then you’ll come home.”

My head starts bobbing before I can stop it.

He’s letting me go!

But—

“Find me the best, Azim.”

The head of security nods and exits the room.

I bolt after him, snatching his arm and dragging him around the corner.

“Oh my gosh, what have I done!” I whisper.

Azim chuckles, buttoning his suit jacket. “It’ll be okay.”

I close my eyes, feeling sick. “Do you honestly think this threat is against me?”

“I’m not sure.” He shakes his head. “To be honest, I think it’s just some bastard trying to wreak a little havoc on this family. We’ve had threat mail before. This could be like any other hoax.”

I nod and bite my lip. “I don’t suppose you could convince my dad of that?”

“Not a chance.” His smile is somewhat sympathetic.

With a huff, I run a hand down my ponytail, wondering what to say next. If I can't make this go away, how can I make it better?

Azim gently holds my shoulders. He understands my desire for anonymity. I told him in confidence when Burk was up in Fitzroy checking it out and he asked me why I was so set on this small university.

"Your father is very protective of you. You know that."

I frown. I'm guessing that's supposed to make me feel better, but it's always felt like one of those electronic locks around my ankle. A reminder that I'm never truly free.

"Don't fret." Azim pats my shoulders. "You should be celebrating that he agreed. You're going to college next week."

"I know." I sigh. "It's just not the way I pictured it."

"Things don't often turn out the way we imagine. But you're going to college, and that's what we should focus on." He smooths a hand down his tie. "I'm wondering if I should send you with Burk. He's already scouted the area, knows the location better than any of us, and is highly experienced. He doesn't have a wife or girlfriend that I'm aware of, so leaving to live with you probably isn't a huge sacrifice for him. Although, I could always offer a bonus incentive if he needs it."

Worrying my lip, I visualize walking onto campus with Burk three steps behind me. Suit, tie, shades, like some secret agent.

Dammit. Everyone will notice.

That's just what I don't want!

Unless...

The thought sizzles, like a sparking flash in my brain. I snatch it before it can disappear, letting it grow for a minute before asking, "Does it have to be Burk?"

"No, but he's the obvious choice."

"You're hiring new security at the moment though, right? To cover this whole stupid, stalker thing."

He nodded, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, what if... what if you found someone who doesn't look or move like a bodyguard? Someone who could pass as maybe a college student?"

Azim gives me a doubtful frown. "I'm not hiring someone who isn't trained to protect you."

"Oh yeah, for sure. But, you know, like he could be all undercover and no one around me would even realize what his real job is." I start bobbing my

head in excitement. “He’d need to be young, so he looks the part.”

“He can’t be too young. I won’t employ someone who doesn’t have some experience under his belt.”

“But he’ll have to come to classes with me,” I whine. “If he’s too old, everyone will wonder what he’s doing there.”

“He could be an adult student.”

“Ugh! Don’t make him an old fart!”

Azim raises his eyebrows. “Like me, you mean?”

My cheeks flush, and I shake my head. “You’re not decrepit yet, old man.” I wink at him. “Just find me someone who can blend in. Burk doesn’t blend.”

After a reluctant sigh, he nods. “I’ll see if I can find you the right guy.”

“Or it could be a girl.” I shrug, figuring that will look even less suspicious. Just two roomies, doing the college thing together.

Azim chuckles and starts walking for his office. “Trust me. I’ll find you the perfect someone. And if I can’t, Burk’s still a good option.”

I groan and spin for the stairs. I’ll be wishing on every star in tonight’s sky that Azim finds me the perfect candidate.

*Please be out there, perfect someone!*

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## WHEN OPPORTUNITY STRIKES

*Brody*

I GRUNT, curling my arm to finish my set of ten.

I was here for a couple hours yesterday, and I'm back again. Still ignoring the "no job" issue and pretending like my life's not about to flush down the toilet. I haven't heard back from Cyrus, but I guess he's waiting to hear from me.

With a little sniff, I put the weight down and wipe my forehead with my arm. I'm sweating so much worse today because I ran here. I actually don't love running, and I normally only do about fifteen minutes on the treadmill to warm up, but since I have to try and make the gas in my car last a little longer, I decided running to the gym for a warm-up was a better idea. It meant I could hit the weights as soon as I walked in the door, but I'm not used to pounding the pavement for nearly thirty minutes. I arrived drenched and out of breath.

A guy I kind of recognize points at the dumbbell. "You done with that weight, man?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." I hand it over and move to the leg press, adding extra weights before sitting down.

"Hey, Brody."

I glance up and grin. "Sup, Roni?"

"What are you doing here right now? I thought you always worked weekends."

"Lost my job," I mutter, unlatching the press and taking the full weight on my legs.



Roni lets me finish my set before asking, "What happened?"

I shake my head, not really wanting to get into it.

But he's still standing there looking down at me, and for some reason I lie.

"They're downsizing. Something about the economy sucking." I shrug and run with it, throwing in some truths for good measure. "Shitty timing. I don't know how the hell I'm s'posed to pay the rent at the end of the month. I was working for peanuts anyway. I mean, I don't need much, but I do need something." I cringe, wondering why I suddenly feel the need to unload on this guy.

Roni raises his eyebrows, slow and thoughtful, just the way Grandpa used to.

Maybe that's why I like Roni so much. He doesn't look a thing like Grandpa Ray, but he's got this essence. Sometimes the way he moves or speaks takes me back to the ranch.

The ache in my chest blooms unexpectedly, and I rub my sternum, trying to get rid of it.

"I get it," he says softly. "Guys like us have to work for a living. It doesn't come easy."

I nod, kind of surprised that he understands. He always looks so put together, but I guess he does work pretty hard—constantly on the phone and in meetings.

"When I first arrived in LA, my brother and I spent years rubbing pennies together. It's taken us time to get established."

"Oh yeah. Your brother a high-flying businessman too?"

"Nah, he's in security."

I pause and glance up at him. "What kind of security?"

"He looks after one of those rich families in Hollywood." Roni's eyes narrow, a thoughtful expression coming over his face. "What was your job again?"

I swallow, wondering how much to say. Figuring it's better to play it safe, I skip the info about being a bouncer at Club Ultra and murmur, "Worked for Alpha Security."

The left edge of Roni's mouth rises. "You were a bodyguard?"

I nod, glancing at the floor. "I'd do whatever jobs they wanted me to."

"But they laid you off for downsizing."

"Uh-huh."

“So, you need a new job.” Roni rests his sneaker on the edge of my machine, looking thoughtful. His assessment of me makes me squirm a little.

“What?” I finally ask.

“How old are you?”

I snicker. “Why do you ask?”

“My brother’s on the lookout for a young bodyguard. Someone who could pass as a college student. He was telling me about it last night, bemoaning the fact that it’d be pretty damn hard to find an experienced guy who was good enough, that could pass as a college kid.”

I grip the edge of the machine and stand up so I can talk to Roni face-to-face. “I could do that.”

“You’re fully trained? Certified? Got all your permits and stuff?”

“Uh-huh.” I nod, and start running with this thing before I can think too hard about it. Cyrus said he could hook me up. I swallow and paste on a confident smile. “I’ve been working for a while now. I’ve got all the skills required to protect people. Alpha Security can give your brother a good reference, and I can drop off a résumé wherever I need to.”

Roni chuckles. “You sound keen.”

“I am, man. I need a decent job.”

“Well, I’m guessing this one will pay okay.” He leans forward and whispers, “My brother works for Castle Shaw.”

My eyebrows rise while I scramble to recall who that is.

“You know, the billionaire movie producer. He also owns a bunch of other companies. The guy’s loaded.”

“Wow,” I whisper.

“And I think he takes pretty good care of his staff. Azim never complains.” Roni bobs his head, his smile growing a little wider. “I’m telling you, man. You clean yourself up, you could be perfect for this gig.”

I frown. “Clean myself up?”

Roni laughs and slaps me on the shoulder. “Take a shower, get a haircut, spruce up your résumé, and give my brother a call.” He heads to the open lockers and I follow him, my mind racing as he clicks on his pen and scribbles down a number. “I’ll give him a heads-up that you’ll be in touch. I think he’s under a bit of time pressure on this thing, so don’t mess around.”

“Okay.” I swallow. “I’ll call him today. Thanks, man.”

“Yeah, no problem.” He’s about to say something else, but then his phone starts ringing. He takes the call and walks away.

I gaze down at the number on the back of Roni's business card. My heart's pounding for some reason. Is it nerves? Excitement?

Glancing over my shoulder, I check where Roni's at, then clear out my locker. As soon as I'm out the door, I call Cyrus.

"So, you made a decision yet?"

"Yeah," I puff, picking up my pace as I start to jog back home. "I need that ID. Full certifications and permits. The works. I need to present myself like an experienced bodyguard."

"All right, man!"

"And you said you'd give me a good reference, right?"

"For sure, Bro. Sounds like you've got something in the works."

"Yeah, potentially."

"Cool. Well, swing past my office as soon as you can and we'll get started."

"Okay, I just need to get a haircut first."

"Going fancy, huh? Nice!"

"I need this job, man. I'll do whatever it takes."

"You'll get it."

He sounds so confident, and I have no idea why.

My hands are shaking as I hang up and run home. Is this really a good idea? Lying to score myself a job with a billionaire?

But the money.

It could be a sweet paycheck, and I need it.

Some things are worth bending the rules for.

It's a simple matter of necessity.

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A PLACE FOR ME

*Indigo*

THE PEPPERMINT GUM I've been chewing is turning to rubber. I spit out the ball and throw it in the metal trash can next to my desk before resuming what I hope won't be a futile job—packing for college.

Laying out the clothes I specially selected and bought online, I run my eyes over the ripped denim jeans and cute little T-shirts, the sneakers and baggy sweaters. I tried to aim for things that I never usually wear in public. Both my parents have always been fussy over image and appearance.

“What you present to the world is how they'll see you. Do you want people to think you're a slob? Or a nerd? Or someone who shops at Wal-Mart?”

My mother's snobbish voice crashes through my brain. She left when I was a kid, but she still keeps in touch sporadically. Phone calls are her usual jam, and she tends to call when she wants to boast or needs me to make herself look good.

*“You have to be at the premiere, darling. The media will love it. The movie's about a mother-daughter duo. It'll be perfect.”*

*“The gala will be amazing. I'm having a dress specially made for you so we match. Make sure you wear the Jimmy Choo's I bought you for Christmas.”*

*You'll need the height."*

Bluch!

My disgust turns into a snicker as I fold the cheap cotton shirt and add it to my pile. Mom would be freaking horrified.

I'm actually kind of triumphant to have bought several of my T-shirts from Wal-Mart. There was a large range with a bunch of cute designs, and I figured why not? I could be a T-shirt and ripped jeans girl. Bring it on!

So far, everything I've bought online has actually fit me pretty well, bar one pair of jeans that I've already passed on to Loretta's daughter.

Running my fingers over the soft denim, I wonder what it'll feel like to walk the streets wearing whatever I want. To turn a corner and not be confronted with a flashing camera and another false headline. I don't know how the media gets away with just making stuff up. It drives me crazy. I never go out of my way to read stuff, but occasionally I see something pop up or a headline catches my eye.

I was thirteen years old when one gossip website accused me of packing on the pounds. *"Is it puppy fat or just plain gluttony? Or is poor little Indigo comfort eating after her father loses yet another girlfriend?"*

I didn't want the story to affect me, but it did. I shouldn't have read it, but the thing was like a car crash—I couldn't not look.

Why did they have to bring me into it? I don't have anything to do with my father's love life!

One of the kids in my prep school read it and laughed about it in front of the entire class. That was the same week I found out that the girl who I thought was my best friend was really only sticking around because she thought my father would cast her as an extra in a movie he was working on. He didn't, so she stopped sitting with me during lunch. And in English. Oh yeah, and if memory serves me correctly, she convinced all the other girls in our grade that I was a stuck-up bitch who didn't care about any of them.

That was a lonely year.

I stayed off the internet and buried myself in books for months after that. I took one with me everywhere I went so I could hide my face in it when I needed to. Plus, they were a good escape. In a book, I could become the character going off on an adventure. I read everything from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Pillars of the Earth*. But my favorites were always the adventure

novels. The ones where the characters were independent and free, fighting for a just cause with no one holding them back or telling them what to do all the time.

In my mind, I've lived in every era of history. I've experienced rainforests and deserts, mountain passes and endless plains. I've solved mysteries, fallen in love, caught the bad guys, and been a kickass fighter.

Books are a solace I can't live without. They've saved me more times than I can count.

But I don't want to rely on them anymore.

It's time to stop living in fantasyland and join the real world. This move to college is my chance to do that. My chance to become someone new without all the pressure of my name and family. I want to walk the grounds of Mont U... just one of the crowd. The girl without status and wealth. The girl who loves learning about science. I want to make friends who genuinely like me for me; not because of who I'm related to, but because I just happen to be a nice person who's fun to be around.

My lips pull into a doubtful frown.

Am I fun to be around?

I seriously have no idea.

Oh man, I hope I can pull this off. I hope the press don't get wind of this stupid stalker letter and ruin it for me.

"What are you doing?" Ruby's curt voice makes me glance up.

I shift my body so she can't see the piles of clothes on my bed. If she gets a closer look, she'll see labels and then rag on me for dressing like a pauper. She'll then want to know why, and she'll probably be horrified by my reasoning.

*"You want to be anonymous? Why!"*

She thrives on fame, goes out of her way to get into the headlines. Every new follower or subscriber is like another point to elevate her self-worth.

I can't live like that.

She feeds off drama. She—

*Oh crap! The letter!*

"You haven't told anyone about that letter, have you?" I ignore her question, suddenly more concerned about my own.

"Of course not." Her glossy lips pout. "The police want us to keep it quiet." She flicks a shiny lock of black hair over her shoulder and points to the open suitcase on my bed. "What are you doing?"

“Packing.” I cross my arms.

“Why?” Her blue eyes flash.

They’re so bright and pale compared to the rest of her. I’ve never met her dad, but apparently she scored his eyes and striking bone structure, but her smooth, tawny complexion and raven black hair come from her mother. She is really beautiful. I get why so many people follow her. The number of stunning pictures she posts of herself—

“You’re not going anywhere,” Ruby snaps. “Castle said we have to stay put until it’s safe.”

“He said I could go if I take a bodyguard with me.”

“What? That’s crazy! Why would you even want to go? Some creepy killer is out there.”

I give her a perplexed frown. “The bodyguard was your idea.”

“I didn’t think you’d take me seriously!”

*I didn’t. At first. But desperate times.*

I shrug. “Like you said, the stalker’s probably not after me anyway.”

She raises her chin and nods. “True. Why would anyone want you? You’re the boring one. You never smile. You’re always complaining about having to go to these awesome events. I seriously don’t know *what* your problem is.”

I give her a closed-mouth smile, trying to disengage. We’ve been having way too many arguments lately, and I don’t want to ignite another one. Ugh. A repeat of last week’s meltdown would be the worst. The look of rage that crossed her face before she stormed out of the room... Shudder! I can’t even remember what I said to piss her off so badly.

But then she just keeps coming back for more. Waltzing into my room and irritating me.

She tuts, glancing down at her glossy nails and pouting. “Being Castle Shaw’s daughter is wasted on you.”

My muscles tense, and I just can’t help myself. “But I am his daughter, Ruby. His *only* daughter.”

Her lips flatline, her eyes flaring with wrath.

Whoops! Here comes that look again.

I can practically see the steam billowing from her ears. “I may not call him Daddy, but he’s mine too, okay? Our parents have been together for years, and they’re not going to be breaking up anytime soon. I know you’ve always hated me, but that’s not my problem. Soon, *I’ll* be the queen bee

around here, and you'll be vapor." She snaps her fingers and storms out of the room, the staccato beat of her heels capturing her dramatic exit perfectly.

"You shouldn't goad her like that." Angelica's voice wafts in like a soft wave—the classic jazz to Ruby's pop rock.

I sigh and sit on the edge of my bed, covering the cheap T-shirts with my butt.

Leaning against the doorframe, Angelica threads her fingers together, her long fake nails clicking against her numerous rings. Soft waves of black hair frame her beautiful face, and I glance away from the concerned look in her brown eyes.

"I know she's a drama queen and that's not your style, but she really hates it when you remind her that she's not Castle's daughter too. Come on now, she practically is."

I concede with a barely there nod.

After years of having different stepmother-types come and go, it's a waste of emotion to attach myself to any of them. But Angelica has been around for a while, and Ruby doesn't seem to be going anywhere either.

I sigh and mumble an apology.

Angelica is gracious enough to smile at my lame attempt. She looks over her shoulder down the hallway and murmurs, "This letter has really unsettled her."

"I don't know why. I think it's just a ruse. Azim does too."

Angelica's head snaps back, but her hard expression quickly softens. "Yes, well, you could be right. But it's always better to take precautions."

I roll my eyes and start playing with the zipper of my open suitcase. "Do you think Azim will find someone for me?"

"Don't you worry. You'll be out of here soon enough. I know that's what you want."

The statement makes me feel guilty for some reason. But why should it? I do want to get out of here and go to college. Doesn't every eighteen-year-old kid?

"Ruby wants it too," I can't help saying. I don't want to be made to feel bad.

Angelica laughs. "She's probably going to end up missing you. Who will she fight with when you're not here?"

I glance up in time to catch Angelica's wink.

Then she glides away, leaving me to my packing.



Laying my folded clothes neatly in the case, I can't help the relief washing through me. It's probably really mean, but I don't think I'll miss Ruby at all. I can't stand the constant bickering between us. It exhausts me.

All I've ever wanted is to live in a place that feels like home.

I don't know if I've ever felt that sensation, and I'm desperately hoping that this apartment Burk has found for me will become this place I've always dreamed of. A little haven to be myself in.

Except I'll have to share it with a bodyguard.

With an irritated huff, I slam my suitcase closed.

This really is not going at all how I planned.

*Please, Azim, find me someone I can stomach. Someone who won't drive me insane and ruin this chance I've been longing for.*

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## A RIGOROUS INTERVIEW

*Brody*

I GET HOME from the interview, pulling off my tie and running a hand through my short hair. It's strange not having those long thick strands to get my fingers caught in, but when I gaze in the bathroom mirror, I have to admit that I'm looking kind of slick.

Unbuttoning my shirt, I start the shower, hoping the hot spray will ease the tension in my muscles. It's weirdly exhausting trying to be someone else.

I mean, I'm still me, but I just have a different last name now. And I'm older. And way more experienced than I actually am.

At least I got to keep my first name, so I can't slip up on that. According to my ID, though, I'm Brody Markum and I'm twenty-one years old. I have a California Guard Card, and all the required permits and certifications to be a high-end bodyguard. Cyrus suggested I sell this as my first high-end gig, to make it more realistic, but he's plumped up my résumé with jobs he can cover if they do a background check, and he wrote me a freaking amazing reference.

Thankfully, Azim is under the gun to find someone quickly. It's worked in my favor, as he might bypass a few background checks and cut corners in order to secure someone for the job.

The job of accompanying Indigo Shaw to college.

Rinsing off quickly, I towel off and think back through my day. Azim really put me through the works. The introductory interview took over an hour as he asked me a bunch of questions. I tried to stick with truth as much as possible. I'd stayed up until three o'clock the night before, rehearsing with

Cyrus, and I'm so glad I did.

I then had to go to the gun range to prove my skills. I'd only ever used a gun on the ranch, and that was a rifle. I'd been pretty good back then, but still, firing a gun wiggled me out. The first shot reverberated through my skull and took me back to a rainy night when I was fourteen. I nearly couldn't fire the second round, but Azim was watching me closely, so I smashed my teeth together and channeled my energy, hitting targets with an accuracy that surprised me.

Azim didn't give me much. I have no idea if he was impressed or not.

Man, he's like the opposite of his brother—cool and formal.

It was unsettling as hell.

After that, I had to drive the human icicle around, telling him what I'd do if someone was tailing me and then, on his command, speeding as if I were fleeing the cops or something. Thankfully we didn't get busted and were soon cruising to a shopping mall where I had to walk around telling him everything I could see. I had to point out people I thought might look suspicious, which I felt kind of bad doing. You can't judge people by their appearance. But I suppose I was only making calculated guesses, not actually judging them as a person.

"Two o'clock," Azim murmured. "Tell me what you see."

My eyes darted in the right direction, and I made a quick observation. "His blue jacket is bulging on the left side around his waistband. It could be a concealed weapon."

Azim nodded, then watched me as I tracked the guy, then moved on to watch someone else saunter past.

Three hours later, I was standing in his office at the Shaw mansion while he made a phone call to Cyrus. He made me sit there, sweating it out while I listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Okay." He nodded and hung up, then looked at me. "Your previous boss vouches for you, is obviously very disappointed they had to let you go."

I nodded, trying to play it cool.

"And my brother speaks highly of you. Says you work hard and are a great sparring partner at his gym."

"Yes, sir." I tried to smile, but it no doubt came off like an awkward grimace.

"You don't quite have the experience I was hoping for, and you're younger than I'd like. But we need young-looking, and I imagine in jeans and

a casual shirt, you could play quite the part.”

I shifted in my seat, unable to hide my grin. He had no idea. I hated wearing suits and ties.

“If you are selected, your job will be to accompany Miss Shaw to her college campus and be an in-house guard, protecting her at all times and in all situations. She’s very clear that she does not want people to know you’re her bodyguard, so you need to be discreet. I will expect daily check-in phone calls. You are to be vigilant, focused, and I expect you to return her home for Thanksgiving without one scratch or a single mishap.”

“Yes, sir.” I tugged on my pant leg, trying to make it seem like I was up for the task.

He assessed me with a gaze that felt like laser beams, then nodded. “I can tell you that you’re a very strong candidate for this position. If you’re successful, you will start work tomorrow morning. Your pay will be sixty-eight thousand dollars per year, plus benefits.”

I nearly choked on my own saliva.

“Do you have any questions?”

Shaking my head like a dumb idiot, I gripped the side of the chair and tried to play it cool.

“Right. I’ll be in touch at the end of the day to let you know my decision.”

“Thank you, sir.” I rose and shook his hand, hoping my sweaty digits didn’t gross him out.

Sixty-eight thousand dollars!

A smile toys with my lips as I walk into my room and grab a pair of shorts off the end of my bed. Waiting for this phone call is going to be torture.

I pace my room for a second, then wander to the kitchen, figuring an early dinner might use up some time.

“Hello! Anyone home?” I call into the silent apartment and am relieved to hear the sound of silence. I kind of love it when Kenny and Bridget are out, because it means I don’t have to deal with any of their BS.

The living area reeks of pot, and when I step into the kitchen, my gag reflex kicks in. Kenny trying to cook is always a disaster, especially when he’s high. It looks like a freaking crime scene in here. Pasta and marinara sauce plastered on the cabinetry, grated cheese littering the floor, along with... what is that?

I creep toward the sink and spot a furry green chicken salad sandwich that I swear wasn't there this morning. Bridget probably took it out of her work bag this morning and just dumped it.

The trash can is one foot away, but no, she chose the sink.

Pinching my nose closed, I dip my head and shuffle out of the room.

I'm not hungry anymore.

As I stalk away, my mind wanders back to another kitchen—a sunny, warm one.

“Don't even think about leaving a dirty dish there, you douchebag. I just spent the last twenty minutes tidying this place!” Deeks slapped the rag onto the bench and finished wiping the water into the sink.

“I was just—”

“Nope!” He pointed at me. “Clean it.”

“Why are you being such a dick?” I grumbled, grabbing the plate and rinsing it off the way Michael had shown me.

“I can think of a million other chores I'd rather be doing than the freaking dishes. It puts me in a foul mood, so shut the hell up and don't make my job any harder than it has to be.”

“Such a baby,” I muttered, knowing I'd be in for it.

Deeks froze and I bit my lips together, fighting a smile as I watched his nostrils flare, his jaw working to the side.

The rag slapped onto the kitchen counter, and I dropped the plate into the sink.

“Ahhhh!!!” Screaming out the back door, I took off running, laughter doubling me over as Deeks gave chase.

By the time we reached the barn, I was laughing so hard, I could barely keep running. He tackled me into the hay and pinned me down, scrubbing my head with his sharp, pointy knuckles until I screeched, “I give! You're not a baby!”

Deeks stood up, smirked down at me, and said, “I didn't think so.”

I tripped him up when he tried to walk away, and we tussled some more until Grandpa Ray shouted, “That's enough, you two! Get on up to the house. You need to be washed up and ready for bed in half an hour.”

Deeks shoved me down when we both tried to stand, then grinned at me as he ran out of the barn.

I gave him the finger behind his back, but that just scored me a sharp glare from Grandpa, and I had to do twenty push-ups for being rude.

The sun was setting as we ambled back up to the house. Grandpa draped his arm around my shoulders and didn't have to say a word. I knew in my core that he loved me. In that moment, I felt like the world was the most beautiful place—safe and hopeful. I was home.

I wander into my bedroom, taking in my rumpled bed. Grandpa wouldn't approve.

“Beds get made in the morning, boys. Start your day the right way.”

When did I drop that habit?

Even though I'll be going to bed in a few hours, I quickly straighten my duvet, tucking in the sheet underneath and making the bed look neat.

Sitting on the edge of it with a heavy sigh, I let the quiet shroud me. It's weird how only moments ago, the silence felt like comfort. Now it feels oppressive.

I miss the sound of my brothers laughing and hassling each other.

I miss the deep tremble of Grandpa's voice as we held hands around the table and prayed before each meal.

I miss the little winks he'd give me, the way he'd laugh at all my stupid jokes and the pranks I used to pull. I was never afraid of that man, even when he told me off for taking things too far. If anything, disappointing him was the worst. I wanted him to think the world of me, because maybe deep down, I already knew he did and I just wanted him to be right.

“You wouldn't be right now, Grandpa.” I sigh, running a hand through my hair and scratching the back of my neck. “You haven't been right in a really long time.”

My voice trips over the last few words, emotion clogging my throat.

Rain pours through the back of my mind, a gunshot ringing out, the shock, the fear, the terror that ran through us all. And then came the decision.

“We've got to hide it. Hide it all.”

I close my eyes, second-guessing myself for the millionth time.

I thought we were doing the right thing, but were we?

Grandpa still died. We still got separated. Cooper ran. Michael and Deeks disappeared about a year later. Jake and I were shifted from one foster home to the next.

Did hiding the fact that Cooper shot Dad really make any difference?

Guilt clings like an itchy rash I can't find a cure for.

And now I'm here.

A jobless, penniless loser who has the choice to lie to get a decent job.

Maybe it wouldn't be all bad.

Sure, the lying part's not great, but I'd be doing something good, right?

I'd be protecting this chick.

Grandpa told me I was big for a reason.

To protect the little ones.

Grabbing my phone, I do a quick image search on the Shaw family and zoom in on a photo of Indigo Shaw with her father. She's looking kind of sullen and unimpressed.

Yikes.

So, not a sunny personality, then.

But she is little.

Damn, she's like really short. Unless her father is just really tall.

"Nah, she's a shorty." I grin, studying her face. She's kind of pretty with her chestnut skin and waves of black hair. I like the way the big ringlets curl past her shoulders. Her eyes are kind of big, her glossy lips full and a little pouty.

I bet if she smiled, she'd have guys falling to their knees. Her frowny face is like a repellent. She's still beautiful, but it just sends out these "don't you come near me" kind of vibes.

I zoom in even more on the photo and study her brown eyes.

Is she showing the photographer everything?

I can't help feeling like there's more to this chick.

Am I reading too much into it?

Probably. I snicker and shake my head, shrinking the image again so I can study her father. He looks like a powerful man, his fingers curled around Indigo's shoulder.

Daddy's little girl.

No wonder he doesn't want her going off to college on her own.

Yeah, I can do this.

I can make this happen for Indigo.

Azim said if he can't find the right guy, then she can't go, and that would break her heart. By the looks of this picture, she's not that happy anyway, so why make things worse for her?

Taking this job would be helping someone.

I'd be doing something good.

And heck, if I did get to actually protect her, I'd be a freaking hero, right?

Nothing wrong with that.

The phone beside my leg starts vibrating. I look down at Caller Unknown and figure it's Azim.

"Hello, Brody speaking." My voice has got a shake I want to ditch, so I clear my throat.

"Azim here. I'd like to offer you the job."

Before I can give weight to any more doubts, I nod and say, "Thank you, sir. I accept."

"Excellent. I'll see you at 10:00 a.m. sharp."



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THE TALL GUY

*Indigo*

DADDY: *The den. Two minutes.*

I glare at the text from my father and huff. He couldn't just come and get me? Slapping my book shut, I rest it on the stack by my bed and head out of my room.

Ruby's hovering in our grand entrance, her heels tapping on the tiles as she paces by the front door.

"What's going on?" I murmur, but she doesn't hear me.

I'm a little grateful. She's looking kind of pouty, and I don't want to have my ears fall off when she rants about whatever's annoying her today.

Walking into the den, I'm stopped short by the sight of a tall guy with short-cropped hair.

He's standing there, all broad and imposing-looking like a soldier, but also not. His stance is too relaxed and casual to be military. His eyes and face, though. They're looking serious.

I trail my gaze over him, not missing the angles of his body. He's wearing dark navy jeans and a fitted shirt, and it's kind of impossible not to notice the size of his biceps or the way his torso is shaped in that sexy, triangular way. Like he could be an underwear model or something.

I glance at his face again, but he's watching me, so I quickly avert my gaze and focus on Daddy.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Azim found you a bodyguard.” Daddy raises his chin at the tall one.

My eyes dart to Azim, who gives me a knowing wink and nod.

“According to his résumé here, he comes highly recommended from Alpha Security. He’s certified. Not as much experience as I’d like, but this reference paints him in a pretty good light.” Daddy’s eyes zero in on the new guy. “So, Brody Markum. You think you’re up for a job like this?”

“Yes, sir.”

Brody.

Hm. I like that name.

His voice is deep too.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Twenty-one.” His eyebrows rise, and he gives me a closed-mouth smile.

I nod. Twenty-one. I can work with twenty-one. We could build a story around that. He’s a couple years late starting college because he did a gap year or something. Traveled or worked to earn some money for college before attending.

I tap my index finger on my forearm, my brain running with plausible backstories.

“You understand that you will be living in the same apartment as my daughter, attending classes with her, and guarding her every move.” Daddy’s look and tone match perfectly. He’s got his business face on—the powerful one that gets people to do what he wants, when he wants them to.

Brody nods, and I’m impressed at the way he holds my father’s gaze. “Yes, sir.”

“You will be checking in with Azim daily, and I will expect a weekly report.”

“Of course.” Brody glances at Azim, then back to my father, again putting on another closed-mouth smile.

Is there a touch of nervousness under that confident veneer?

I eye him some more, my gaze trailing down to his large sneakers before resting on his face again. He’s kind of handsome. I like the shape of his nose. It’s sharp, Roman. And is that a chin dimple I’m spotting?

He clears his throat, and I’m suddenly aware that he’s noticing me checking him out again.

I look to the floor, my eyes grazing the twitch of his lips before I’m staring at the plush Persian rug beneath my Coca-Cola red toenails.

“Azim has shown you the letter. You know what we’re dealing with. If anything happens to my little girl, I’ll be holding you fully responsible.”

My head pops up so I can take in my father’s stern expression.

“Daddy,” I reprimand.

“Don’t you ‘Daddy’ me. If I had my way, you wouldn’t be going at all. Now, I expect this man to bring you home every holiday safe and sound.” He’s pointing at Brody while he speaks, but his eyes are on me, like he’s daring me to argue back.

I don’t fall for it.

I don’t even have a chance, because Ruby storms into the room.

“I should be getting this one!” She points at Brody, then shoots him a demure smile when he turns her way.

Ugh.

*Jutting out your hip like that? Come on, Ruby!*

Her long nails clink against the jeweled belt that drapes around her toned ass.

I roll my eyes and look to the ceiling.

“He’s young, strong, completely capable of looking after me. Why should Indigo get him when I’m the one who’s in the most danger?”

“Ruby.” Daddy raises his hands like two white flags. “We’ve talked about this. I’m putting the best man on the job for you. Someone with lots of experience.”

“But this guy’s good. You were just going on about it. Why do you always put Indigo ahead of me? I may not be your daughter by blood, but I live in your house. You’re in love with my mother. You should be treating me better than this. You act like I’m some second-rate citizen who just happens to live in the same house! I’m so over this.” Her voice pitches, her chin trembling as she turns on the waterworks. “I’m the one who is in serious danger. Do you have any idea how scary this is? A stalker is after me! He wants to bury himself with me, and you’re just acting like it’s all about Indigo! It’s always all about Indigo!” Her tears evaporate, venom dripping into her tone as she fires a caustic look my way.

I ignore it, keeping my stare on the wall just past Brody’s shoulder.

I catch his cringe out of the corner of my eye and have to bite my lips together to hide my smile. Azim obviously didn’t warn him about “the Ruby factor.”

“Ruby, you need to calm down.” Daddy’s voice is soft and unimpressed.

“I care about your welfare just as much as Indigo’s. That’s why I’ve got Burk assigned to you. He’s one of our best.”

“I want Brody.” She pouts, then puts her flirty face on.

*Careful, Ruby. You’re breaking character.*

As if she heard my silent warning, she pings straight again and turns to my father. “Burk should go with Indigo. He’s already been to that little town. He knows it. He’s the better choice. He can take much better care of Indigo, and Brody can take care of me.” She looks at the new bodyguard.

Did she...?

Ugh! Fluttering her eyelids. A little bit of puke just came up my throat.

“Well, he is the more experienced one,” Daddy murmurs.

My heart leaps into my throat, nearly choking me.

No! This can’t happen!

Burk’s like in his thirties. There’s no way he could pass as a college student. He’ll act like a bodyguard. He’s too stiff and well trained. There’s no way he’d look as casual and relaxed in jeans and a shirt like Brody is right now.

I need Brody!

Azim found him especially for me. I dart a desperate look at our head of security.

*Help me!*

Azim catches my eye and steps forward.

“Mr. Shaw, sir, if you don’t mind me saying, I think Brody will be a better fit for this assignment. I understand Ruby’s concerns for Indigo’s welfare.”

I scoff and quickly turn my body, hoping Ruby didn’t notice.

I’m pretty sure she did.

I can feel her laser gaze burning two holes in the back of my head right now.

Azim keeps talking. “I specifically chose Brody for this role. I wouldn’t have done that if I thought he wasn’t perfect for this job.”

Daddy looks sideways at me, and I give him a stiff smile.

“But, as was said only moments ago, this stalker could have his eyes on Ruby, and if that’s the case, then Burk is the better one to watch her. This small town of Fitzroy will be safe within itself. No one knows she’s attending college there. We’ve kept everything under the radar, as we discussed would be the better option. Brody will drive her up there under the cover of darkness

if he must. This solution is infallible.”

I hold my breath, wondering if Daddy will buy it and not question my real motives.

I’m pretty sure he’ll be downright pissed if he knows I’m heading to college with absolutely no intention of using his name or associating myself with this family at all.

Wait a second. That gives me an idea.

I step forward, hoping my expression is innocent. “Azim’s right. Fitzroy is a small town, miles from Hollywood, and people might not even know who I am. In fact, maybe it’d be better if I kept that information to myself. Just to start with. Try to keep a low profile. That’ll help with safety, right? I mean, this stalker person won’t even know where I am.”

Daddy looks kind of dubious. “Once the news hits, there’ll no doubt be reporters on your doorstep, asking all about college, and then you’ll be in the spotlight again.”

“Yeah, well, the news doesn’t have to hit, you know?” I thread my fingers together while Ruby groans beside me. “People don’t need to know about this letter, this stalker, me heading off to college. You’re the famous one. They’re interested in you, not me. So, you know, when you think about it, me being away at Fitzroy, flying under the radar, is really the safest place for me. And taking a bodyguard who’s young and doesn’t look like a trained special ops agent might work in my favor. We all know Burk will want to act like James Bond.”

“No he won’t!” Ruby flicks her hands in the air.

“Oh please. He loves that stuff,” I counter. “He gets off on pretending he’s some kind of secret agent.”

Azim snickers but quickly swallows the sound before looking at his boss. “I really think, sir, that Indigo has a point. If it doesn’t work out, Brody can return her home.”

“If it doesn’t work out, my daughter could be kidnapped and killed by some psychopath.”

“Sir.” Brody steps forward. “I swear on my life, I won’t let any harm come to your daughter. If you give me this job, I one hundred percent commit to bringing her home every holiday in one piece—happy and safe.”

My lips part just a little before my eyebrows rise and I share an impressed look with Azim.

He gives me a secret grin and winks while Ruby screeches and storms out

of the room.

Crossing my arms, I give Brody a grateful look before turning to my father.

“I think that settles it, right, Daddy?”

My father gives in with a small smile and shake of his head. “Looks like you’re off to college.”

It’s an effort to suppress my grin and squeal of glee.

“Azim, work with Brody to update him on every detail, and figure out the safest route for these two to get to Fitzroy. And it might be a good idea for Brody to head out with Indigo a couple times over the next few days as a bit of a test run. You’ll accompany them to a shopping mall and run Brody through the ropes of how our family operates.”

“Yes, sir.” Azim nods.

“Thank you, sir.” Brody extends his hand, and they shake on it.

Okay. Well, it looks like my dreams are coming true after all.

All I’m asking for is a chance to be a “normal” college freshman. Let’s hope this Brody Markum can be the man I need him to be.



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## TODAY'S THE DAY

Brody

THIS WEEK HAS BEEN A BLUR.

I've had so many things to do—maps to study, college plans to memorize, access codes to learn. Burk went over most of it with me. He didn't outright say it, but I think he's kind of pissed not to be the one going.

*“Well, when I was there scoping the place out...”*

*“I know Fitzroy pretty well considering I've been there already.”*

*“If I was the man on this job...”*

Thankfully Azim has held steady and not switched me to Ruby detail. After her performance in Castle Shaw's office that first day, I don't think I could stomach it. Not even for sixty-eight grand a year.

Azim has put me through my paces with extra training that's gone late into the night. He takes his job so freaking seriously and is obviously determined to make sure I'm the right man for the job.

It's no wonder I haven't had a chance to call and let Jake know until now.



“You’re serious?”

“Yeah, man. It’s good money, and it’ll be easy.”

“And you’re leaving today?”

“Sorry, I meant to call you earlier, but it’s been an intense week.”

“But the last time I spoke to you, you’d just lost your job. Now you’re some bodyguard?”

“It’s all happened kind of fast,” I agree.

“This is crazy. You could be fending off a stalker!”

“Shhhh. No one’s supposed to know about that.”

“Who the hell am I gonna tell?”

“I don’t know! Just keep your voice down. Besides, Azim admitted yesterday that he thinks it’s probably a hoax like the others were. They’ve been getting crazy mail for years. Castle Shaw is paranoid. Which, you know, works in my favor!” I laugh, my insides zinging at the thought of my first paycheck. It’s going to be freaking amazing!

“Anyway, I’m just gonna be trailing her to classes and making sure she’s safe. If someone does happen to recognize her, then I’ll run a blocking play when she needs me to.” I grab my shirt off the floor and give it a sniff before throwing it into my bag. I’ve already given notice on my room and have cleared out most of it. They’re letting me store a few of my bigger items in the garage, and I’ve left the rest for whoever comes in after me.

“So, how long will you be gone?”

“As long as she needs me at the college. I’m assuming until they verify this stalker business is BS. I doubt they’ll want to keep paying me after that. For all I know, it could be two weeks, it could be six months. It’s not like I’ve got anything keeping me here right now, so I might as well do it.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m just surprised Castle Shaw was happy to hire a total newbie. Don’t you have to be certified to be a bodyguard?”

“I went through the training,” I murmur, not wanting to disclose everything. Like the fact that I’m using a fake ID and am totally uncertified.

“In one week?”

I avoid the question. “I seriously don’t think it’ll be a big deal. I don’t think anyone at the college will even know who she is. I mean, I had to look up Indigo Shaw when I first heard her name. Did you know who she was before I told you?”

“No. But I recognized her face when I Googled it just now.”

“We’ll be in some backwater town, miles away from Hollywood. I’m

actually wondering if that's why she chose the college. It just seems like a really weird choice for someone who could afford to go anywhere they wanted. Maybe she wants to be somewhere that people won't be staring at her or doing double takes all the time."

"Yeah. Maybe." Jake's sounding distracted suddenly, and I'm wondering if Carmen has just walked into the room.

I roll my eyes and keep throwing things into my bag. "I better hustle, man. I've got to finish packing and get to the Shaws' house."

"Okay, Broski. You take care of yourself."

"I will. Have fun flirting with Carmen."

"What? How did you—"

I hang up with a laugh and shove the phone into my back pocket.

Indigo asked me to go plain clothes when I followed her around the last couple days. I had to walk behind her, keeping an eye on her but acting like I didn't really know her.

I caught a few big camera lenses, but not until Azim pointed out the first one to me. He seemed a little annoyed that I'd missed it. I was really attentive after that and managed to prove my worth by spotting two more.

It was kind of bizarre. I couldn't believe people just snuck around, snapping photos of celebrities like that. Apparently, Castle Shaw is heading a couple big movies this year, and one of them is slightly controversial. I haven't found out why yet, but it's making the press buzz more than usual.

That's how Azim put it anyway.

It became clear two days ago when we walked up to a pedestrian crossing and were waiting for the lights on Rodeo Drive.

This ballsy guy came right up to Indigo, snapping her picture and asking her some question about her father being a sexist bigot.

I had no idea what the guy was talking about, and I didn't stop to think about it, because I was too fascinated by the way Indigo's expression turned to stone. She kept her eyes trained on the other side of the road, acting as though the flashing camera and insulting questions weren't even being asked.

"Hey!" The guy got a little irritated. "You hearing me?"

As soon as the signal turned green, she crossed the road, her heels clipping sharply. The guy tried to follow her, but Azim put a firm hand on his chest and softly warned, "That's enough now."

"No wonder everyone hates her. She's the freaking ice queen," the guy muttered under his breath as he shuffled off, checking out his digital display

as he went.

Azim sighed and looked at me. “She’s only the ice queen with them.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. After the way she was just spoken to, I totally understand the cold shoulder.

Although she’s often a little cool.

So far, I haven’t actually seen too much of a sunny personality from Indigo Shaw. She’s kind of wooden and robotic. I’ve yet to see her smile. Our conversations have been polite and appropriate. Short and to the point.

Yeah, this could be a really sucky assignment.

But it has to be better than watching over Ruby.

And it pays well.

I just have to focus on the money. Do the job. Be a hero if I have to, and finally find my way out of Loserville.

\*\*\*\*

I arrive at the Shaw mansion right on time, pulling my car around back, as I’d been instructed to. Azim is waiting for me with a set of car keys.

“Just to keep things under the radar, you’ll be driving one of Castle’s latest purchases to Fitzroy. It’s a brand-new model, only just released, so no one associates this car with the family yet. And it’s probably the least ostentatious one he owns.”

I nod, nervously wrapping my fingers around the chunky key.

I spot the brand and frown. “Genesis?”

“Rated as the safest cars in the world last year. You’ll be driving the GV70. It’s a nice crossover with all the bells and whistles.”

Crap. I better not crash this thing. It probably cost a bajillion dollars or something.

Walking around to the sleek car, Azim introduces me to the flash vehicle. It looks like an SUV to me, but maybe a little small. I can’t help falling in love just a bit. I’ve never driven anything so nice in my entire life. Brushing my fingers lightly over the steering wheel, I breathe in the smell of new leather and try to ignore the wave of doubt crashing over me.

Am I seriously up for this?

Feeling way out of my depth, I start the car when Azim tells me to, then slowly drive it around to the front of the house where Indigo is waiting with her bags.

Mine is already on the back seat, leaving plenty of room in the trunk for Indigo's stuff.

While she hugs her father goodbye, I walk around and load up the car. She doesn't have as many cases as I was expecting her to. That's a nice surprise.

Ruby's standing there pouting, muttering about the fact that Indigo obviously plans on wearing the same thing every day.

"She'll stand out whether she wants to or not. She's got 'look at the loser' written all over her."

"Oh, Ruby, shush." Her mother fights a grin while squeezing the horrible girl's arm.

She may be knockout gorgeous, but that Ruby is one nasty piece of work. And she seems completely oblivious to this fact.

Indigo may be an ice queen, but I think I prefer that over the crazy, stupid, high-maintenance type. Thank God I'm not Burk.

I glance up the stairs and notice him hovering in the doorway. He looks at the back of Ruby's head, and I can't help wondering if part of the reason he wants to go to Fitzroy is to get away from her.

My stomach trembles with a sympathy laugh that I manage to quell. I'm the lucky one right now. I have to remember that.

Burk glides a hand down his thin black tie. His charcoal suit looks pristine, and if I could see his shoes right now, I bet they'd be gleaming. Yeah, Indigo has this guy pegged. He looks like a secret agent and he freaking loves it.

I stifle another chuckle as I finish loading up the vehicle, then wait by the passenger door to open it for Indigo.

Practicing what I've been taught, I scan the surrounding area, using my peripherals to keep it subtle. There's an underlying tension around me. I can't explain what I'm feeling or why, but there's just this sense that I can't shake.

Clearing my throat, I look to Azim, who is now hugging Indigo goodbye like she's important to him. I watch their easy banter, unable to see Indigo's face. Azim laughs, which kind of shocks me. His entire face changes, and I can see a Roni likeness in there. After a brief hug, he directs Indigo toward Loretta.

The housekeeper is already crying, blubbering in unintelligible Italian.

“*Va bene, Tornerò.*” Indigo touches her face. “*Ti amo.*”

“*Ti amo, mio topolina.*”

Indigo pulls her into a tight embrace, and they stay like that until it’s kind of awkward.

Finally Indigo steps away and rushes to the car. There are tears in her eyes, which I’m guessing I’m not meant to see, so I act like they’re not there and close the door behind her before walking around to the driver’s side.

I share a quick look with Azim and then Mr. Shaw before slipping behind the wheel and starting the engine.

“*Arrivederci!*” Loretta is waving and crying.

“*Addio!*” Indigo calls back, lowering the window and waving as we head down the long driveway.

Before we reach the gate, which slowly opens for us, Indigo slides the window back up and hunches down. It doesn’t take much for her to be out of view, and I have to bite my tongue against teasing her.

Oh, so many shorty jokes right now.

So many.

I bite my teeth together and stay silent for nearly twenty minutes.

Once we’re out of Hollywood and well away from the house, Indigo sits up and gets to work messing around with her phone and connecting it to the car stereo. Smooth R & B is soon filtering through the speakers.

She starts to sing, then suddenly stops herself like she’s aware that she’s basically traveling with a perfect stranger.

I catch her sideways glance and notice her squirming.

I could tell her she’s welcome to sing. That little snippet I just heard was freaking awesome. Better than my walrus impersonation anyway. But I get the feeling that might embarrass her and she won’t sing anyway.

I’ll talk. That’ll work.

“So, you speak Italian,” I blurt over Rihanna’s sweet tunes.

She glances at me.

“I mean, I think it was Italian. It didn’t sound like Spanish. I guess it kind of did a little, but... nah, it definitely wasn’t Spanish.” She’s still not saying anything, so I look at her. “Oh, I’m sorry. Are we not supposed to talk? You’re sitting in the front, so I thought maybe... We don’t have to talk. That’s cool. I can be quiet. I can be chill.” My voice is starting to sound dope. Why the hell am I drawing out my words like that?

I bite my lips together and berate myself for coming across like a douchebag.

Indigo's soft voice reaches me a moment later. "It was Italian, and I don't speak it as fluently as I'd like to."

My lips rise at the corners, my fingers loosening on the wheel just a touch. "What'd you guys say to each other?"

"Um..." She frowns and looks out the window. "I told her it's okay and that I'll be back. I told her I love her, and she said, 'I love you, little mouse.'"

"Little mouse." I chuckle.

"Yeah." Her whisper sounds kind of sad. "She's been calling me that ever since I was a kid."

"Oh, so she's your nanny, then? I thought she was a live-in housekeeper."

"Well, she is. She's been everything to me: nanny, housekeeper, chef."

I nod but can't really relate. Since Jake and I got moved out of that first foster home, we've kind of been raising ourselves... or playing child slaves.

I shudder, remembering foster house number three.

I thought doing chores at Grandpa's was bad. We didn't know shit. At least on the ranch, you were working for the greater good. You were a team, all pitching in to keep a house running. A house full of love and warmth, where your efforts were appreciated. Foster home number three was nothing but endless cooking, cleaning, and yard work. Jake and I quickly figured out the only reason they took teenage foster kids was to keep their house immaculate.

Thankfully, we were only there six months before Jake managed to convince our social worker that it wasn't the right place for us. He's good with words. Knows how to argue a point. I'll be forever grateful that he does. Unless I'm trying to argue with him, of course; then I wish he wasn't so damn smart.

A phone starts ringing through the speakers, and I press the Answer Call button on the wheel.

Indigo gives me a sharp frown, which only deepens when an overly cheerful voice filters into the car.

"Indigo? Hi, baby. It's Mom!"

Indigo bites her lower lip before replying. "Hey, Mom."

"I heard about that awful letter. You must have been terrified!"

"No, I think it's an empty threat, actually. Azim's not too worried, and he tends to know best about these things, so..."

"Well, you just be careful. Wouldn't want you snatched away by some weirdo." She laughs.

Indigo just stares out the windshield, her lips a flat little line on her face. "Daddy's taking good care of me. You know what he's like. Looking out for his girl."

Am I sensing an underlying dig there?

I steal a quick look at Indigo's face and think maybe I am.

I don't know where her mother fits into the picture, but something about this conversation makes me wonder if she's been off scene for a while.

She doesn't seem to notice her daughter's bitterness and starts gushing about her latest role. "I swear, this one has been written for me. You should see me on set, baby. I'm fire. Mack, you know, Macky McGuire. You met him last year at the film festival."

"The one in Cannes you made me go to?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Didn't we have a blast!"

"I missed a really important assignment and nearly failed chemistry because you wouldn't let me leave on my originally scheduled flight."

Her mother laughs like this is the biggest joke, then completely ignores the statement. "So, Macky thinks my performance is Oscar quality. Did you hear that? I could get nominated for an Oscar, baby!" She shrieks and Indigo winces, lightly touching her ear.

"That's great, Mom. I'm just heading to college right now. Orientation starts on Monday, but I want to get all settled and meet my online friend. Do you remember Tabatha? I told you about her. She's invited me to a freshman party this weekend, so I'll probably go to that and—"

"Yeah, wonderful."

Indigo bites her bottom lip, obviously annoyed at being cut off. "I'm pretty excited. Did I tell you I'm going to be studying—"

"Gotta fly, sweets. They need me. I love you."

The line goes dead. My eyes bulge as I try to wrap my head around whatever the hell that was.

It definitely wasn't a conversation.

Risking a quick glance at Indigo, I'm met with an icy scowl. "Next time, let me answer the phone. You may be my bodyguard, but I don't think it's appropriate for you to be eavesdropping on my calls!"

"Sorry," I mumble. "I just pressed without—"

"Yeah, I know. Just don't do it again, okay?"

“Of course.” I raise my hand and give her an apologetic smile.

She turns away from it, staring out the window and kind of hunching over on herself.

I can’t really see her face right now, but I can almost feel what she must be thinking.

Talk about an outright rejection.

Her mother wasn’t calling to check on her, she was ringing to boast about being such an amazing actress.

An unexpected anger fires through me. I may not remember much about my mother, but the parts I do remember never included being pushed away or cut off. Mom used to let us sit on her knee. She’d hold me and Jake, one on each leg, and talk about how perfectly the three of us fit together.

“You’re my surprises from heaven, you two.”

She’d ask us about our day, and Jake would always go on and on, including every little detail. I’d be groaning and rolling my eyes, but she’d be rapt, drinking it all in.

Then it was my turn. I’d try to make it more interesting than Jake, and she’d laugh at my antics, letting me slide off her knee so I could act it out and entertain her.

She had the best laugh in the world.

I think I can still remember what it sounds like. Maybe it’s morphed into something I just imagine, but I don’t even care. I can see Mom’s face still. It’s a little blurry, but it’ll always be there.

Moms don’t cut their kids off.

Not the way Indigo’s mom just did.

No wonder she never smiles. With a self-centered stepsister, a smothering father, and a mom who doesn’t give a shit, what does she have to smile about?





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## CLASSIC TROPES AND ZIPPED LIPS

*Indigo*

OH MY GOSH, I am so embarrassed.

I can't believe Brody heard that entire conversation with my mom.

Talk about humiliating!

I'm used to Mom behaving that way, but I didn't miss the look on his face. He's obviously come from a very different home to mine. He probably has a mother who feeds him and looks after him when he's home. She probably sits there asking him all about his life and wanting to be a part of it.

Unlike mine.

My eyes start to sting and I clench my jaw, swallowing down the stupid emotion that always surfaces whenever Mom gets in touch.

I almost wish she wouldn't.

I don't even know why she does.

It's probably just to appease some guilt she carries for abandoning me when I was a kid.

"What are you going to be studying?" Brody's deep voice is soft and so out of the blue I actually flinch.

"What?"

"What are you going to be studying?"

I tip my head with a withering glare.

He just grins. "Hey. I'm gonna have to be in these classes too, you know. I'll just hover around the back, keeping an eye on things, but it'd be good to know what I have to listen to."

His smile is nice. Easy. Relaxed.

I like his friendly, laid-back vibe.

What I don't like is that vision of him standing in the back of my classes, watching things like some patrol dog that will draw everyone's attention.

I shift in my seat, adjusting the seat belt so I can face him properly. "So, about that." I bite my lip, then launch into my grand idea, trying to sound way more confident than I actually feel. "Thing is, I really don't want people to know I have a bodyguard, which is why I like the whole plain clothes thing, and why I asked Azim to find me someone who looked like a college student."

"Right." Brody draws out the word, his fingers wriggling on the wheel.

"So, I was thinking that since I don't want anyone to actually know you're my bodyguard, maybe we could come up with some kind of story. Like you could maybe pretend to be my friend. Roommate. A freshman who just happens to be taking all the same classes as me. I totally think you could pass as an eighteen-year-old. We just have to sell it."

"Wait. What?" He takes his eyes off the road for a second, and his large hazel gaze is kind of cute, all surprised like that.

It makes me want to giggle, but I lick my bottom lip and force myself to stay in business mode.

"This plan will work. All you have to do is walk beside me rather than behind me. Talk to me when I'm around other people and just act like, you know, we're friends. Roomies."

"But—"

"I know it goes against all your training, but think about it. If you follow protocol, you're going to be everywhere I go, but you're not going to actually be hanging out with me. People will notice that. It'll stand out even more, and it'll look stupidly obvious. But if you act like my friend or whatever, then people won't really know why you're there. They won't figure out my father is this famous producer guy, and I might just have the slightest chance of getting through college like a normal human being."

He doesn't say anything for a minute, and I stare at him hopefully, wondering what I'm gonna have to do to convince him.

His eyebrows pucker and he runs a hand through his hair, scratching the back. "I don't know. I've been hired to—"

"I know, but technically I'm your employer, so you have to do what I say."

He snickers, a broad smile pulling his lips wide.

His incredulous look kind of makes me feel bad, so I soften my tone. "I

mean, please do as I say? I just really want this to work. It's my chance, you know? My one chance."

The smile fades and he starts bobbing his head, like he's seriously thinking about it.

Then he looks my way and nods. "Okay. As long as I can still do my job, then I guess there's no harm in it. It could be fun. Like that whole fake dating thing in books, right? It's a classic trope." He wags his finger between us. "Although you can't go falling in love with me." He winks and smiles at his own joke.

I tip my head, finding it really hard to keep my lips in line right now. "What did you just say?"

"You can't go falling in love with me. You know, like in books, I pretend to be your boyfriend and everyone will be like 'Oh, well, that explains why they're together all the time, and—"

"We're not pretending to be a couple." I shake my head. "I said *friend*."

He snickers. "It'd be cool though, right? They could call us Brindigo."

My mouth drops open with a gasp. "You wouldn't dare."

A loud laugh bursts out of him. "Your face right now. Oh man, I want to do it just for that expression again." He keeps laughing, and I fight the urge to join him.

It's really challenging.

His laughter is loud, but not obnoxiously so, and it's kind of funny what a kick he's getting out of this.

Brindigo.

Ugh! As if.

Gag me.

"Classic trope," I mutter, swiveling around to face the front again. "How do you even know that term anyway?"

"Uh." His laughter evaporates, his swallow getting thick as a soft, red hue creeps up his neck.

"Wait. Do you... are you a reader?"

"Yes, I can read."

"No, I mean do you read... like are you..." I gasp. "Do you like romance novels?"

He works his jaw to the side. Shrugs. Shakes his head. "You know, the word trope applies to many different genres."

"But you knew fake dating is a classic trope. A classic *romance* trope.

How'd you know that?"

"Well, I mean, come on." His face is getting a little redder. "Anyone who's interested in literature knows—"

"No they don't! Oh my gosh, you read romance novels!"

He scratches under his chin and mutters, "Only the good ones."

It takes every ounce of control I have not to burst out laughing.

"And yes, in case you're wondering, I kinda like the whole fake dating story. It's fun." He's trying to sound so justified and serious.

Cute!

I swallow my snicker and nod in agreement. It is pretty fun, although I prefer something a little heavier than a lighthearted, flirty romance to help me escape. Brody's squirming right now, and I should put him out of his misery, tell him it's totally fine if he loves romance novels. People can read whatever the hell they want, but this big guy beside me?

He's smashing stereotypes right now, and it's freaking adorable!

I press a finger over my lips, my stomach trembling with silent laughter as I try to rein it in.

"And please, for the love of God, never tell anyone my reading preferences. Jake would never let me live it down."

I let out a breathy sound that could be a cough or a laugh and manage to ask, "Who's Jake?"

"My twin brother. So just..." He mimes zipping his lips closed.

I watch him for a moment, cautiously amazed by how one conversation can take curiosity and start morphing it into like.

No. Bad idea.

I don't like him.

He's just... funny. And he reads romance novels.

That's nothing to go falling for or whatever.

Sitting up a little straighter, I put my business face back on and nod. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

He glances at me and nods. "So is yours, Roomie."

And I'm fighting a smile again. Turning to face the window, I let my lips curl at the edges and try to remind myself again that he's my bodyguard and nothing more. Sure, we'll pretend to be roomies and friends, but it won't be real.

I can't go liking this guy.

I don't even know him.



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## BOSSY CAN'T MAKE A BED

*Brody*

I PULL beneath the apartment complex and find space 2A. Carefully gliding the car in, I hold my breath until I hit the brake, not understanding why they have to make parking spaces so narrow in the first place.

The interior light comes on as I open the door, and I catch Indigo's expression. She's looking just a little nervous as she slips out of the car. Walking around to the back, I pop the trunk and am yet again struck by how small she is beside me. The top of her head only just reaches my shoulder.

It's cute.

With a little smile, I pull her cases out of the back. She hitches her handbag on her shoulder, and we head for the elevator.

The ride up is a quiet one. Indigo's chewing on her lip, and I'm scrambling to think of something light and funny to ease the tension, but we're there before I can utter a word.

The doors ding open and we step onto a small landing. Azim made me look over the plans, so I already know there are two apartments per floor and Indigo's is on the right.

She uses the keycard to unlock the door and I follow her inside, scanning each room before placing her bags by the master bed and heading back downstairs to get my own.

I'm soon in my new room, reeling at how new everything smells. Never in my life have I stayed somewhere this fancy. The walls are plain white, the fresh paint practically gleaming. Beneath me is a plush midnight blue carpet, and against the back wall is a lush bed. I swear I've never felt a mattress that soft before.

Sitting down on the edge, I give a little bounce to test it out, then flop back with a happy sigh. Oh man, Jake's not gonna believe this. I have absolutely made the right decision.

A frustrated grunt from across the hall makes my head pop up.

"You okay?" I call.

"Yeah, I'm fine!" Indigo sounds a little pissed.

I cringe and wonder what's got her so worked up. I guess it's gonna take me some time to figure her out. The car ride gave me a few insights.

Man, I can't believe what I did.

I certainly gave *her* some insights about me!

Not only did I agree to basically break protocol—is Azim gonna fire me? Only if he finds out!—but I also admitted to reading romance novels.

Seriously.

What. The. Hell.

I've never told a living soul. In fact, the only person who ever knew was Grandpa, and he only agreed to keep it quiet because he knew my brothers would never understand.

"They should, but I..." His face went a little red, like he knew exactly why they wouldn't.

"It makes me feel close to her," I admitted, clutching the novel I was reading and trying not to cry. I hated the idea of Grandpa thinking less of me.

He went still and took a seat beside me. "Makes you feel closer to who, son? Your mom?"

I swallowed. "I remember. She used to have a stack of these next to her bed. They were all tatty and the covers were falling off. But then I saw some just like them in your room."

"You went into my room?" Grandpa's voice got stern.

I shrank in on myself. "I know. I was sneaking where I shouldn't."

Grandpa nodded, scrubbed a hand down his face, then sighed. "Your grandma used to love them books. Always had one on the go. I'm guessing your mom took some of them when she left this place." He nudged me with his shoulder. "What do you like so much about them anyway?"

"Well." I swallowed, still feeling kind of embarrassed for getting caught. "I don't know."

"Come on. You can tell me. I won't judge you."

I closed the book, running my hand over the kissing couple on the cover. "They always end happy. They make me think that life can work out. You



know? That there is such a thing as happily ever after.”

“Well, there ain’t that.” Grandpa shook his head.

I looked up at him, ready to cry all over again. “There’s not?”

Grandpa chuckled, a throaty sound that matched his half smile. “I mean, there is. But what I mean to say is that life isn’t like a fairy tale. Love is something you have to work at. You compromise, you choose love and forgiveness every day. Even on the days you don’t feel like it.”

“So, you can be happy forever, you just have to try.”

Grandpa nodded. “Yeah. You find yourself the right woman. Then you love each other and try your best to put her first. And she puts you first, so you’re both taking care of each other. There’ll be stormy days, and then days of pure sunshine.” His voice went soft and wispy, a deep sadness swamping his expression. “And then they’ll be gone. And all you’ll be left with is the memories.”

I didn’t know what to say after that. It was one of those conversations that remained kind of unfinished in my head.

We didn’t talk about romance novels again, and he never said a word to my brothers, but every once in a while, I’d lie down to sleep at night and find a new secondhand paperback under my pillow. It’d always be a romance novel.

Another frustrated moan comes out of Indigo’s room, so I get up and poke my head out the door.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I said I was fine!”

“Okay.” I lift my hands as two white flags and turn back into my room. Spotting the clean pile of linen on the edge of the bed, I get to work making it as neatly as I can. Grandpa would be proud.

The thought makes me smile as I turn out the door to get myself a drink from the kitchen.

“Burk did good!” I call down the hallway. This place is really nice.

Looking across the kitchen counter, I take in the brand-new furniture beautifully laid out in the living room. This place must never have been lived in. The little dining table tucked under the window next to the kitchen is shiny and unscratched, and the chairs look plush. I start opening cupboards and checking out the equipment. Everything is brand-spanking-new.

Unbelievable.

The flat-screen TV on the wall is freaking huge, and I down my glass of

water, then head over to it, hunting out a remote.

“Have you seen the size of this TV?” I call, then instantly regret it. This place must seem so tiny and pathetic compared to where she normally lives.

I have to remember who I’m hanging out with. She’s the daughter of a billionaire, for crying out loud.

“Argh! Why is this so difficult?” Indigo shouts.

I forego the remote and head down the hallway. Knocking lightly on her door, I push it open and spot Indigo standing next to the big double bed and trying to wrestle a pillow into a case.

With a little wince, I point at the pillow. “It’s easier if you tuck it under your chin and— Here let me show you.” I hold out my hand, and she hurls the pillow at me with a frustrated grunt. “Whoa.” I catch it with a laugh. “Are you okay?”

“The bed’s not made.” She huffs and slaps the bare mattress with the palm of her hand.

“Yeah.”

“Well, Burk told Daddy the apartment was furnished and ready to go!”

I pinch the pillow under my chin and slide the case on. “Well, it is. Everything is brand-new and—”

She points at the bed, her expression exasperated. “It’s not ready to go, is it? Because the bed’s not made!”

“Seriously?” I throw the pillow back at her. She catches it and dumps it on the floor, then rests her hands on her hips and won’t look at me. “You need someone to make your bed?”

“Well, no!” she snaps, then deflates, her voice getting tiny. “I guess, I just...” She crosses her arms and shrugs. “I’ve never made one before. I don’t know how.”

“Wow.” My eyebrows rise before I can stop them.

“Shut up. Okay? I know it makes me look like some entitled princess, but I seriously never was like ever told to make one. Things get done for me, and I didn’t think about the fact that I would have to do some of this stuff for myself. I mean, I thought about it, I just didn’t think it would be that hard! But look at this sheet.” She grabs the fitted sheet with the sewn-in corners. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

I snicker but quickly shut off the sound when she glares at me. “Can I come into your room?”

“Yes.”

I step in and take the sheet from her, flicking it out and softly explaining how it tucks around each corner. I take one side of the bed and instruct her on the other until we're gazing down at a beautifully made queen bed.

"Not even a wrinkle." I grin. "This is five-star, hotel-quality bed making, I'm telling ya. I think you're a natural."

She gives me a barely there smile. "Shut up." Smoothing her hand over the cover, she then murmurs, "And thank you."

"Not a problem. I'm here to help." I wink at her and step out of the room just as her phone starts ringing.

She grabs it off her desk and looks suddenly petrified.

"Are you—"

Holding up her finger, she shushes me without a word and answers, "Hey, Tabby!"

There's a hitch in her voice, so I stick around, leaning against the doorframe and not caring that I'm no doubt invading her privacy. Her fear and discomfort is now my responsibility, and I'll do whatever I can to make sure she never has to feel that way.

"I'm here." Indigo's trying to make her voice sound bright and carefree. It's not really working, but the person on the other end of the line doesn't seem to notice.

I hear a delighted squeal and then a rush of words that are muffled because the call isn't on speaker.

"Tonight?... Yeah. Like, where is it?... Totally. Yeah, that sounds good. I can do that."

I move into her line of vision, waving my hand to get her attention.

She glances at me, her shoulders sagging as she winces. "Hey, can I bring a friend?"

More high-pitched garbling

"Well, no. That's right. You are my only friend here, it's just that my dad—without me knowing he was gonna do this—has arranged for me to have a roommate, and I'm just trying to be nice." Indigo bites her lips and nods, then looks at me. "Uh, yeah, he's a freshman." Her cringe is kind of cute, and I smile at her. "I know! Crazy. But he's like a friend of my father's co-worker's son, and, um, his housing fell through last minute, so it's a mercy invite until he can find something else." She forces a laugh, and now it's my turn to wince. You would not know this chick came from acting genes. She's one terrible liar.

“Yeah.” Her laughter gets even higher and more awkward. “What difference does that make? Like I would ever hook up with a roommate. Talk about awkward!”

She bulges her eyes at me, flicking her hand to shoo me away. I chuckle and back out of the room. Finishing up in my own room, I unpack the rest of my gear and walk out into the living room when I hear Indigo in the kitchen.

She’s getting herself a drink from the fully stocked fridge, and it’s hard not to notice how tight her butt looks in those jeans. Standing straight, she turns around and sees me. I quickly avert my gaze, hoping my cheeks aren’t too red. She’s changed into these fitted ripped jeans and this off-the-shoulder top which looks pretty damn good on her. The skin around her shoulders looks smooth, and I love the color. She’s beautiful.

“Okay, so a few rules.” She holds up her finger, swigging straight from her mini water bottle before replacing the lid. “When you meet Tabby, you need to refer to me as Indy. In fact, just always refer to me as Indy. Never use my last name in public. I’ve enrolled here as Indy Bardot.”

“How’d you get away with that?”

“It’s my middle name. I’m just using it as if it’s my last. No big deal.”

I shrug, hardly one to argue. I’m using a totally fake name for my last one, so I shut up and listen to the rest of her rules.

“I don’t want the name Shaw mentioned anywhere around me, got it? I’m not the rich daughter of some billionaire, I’m just a California girl who enrolled in Mont U for its exceptional science program.”

“Okay, so science papers.” I bob my head, trying to think how I’ll manage sitting through hours’ worth of lectures on science—groan!

“And you’re—”

“The friend of your father’s co-worker’s son.” I give her a droll look, which she ignores.

“Are we cool?”

“Yeah. Indy Bardot.” I bury my hands in my pockets, then shrug. “Except, why didn’t you just stick with Indigo and drop the Shaw part?”

“Ugh. Because Indigo is the worst name in the world.”

“What? I like it.”

“It means purple. My parents named me a color of the rainbow.” She looks disgusted, and I can’t help laughing at her expression. “Besides, Indigo is just too out there. People will pick up on it. At least if they hear Indy, they’ll assume my name is Indiana.”

I concede with a nod.

“So, whether you like my name or not, you call me Indy, or you don’t call me anything at all. Got it?”

"Got it, Bossy. I mean Indy." I wink when she starts to frown at me.

Her expression softens to a dry look as opposed to a pissed-off one.

I make my smile as wide as it can go.



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## IT'S TIME TO DANCE

# Indigo

OKAY, staying mad at someone whose smile is that cute is like impossible, so I'm just gonna turn my back so he can't see my face break apart with a grin.

I pop my water bottle back in the fridge door and adjust my shirt. It's kind of fun wearing something as plain as a little white T with a big black love heart in the middle.

It's gonna be weird going out in public like this.

Me and my Wal-Mart wears.

Mom would be mortified.

Spinning around, I sense Brody's gaze before I see it. Trailing my eyes up his body, I connect with his hazel orbs and feel that kick in my stomach, the one that's warning me how cute this guy is.

*Stop it!*

Stepping around him, I try to ignore the scent of his cologne and run back to my room for the glasses I specially bought for this semester.

Slipping them up my nose, I examine my reflection in the mirror, then nod.

"This'll work." A nervous smile lights my face. Running a hand down the back of my high ponytail, I let it swing like a pendulum across my back before I school my expression and walk out to the living area.

Brody's waiting for me, spinning the car keys around his finger.

"We can walk to this one. I checked on the map." Holding up my phone, I waggle it in the air.

"Cool. Let me see."

I open the app and let him examine our route. It's kind of ridiculous that he has to, but I know it's his job.

Satisfied, he sets the keys down on the counter and hands me back my phone. "What's with the glasses?"

"These are mine." I tap the left arm, hoping to evade the question.

"Yeah, obviously. I've just never seen you wearing them before."

"I just... you know. Going for a new look." I tweak the arm, hoping they look cute and believable.

He points the keycard at me, running it up and down my body. "Love the new look. Jeans and a tee really works for you. I just don't get the glasses. I mean, they're not prescription, right? And if it's a fashion statement, I can dig it. It's kinda cute. But is that all it is?"

"Please don't make me spell it out for you," I quip.

He tips his head, like he doesn't get why I so desperately want to hide from my screwed-up family.

"I don't want the fame," I whisper. "I never asked for it. The longer I can go with no one knowing, the better, you know?"

"Yeah." He finally nods, although he still looks hesitant. "Okay. It's your party, so you wear whatever you want. It's actually very Clark Kent." His lips dip thoughtfully. "I mean, no one ever spots the similarities between Superman and Clark Kent, right? They look completely different."

I parry his sarcasm with a very dry look that only makes him grin.

Stomping past him, I grab the high-heel boots I wore from LA and start slipping them on.

"You know the place we're going to is over half a mile away, right?"

"Yeah, I thought it'd be a nice night to walk."

"And not have anyone see the flash car you're driving."

I ignore his jab and zip my boots.

"Are you sure those heels aren't too high?"

"I wear heels all the time."

"You don't have to. It could be part of your whole Indy Bardot look. A pair of Converse would look totally awesome with those jeans and be way more comfortable."

I snort and shake my head. "Heels are fine. I don't need to change that about myself."

"You mean you don't want to."

"Of course I don't!" I spread my arms wide. "No heels and I'm like the



shortest girl in the room.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Says the giant.” I rest my fist on my hip and point at him. Even with my heels on, I still only reach his shoulder. It’s ridiculous.

I won’t wear any of my super-expensive heels, but I’m keeping these boots and a few of my faves. They still match my new look, so I’m going with it.

He grins and opens the door for me. “Tell me about this party tonight.”

“Well, it’s a freshmen mixer. Not official. Just being put on by this senior who wants to help his kid brother make friends and stuff.”

“Uh-huh.” He nods. “So, not supervised, then?”

“I said there’ll be seniors there. Guys who are your age and older.”

“Guys who have easy access to alcohol.”

I try to give him my best pointed look. “I don’t see why that should be an issue. I’m not old enough to drink.”

“Yet you will.” He narrows his eyes at me, then puts on a stern face. “No getting drunk. I only just got this job, and I kinda want to keep it. My ass is already on the line with this whole fake friends/roommates business. You are not getting me fired on my first day.”

My lips break into a smile before I can stop it, but I quickly pull my mouth straight so he knows I’m serious. “I’m not going there to get wasted. I just want to meet Tabby face-to-face for the first time and maybe make some new friends. That’s it.”

“Okay. I’m holding you to that.”

I nod, then swallow, the enormity of what I’m doing suddenly catching up to me.

What if I walk in there and someone recognizes me? What if they draw everyone’s attention to me and suddenly I’m front and center, just where I *don’t* want to be?

What if no one likes me?

This could be a disaster.

*Bail! Bail now!*

*You can’t! This is what you wanted.*

“You all right?” Brody’s large hand lightly touches my elbow and I jolt, forcing my head to bob up and down like I’m totally cool and not internally freaking out.

“I’m good. Just excited.” I want to smile and reassure him that I’m all

good, but my lips can barely twitch, so I keep walking, picking up my pace.

Brody doesn't say anything, sliding his hands into his jean pockets and ambling along beside me. His long strides match at least two of my hurried steps, so he's keeping pace with me and making it look like a stroll through Central Park.

"So, tell me about Tabby. How'd you guys meet?"

I start telling him, talking about Instagram and our initial conversations. The chatter relaxes me a little, and before I know it, we're turning into the address Tabby gave me over the phone.

The sprawling Spanish-style home is lit up like a Christmas tree, and music is pounding out of it. Like a beast that's burping sick beats, it strobes in the darkness and makes me feel even smaller than I already am.

I stutter to a stop.

Brody rests his hand on my lower back. His breath is a little warm when he speaks into my ear. "We can leave at any time. Even before you walk in that door... if you want to."

I gaze up at him.

His smile is soft and sweet. "Tabby sounds like a really great person. I think you'll regret it if you don't meet her before we go."

"You're right." With a thick swallow, I bob my head. "Where will you be?"

"Where do you want me?"

"Um..." I glance over my shoulder as a couple walks past us. They're laughing about something and don't even give Brody and me a second glance.

"My only condition is that I can see you, but if you want to do your own thing, then you just step ahead and know I'm in the background, ready to jump forward if you want me to."

Not that I'll admit it, but that makes me feel so much better.

Pulling in a breath, I whisper, "Thank you," and head toward the house. Brody's just one step behind me. I wait for him when I reach the door, and we walk inside together.

I immediately start scanning the room for Tabby, and a few moments later, I spot her. I mean, I just *know* it's her. She's wearing a bright orange dress, like she told me she would.

Excitement dances through me as I approach her. The second our eyes connect, she lets out a squeal and bounces over to me.

“It’s you! It’s you! It’s you!” Wrapping her arms around me, we jump in circles for a second.

Pulling back all of a sudden, she checks my shirt and then nods. “Oh phew! I just suddenly had this doubt that I read your shirt wrong or something.”

“No.” I laugh. “Black heart.”

“Orange dress!” She poses and I laugh again, feeling instantly better.

Wrapping me in another hug, she goes on for a few minutes about how she can’t believe we’re finally meeting and how excited she is.

“Come meet my friends. Percy’s brother, Barnaby, is hosting this thing.” She grabs my wrist and starts tugging me through the throngs. “Oh wait, where’s your roommate?”

I spin and find Brody just off to the side, watching us with a smile.

He waves, and Tabby’s mouth drops open. “Oh my gosh, he’s a freaking supermodel.”

I shrug, trying not to agree with her.

“Oh, don’t pretend like you don’t think he’s gorgeous. You’d have to be freaking blind not to notice.” She eyes him up like he’s a prize bull, then squeezes my arm. “You’re gonna get so lucky this year.”

“Stop it.” I lightly slap her arm. “I’m not hooking up with my roommate.”

“Whatever you say.” She raises her eyebrows and starts giggling. “Come on. Introduce me to that fine-looking specimen. If you don’t want him, I’ll happily go after the guy.”

I roll my eyes, the smile on my face faltering when she starts pulling me over to Brody.

“Hey there.” He greets us with one of his friendly grins, and Tabby’s swooning already.

“Hi. I’m Tabatha.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you.” His voice is deep yet easy, carrying over the thump of the music. “Indy thinks you’re the best.”

“Aw, well, she’s the sweetest too.” She dips her skinny hip, and for a second I have a moment of pure terror. That’s a Ruby move.

*No! Tabby, please don’t be like Ruby. Please!*

Her eyes dart my way and she winks, swinging her arm over my shoulder and giving me a playful smile that settles my nerves.

*It’s okay. She likes you. She’s being friendly and fun. Just go with it.*

Tipping her head, the short curls bob against her round cheek as she

points into the large living area. “You wanna come dance with us?”

*Us. She said us. See, she’s your friend, Indy.*

Brody cringes. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“It’s just swaying side to side.”

“You say that, but it’s not really.” The way his nose wrinkles makes me want to laugh. He’s cute when he’s awkward.

I almost want to start egging him on, just so I can see what a bad dancer he is, but then I take pity on him.

“Come on, Tabby. Let’s go shake it. Brody here can get us some drinks. Is that cool?”

“Most definitely.” He darts away before he’s forced onto the dance floor, and Tabby forgets all about introducing me to Percy and starts bopping beside me.

She’s not much of a dancer either, but she’s having fun, and it helps me to relax even more.

I can do this. I can be normal.

I can shake my booty on the dance floor at a freshman party and not draw the eye of every person in the room.

Raising my arms in the air, I sway to the beat and look around, happy to see that no one is even noticing me. I’m just one of the crowd, and it makes my smile grow a mile wide.



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## DISTRACTING SMILES AND FOOTBALL TALK

# Brody

I MOVE AS QUICKLY as I can to get the drinks and am back with two sodas before the song is even halfway through. I find Indy on the dance floor and stand mesmerized as she sways to the music, her slender arms reaching for the ceiling, her narrow hips moving in perfect time. Okay, so she's got rhythm.

And... look at her smile.

A breath catches in my throat.

I only see it for a second.

Her head's tipped back, and I catch a glimpse of her white teeth, the shape her lips make as they stretch wide across her face.

It's beautiful.

And then she spins to face Tabby again, and I'm resting against the wall with two cold sodas and a weird feeling in my chest.

"Hey, man." A friendly voice makes me turn, and I'm facing a tall guy, about my height, with white-blond hair and a smile that dominates his entire face. "How's it going?"

"Yeah, good."

"I'm Charlie. You play?" He points at my chest, and I'm struggling to catch up with him.

"Do I play what?"

"Football, man. Come on! You're built like a freaking tank. You must play something. You here on a scholarship?"

*Great. How am I supposed to field this one?*

"Uh, I used to play a little in high school. Offensive lineman. How about

you?” I divert the conversation back to him and hope it’ll keep him talking about himself.

“Defense.”

“Nice.” I nod and turn back to check on Indy.

She and Tabatha are still dancing. A guy’s joined them now. He’s rockin’ to the beat, getting up close and personal with the girls. I frown, checking his hands, but they’re not touching anything they shouldn’t be right now.

“Are you a transfer or something? I haven’t seen you around here.”

“First year,” I murmur.

“A freshman? No way! You’re huge. I thought you were at least a junior, like me.”

“Nah, born big.” I try to laugh it off, hoping to cut the conversation short.

Indy and Tabatha are still dancing with that guy. I study his narrow face, the swoosh of sandy brown hair flopping over his forehead, and try to decide what I can about his personality. Is he a smarmy douchebag or just a nice guy having some fun?

Tabatha says something close to his face, and he tips his head back with a laugh. Indy grins again but is obviously more focused on the beat and shifts slightly away from them. Tabatha moves closer to the new guy, and it’s hard not to notice the obvious chemistry between them. His eyes flick to Indy, but his hand is soon resting on Tabatha’s hip, his head angled toward her.

Indy turns to look for me and I catch her eye, raising the soda cup. She nods but doesn’t move off the dance floor. I think she just wants to know I’m here.

Well, I am, and I’m not going anywhere.

I probably should be out there dancing with her, but seriously, I’m the biggest klutz on the dance floor. I just can’t do that to myself. I’ve stepped on enough toes to know I should be banned from all dancing activities. Junior prom was a disaster.

“So, back to my first question... you playing for the Mont U Bobcats this year?” Charlie’s still standing beside me, a dopey, hopeful smile on his face.

I ignore the question, noticing Indy bobbing my way, her black ponytail dancing on her shoulders as she jiggles over to me.

“Hey.” She gives me a fleeting, awkward smile and takes the soda from my hand, guzzling it back, then making a face. “Ew, what is this?”

“Cherry Coke.”

She sticks out her tongue. “Ugh, it’s so sweet. Can you get me something

else?”

“Like a water?” I give her a pointed look, and she tips her head to the side.

“Or maybe like a beer?”

“Got any ID?” I tease.

The guy beside me laughs and slaps my shoulder. “I can get you a beer, sugar.”

“Nah. It’s all good.” I stop him with a firm hand on his arm. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Sorry, man. Didn’t realize she was your girl.”

I turn to Indy with a silent look—*see, I told you we should have gone for that trope!*—but she just shakes her head and shouts above the music. “He’s not my boyfriend. He’s just a... friend.” She winks at me, then starts shimmying back to the dance floor.

“Hey!” I stop her with a quick hand around her wrist. “Who’s the guy you’re dancing with?”

She shrugs. “I think his name’s Wren or Randy or something. He’s a bit of a flirt, but nothing to worry about. I’m pretty sure Tabby’s falling in love on the spot.” She rolls her eyes and looks a little miffed.

Huh. Interesting.

And maybe I get it. Tabatha’s basically the only person she knows in Fitzroy. I wonder if she’s worried that this guy is going to steal her only friend.

It’s sweetly childlike, and my heart beats out of time when I catch the flash of vulnerability on Indy’s face.

“You’ll find someone,” I murmur, but she doesn’t hear me.

The music’s too loud, and she’s already facing away from me.

“I’m just gonna keep an eye on her,” she shouts above the beat.

“Kay. And I’ll keep an eye on you.”

She spins back, an impish look in her brown eyes. “Get me a drink first!” Her lips twitch with a smile, and I’m pretty sure I’d do anything she asked me to right now.

Moving past Charlie, I head for the kitchen to source out another drink. I’m aiming for water but can’t see any. Maybe one small beer wouldn’t hurt her. I move to the keg and prepare a half cup.

Charlie hovers beside me, peppering me with more questions about football.



I try to fob him off, but he blocks my path. “Seriously, dude. We need a big guy like you on our team. I could talk to Coach Simmons. He could give you a tryout. I swear, he’d be all over having a guy like you join.”

I place the beer down so I can put a hand on each of Charlie’s shoulders. “I’m unavailable. I don’t play anymore. Sorry, man. I know you don’t want to hear that, but I’m not at this school to join a team.”

“What the hell are you here for, then?”

I fight a grin, knowing I can’t tell him the truth. Shaking my head, I nearly laugh out the lie, because it is so damn absurd. “I’m here to study science and get a degree.”

The guy looks at me like I’m a wasted talent, shaking his head miserably before moving away.

I have to admit that having to reject the offer of football is kind of sad. I was a pretty good player in high school, and I miss being part of a team.

But I have a really important job here, and I’m not going to screw it up.

Stepping back into the large living area, I scan the dance floor for Indy.

I can’t see her.

My eyebrows dip into a sharp frown, and I carefully pick through the crowd once more, making sure I haven’t missed anyone.

And then my stomach drops, the heavy weight igniting a spark of panic.

Shit.

She’s gone.



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## A SLEAZEBALL ON THE DANCE FLOOR

# Brody

I HAD ONE FRICKIN' job. Keep an eye on Indigo Shaw. Make sure I didn't lose her. Make sure I kept her safe.

Less than thirty minutes into this party and she's already out of my sight.

Why the hell did I agree to get her a beer?

Shitballs!

Working my way through the party, I check out the house from top to bottom. It takes me for-freaking-ever, but I don't want to miss her, so I even check the rooms with socks on the door handles and get yelled out of a couple.

I ignore their indignation. "Indy in there?"

"Who the hell is Indy?"

One guy hurls an empty beer can at me from the bed. I shut the door, hearing it smack against the wood before moving on to the next room.

My temper rises as I search the place, anxiety working its way through me at a rapid pace as I double-check areas I passed through before, in case she's moving around. I'm probably shifting out of an area just as she moves into it.

Dammit!

I can't keep screwing up like this.

I can't lose another job.

I can't—

My thoughts derail as I come around the corner, back to the dance floor for a third time, and spot Indy suctioned to some guy. His hands are groping her butt, and his disgusting tongue just licked the side of her face.

*What. The. Hell.*

Steam is shooting out my nostrils as I push my way through the crowd and step up to him.

Indy giggles as Mr. Tongue pulls out of the kiss.

“You like that, baby? Maybe we should go upstairs for some more.”

“I don’t think so,” I growl, shoving him away.

“What the f—”

“Get your hands off my girl.” I move Indy behind me, crossing my arms and creating a solid wall between them.

His head jerks back with surprise, and he leans around me to snap at Indy. “You have a boyfriend?”

“I don’t think so.” She frowns, looking confused and disoriented.

I gently take her face, aiming it toward me so I can look at her properly.

“Indy. Are you okay?”

She gives me a lazy, drunken smile, and I spin to face Mr. Tongue with a dark stare. “Did you give her something?”

His expression falters. “I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

“That shouldn’t matter!” I snap. “Now what the hell did you give her?”

“Just a couple shots and some beers! She’s a lightweight, man. That’s not my problem.”

“It is when you’re the one shoving it down her throat!” I’m ready to pound this guy to dust, but people around us have stopped dancing, a circle quickly forming as the curious crowd lusts for some drama.

“Hey, big person.” Indy’s arm snakes around mine, her smile faltering as she recognizes me. “Brody,” she whispers. “I don’t feel so good.”

Her voice is tired, her words dragged out like she’s having to physically pull them from her voice box.

I spin around, catching her as she sways. She giggles, but the sound falters when she touches her stomach.

“Indy!” Tabatha appears through the crowd. “Where’d you go? We’ve been looking—” Her eyes round. “Are you okay? Is she okay?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “She’s just drunk. I’m gonna take her home.” I wrap my arm around her waist and try to guide her to the front door.

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Indy suddenly shouts.

Mr. Tongue jumps all over that one. “Oh yeah? Then he shouldn’t be taking you home!”

I throw him the darkest glare I can. He inches back from it but is still

cocky enough to start mouthing off.

“What do you want, girl? I can look after you.”

“Don’t touch her.” I warn him away as he starts to move forward again. “Everyone back off!”

“Yeah, back off!” Tabatha joins me. “She’s drunk, she doesn’t know what she’s saying. Brody’s totally her boyfriend.”

Tabatha winks at me like this is all a big game. I give her a tight smile and start leading Indy away. Tabby follows with that guy she was dancing with before.

As soon as we reach the fresh air, Indy jerks forward and hurls into the bushes beside the house.

I hold her steady while Tabatha winces. “Ew.”

“I thought you were with her,” I snap.

“We were.” Her voice trails off as she glances at the guy beside her. His nose twitches like it’s a nervous tic he can’t control, and they both go a little red, sharing sheepish smiles. “But I guess we got kind of distracted.”

I grunt and turn back to make sure Indy’s okay. I wonder how many shots she had. A person her size probably couldn’t handle too many, and it’s probably been compounded by the fact that she threw them back so fast. “I’m taking her home.”

“Okay. Good idea.” Tabatha gives me a sweet smile. “I kind of wish you were her boyfriend. It was really sweet the way you protected her in there.”

“Not my boyfriend,” Indy croaks, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Her eyes are clearing a little. Throwing up was exactly what she needed. Hopefully it’s cleared enough alcohol out of her system that she can start to sober up.

The only problem is sobering up is going to feel like crap, and I can already see the edges of a frown forming. She touches her temple and winces.

Yeah, it’s gonna be a long walk home.

Tabatha kisses Indy’s cheek and whispers, “I think he should be your boyfriend.”

“Never,” she barks.

“You sure?” I ask. “I think we’d make a great Brindy.”

“Shut up,” she whimpers, giving me the finger and then shuffling away.

I chuckle and run to catch up with her, steadying her with my hand when she tries to storm down the path.

She wriggles away from my touch.

“Don’t!” she snaps, then holds her head like the shouting hurts. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Did what? Protect you?”

She spins with a wild glare that’s maybe a touch frightening. “Embarrass me! In front of everyone!”

I look away from her scowl, scratching the side of my throat and trying to stay calm.

“I wasn’t the one who got drunk and let some sleazeball start licking my face.”

“You didn’t have to stop him!” she screeches, then jerks still and looks around us, her eyes growing big as she checks to make sure we aren’t making a scene.

But the street is empty.

I step a little closer and lower my voice. “I’ve been hired to watch your back, okay? And if that means protecting you from your drunken self, then I’ll do it. That guy was trying to lead you upstairs, and you were too off your face to even notice!”

“Have you ever thought that maybe I *wanted* to go upstairs!”

“Really?” I frown. “You wanted to go and have sex with that guy? What was his name again?”

She crosses her arms and looks to the ground, angry puffs shooting out her nostrils.

I work my jaw to the side and try to keep my voice calm. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you, but you have to concede that maybe you embarrassed yourself a little too. I’m not screwing up this job because you suddenly want to go wild. It’s up to you how hard this has to be.”

“I don’t want to be your job!” She throws up her hands. “I just want to be normal. Who the hell has a freaking bodyguard, anyway? This is my one chance to finally live the life I’ve always wanted. I don’t want you acting like some guard dog, I just—arghh!” She smacks my arm with the back of her hand. I barely feel it.

Giving her a droll look, I tip my head. “I’m sorry you feel that way, but your dad hired me because he wants you to be safe. And whether you like it or not, you need my help right now.”

I nearly tell her she’d be sleeping on a bare mattress tonight if it wasn’t for me, but the way her scowl is being replaced by a watery look of pain shuts me up.

With a little sniff, she spins away, muttering, “I didn’t ask for this. Just leave me alone!”

I let her stomp away, getting a few paces ahead and giving her the space she so obviously wants.

*Great. Nice going, Bro.*

Slipping my hands into my pockets, I count to five, then start trailing behind her.

Yeah, this is seriously going to be the longest walk home in the history of man.





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## GRANDPA'S GENTLEMAN

*Indigo*

MY TONGUE TASTES LIKE PUKE.

My head feels like lead.

My heels have somehow turned into needle points that are freaking impossible to walk on, and all I want to do is cry!

Why?

Why do I feel so heinous?

*Uh... because you've never really drunk alcohol before?*

"I hate my life," I mutter.

I'm the daughter of a Hollywood high-flyer. You'd think I'd be totally party-prepped, but with an insane need to stay out of the media spotlight, I've spent most of my teenage years holed up in my room, reading and living vicariously through characters I've never been brave enough to be.

Then tonight, I finally threw my inhibitions to the wind. Tabby was flirting up a storm with Rudy or whatever his name was, and when that guy approached me with his slick smile, I figured I could do the same. He was hot and he had nice hands. His breath tasted like peppermint, and there was zero recognition in his eyes. He didn't know who I was. To him, I was just a pretty little freshman. He offered me drinks and I took them.

I acted like a carefree student at a college party... and what happened?

I got drunk to the point of hurling in someone's front yard, and my bodyguard made a big scene and then joked about it afterward.

Brindy!

Ugh!

Shoot me now!

I can't believe he said that to Tabatha, not to mention acting like some overprotective boyfriend in front of everyone. It was humiliating, and anyone who remembers tonight will no doubt talk about the drunken freshman and her giant boyfriend who got pissy and territorial!

He just doesn't get it!

He doesn't know what it's like to have people speculating over you. Making all these assumptions and judgments without even knowing who you are!

He doesn't get the fame, or how crazy hard it is to live in a world where your name and face could be plastered anywhere at any time, and lies get told about you like it's no big deal. Like it's not gonna hurt!

My heel wobbles and turns, but I manage to correct myself before it hurts. I hear Brody's steps pick up, so I increase my pace. I don't want to talk to him right now. I wish he wasn't even here!

I stumble past a couple who give me a slightly odd look, then obviously glance past me and see my bodyguard. One of them cringes. They probably think he's my boyfriend and we're in the middle of a fight.

Or, shit, maybe they realize he's my bodyguard, because he's walking a few steps back, all watchful and aware. Dammit, they'll figure it out, then know I'm famous and—

I stop and spin to tell Brody to walk beside me when my heel turns again, but this time it freaking hurts.

“Ahh!” My ankle buckles, pain searing up to my knee.

Brody's there in an instant, catching my arm and pulling me back up.

“Is it your ankle?”

I hiss. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Heels, huh?”

I glare up at his droll expression, but then he winks at me and starts to smile. “Think you can walk?”

“I'll be fine.” I shake him off and try to storm away, but my ankle is throbbing, and I think I want to throw up again.

My leg gives out, and this time Brody catches my arm then scoops me into a princess hold.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm carrying you.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” I quip, trying to wriggle free. “But you don't need to do that.”

“Oh really? Well, I hate to inform you, Princess Delusional, but you’ve hurt your ankle and you’re still kind of drunk. I don’t want to spend the next hour watching you hobble home when I could carry you there in like ten minutes.”

I grip the back of his shirt and try to get my sludgy brain to come up with a decent retort. “Won’t your arms get tired?”

He snickers. “You weigh like three pounds. I’m fine.”

My lips twitch, but I hold my grin in check. I don’t want to find him funny and charming. I’m annoyed right now!

Clenching my jaw, I keep my gaze averted from his chiseled face. It’s so close. If I wanted to, I could trace the lines of his cheekbones, then run my finger down his jaw, all the way to that chin dimple.

My fingers curl into a fist as I resist the urge to touch him.

I don’t want to.

He’s infuriating!

“Listen, I’m sorry about before.” His voice is soft and husky. It obliterates my anger and makes my insides tingle instead. I can’t help but listen to him. “I know you never asked for my company, and I swear I’ll stay out of your way as much as I can. But I draw the line at sleazy guys with grabby hands and selfish intentions. My grandpa raised me to be a gentleman, and a gentleman doesn’t get a girl drunk so he can take advantage of her. A gentleman looks after the people around him, so you’re just gonna have to put up with the fact that I will do everything in my power to protect you from getting hurt.”

His words still me. I can’t breathe for a second. All I can do is blink and try to control my trembling chin.

His grandpa raised him to be a gentleman. It’s impossible not to be enchanted by that one fact alone. But then he said all that other nice stuff, and I wish I could memorize it.

With a little sniff, I rest my head against his shoulder. I don’t know why I do it.

I guess I have to admit that it’s kind of nice being carried this way. I don’t know if I ever have been. Not since I was a kid anyway. Sometimes Loretta would carry my sleepy self upstairs to bed. I remember pretending to be super sleepy just so she would carry me. But that hasn’t happened in a long time.

There’s something safe about this feeling. Like if I wanted to, I could

drift off to sleep and know nothing bad was going to happen to me.

But can I trust Brody?

What he just said makes me think I can, but what if he's lying?

What if he's like those prep school girls?

*He's nothing like them.*

What if he's like those prep school guys? Like Jameson?

*He's not. Jameson wasn't getting paid to be nice to you. He had other intentions. Selfish ones.*

Daddy's paying Brody to keep me safe, though, so I can put some faith in that. He seems to want this job. Seems to be taking it seriously.

As much as I don't want a bodyguard, maybe I need one. Just until I can find my feet and work out how to look after myself. Heck, Brody knows how to make a bed on his own, maybe he can teach me how to do other home-type things as well.

This doesn't have to be a forever situation. I can think of it like a training course, and then he can go and I can finally get the freedom I've been craving.

It's gonna be okay.

My eyes drift shut. Satisfied with my plan, I let the steady rhythm of Brody's feet walk me into oblivion.



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## AN ENTICING IDEA

Brody

IT TAKES ME TWENTY MINUTES, but I finally figure out how to make coffee with Indy's fancy-pants machine. I nearly quit twice and head down the road to buy freaking instant coffee—never seen anything wrong with that stuff—but then the capsule thingy clicked into place and the machine started whirring.

I gaze down at my mug of café-style coffee and have to admit that I'm kind of impressed. It looks pretty good.

I take a sip.

It tastes pretty good too.

Huh. Who knew.

Taking a seat at the table, I start buttering my four pieces of toast and wonder what today's gonna look like. Indy will no doubt sleep in. She'll probably feel like trash this morning. I've only been drunk like that a few times, but from memory, the first time was the worst. It was after a football game my sophomore year, and Jake was super pissed with me. Apparently, I did something stupid and dangerous that nearly got me kicked off the team, but I seriously cannot remember hanging off the back of a pickup truck and destroying mailboxes with a baseball bat.

"You're just lucky no one can prove it, you idiot!" Then he stalked off muttering something about Cooper kicking my ass or Grandpa making me do push-ups until my arms were jelly.

The words tasted bitter in my brain. Not only did I hate it when Jake was mad at me, but bringing up Grandpa and Cooper was like a punch to the gut.

I swore I'd never drink myself stupid again. I only did it a couple more

times, by pure accident, and thankfully he never found out about any of them. Well, not that I know of anyway.

“Cooper.” I whisper my oldest brother’s name, wondering where he is right now. He could be dead for all we know. My last memory of him was an ashen-faced, hollow stare that made my heart bleed. He was gone the next morning. Left without a freaking word.

I still don’t know whether to be pissed at him or not. Part of me wants to pity him. He was never the same after pulling that trigger. But did he have to just take off like that?

“Morning,” Indy groans as she shuffles into the room, holding her head. She’s still in the same clothes she wore last night. I didn’t think it was appropriate to undress her, so I just laid her on the bed and took her boots off.

“Hey.” I smile, keeping my voice soft. “How you feelin’?”

“Like shit.” She plunks into the chair opposite mine. “Is that coffee?” Before I can reply, she’s taken my cup and is downing the rest of it.

I decide to let it slide. She’s looking kind of pale right now and probably isn’t up for some sort of fight about how I don’t really like sharing food.

I quickly start scarfing down my toast before she can steal any of it.

She gets up from the table and gets a glass of water, noisily drinking the whole thing before turning to look at me. A drip glistens on her bottom lip, but then her pink tongue wipes it away and I’m all of a sudden struggling to remember how to chew toast.

With a little sigh, she plunks back down at the table.

I’ve managed to work out how to chew again and swallow my mouthful but don’t go for another one. There’s this look on her face that is making me super curious.

Her big brown eyes are studying me, narrowing just a little at the corners, like my face is this math problem she’s trying to solve.

I’m about to mirror her expression, but then she props her chin on her knuckles and asks, “Do you know how to cook?”

I nod.

“Clean?”

“Well enough.”

“Do laundry?”

“Yep.” I take another mouthful, asking her why without actually saying it.

The left side of her mouth twitches, nearly giving in to a smile, but then

she leans back in her chair and points at my chest. “So, you can teach me, then.”

I stuff the last of the toast into my mouth and wipe the crumbs off my fingers.

“That’s an interesting request,” I mumble around my mouthful.

She groans and rubs her temples. “I had this idea last night. I know you want this job and everything, but hopefully once this stalker crap is dealt with, you’ll be on your merry way. But... then I won’t have anyone to show me how to make a bed. You said last night that I needed your help. And maybe you’re right.” Her cheeks darken and she looks to the tabletop. “I need you to teach me how to run a house. To at least look after myself.” She sucks in a breath, like saying all this is a huge effort. Then she sighs and murmurs. “I need to prove that I’m not some spoiled princess, that I have what it takes to live my own life.”

I’m actually kind of impressed. She must remember more of our argument than I thought she would. With a shrug and a smile, I agree. “Okay.”

She looks surprised that I’ve said yes so easily, but then her lips turn up at the corners just a little and she straightens her shirt. “Okay, then.”

“When do you want to get started?”

“How about right now? I’m kind of hungry, and Loretta usually makes me pancakes on a weekend morning.”

I snicker and wipe my mouth. “I’m no pancake expert, but I can make some pretty delicious toast and scrambled eggs. Let me show you.”

It seems so junior, and I worry that I’m patronizing her, but she soaks in everything I’m saying and is soon munching her eggs on toast and looking pretty damn triumphant.

Wow. How cute is she?

This might be the most fun I’ve ever had.

A dangerous thought, maybe, but damn enticing.





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## TIME TO GET SCHOOLED

*Indigo*

BRODY TEACHES me everything he knows, from cleaning a toilet and shower (kind of gross) to making nachos and baking chocolate brownies (kind of fun) to ironing a shirt (although he wasn't great at that one). I'm thinking a weekly trip to the dry cleaners might be in order.

By the time classes officially start, I'm feeling way more confident. Between all the mandatory activities Mont U makes you attend, plus the stuff I've been doing with Brody, I'm feeling more empowered than I ever have.

I'm doing it.

I'm actually starting to feel like an independent young woman.

It's foreign and new and... freaking fantastic!

Brody is super sweet, and I love how he doesn't judge me for not knowing anything.

He's easy to talk to as well. I don't usually open up very easily with people, and I guess I haven't with him either, but we've had some fun chats about the surface stuff.

Pizza is his favorite dinner. We ate it last night while watching episodes of *Alias* together. It's this old show from like the twenty years ago, and neither of us has seen it, but it's so good. Sydney is such a cool character, and I love the way she gets to dress up and become someone else for each of her covert missions.

We ended up talking late into the night, making up our own stories for the covert missions we'd do. It was super hard not to bust out laughing, but my laugh is kind of embarrassing, so I kept it in check, sufficing with a throaty giggle.

My stomach trembles again as I relive our conversation about sneaking into North Korea as undercover spies and stealing Kim Jong-un's collection of porcelain cats. I have no idea if he owns a collection of porcelain cats, but the way Brody laughed when he came up with the idea added another layer of crazy to the story. Unbelievably, it got even weirder from there.

Swallowing down my laughter, I shift in my seat and try to focus on what Professor Busch is saying.

“So if we look at this from a molecular level...”

Brody changes position in the seat beside me, his long leg brushing mine for an instant. An electric current buzzes through me and we glance at each other, then quickly look back to the front.

Forcing my eyes to my laptop screen, I try to catch up on the notes I'm missing.

This is insane. How can I be so unfocused?

Chemistry has always sparked my interest, yet here I am thinking about Brody's powerful thigh, less than an inch from mine.

We've been jogging together in the mornings. It's not really his thing—so he said—but it's my favorite form of exercise, and since he's my bodyguard, he has to come too. We ran an easy three miles this morning. I came back energized; he came back sweating and out of breath. His face was so red, it made me giggle.

He gave me a dry, dirty look before heading to the shower, which made me feel bad, so I cooked him breakfast and found the biggest glass in the cabinet to pour his orange juice into. He was smiling by the time we walked to our first morning lecture.

Giving him a subtle sideways glance, I check his face. He's looking kind of bored, his eyes a little glazed as he watches Professor Busch click to the next PowerPoint slide. Poor guy. I wonder how bored he is. He told me he wasn't that great at academic stuff, and maybe he's bored because he doesn't understand the content.

I could teach him.

It'd be like returning the favor.

“All right, people. That's it for today. Please make sure you're up to date on the readings before our next class. I want to dive more in depth into this material before your test next week.”

Laptops shut around the room as students pack their bags and start heading for the door. I check my watch. It's lunchtime, and the hunger pangs

are kicking in.

“You want to go to the cafeteria?” I ask, checking my phone and spotting a text from Tabby.

*TABBY: We're at the table by the window, underneath the Eco-Day banner.*

I send her a thumbs-up, then look to Brody.

“Everyone’s waiting for us. Let’s go.”

He turns with me and we head for the cafeteria, talking about what’s coming up after lunch. We run through the rest of the day as we collect our food, then take a seat with the rest of our friends.

It’s been nearly two weeks, and I’m starting to feel like I fit.

I mean, I think I do.

Tabby’s sweet and easy to be around. She and Wren, the flirt from the party, have started dating, and he seems pretty cool too. Then there’s Percy, who is... well, he’s kind of weird. But he and Tabby are family friends, and she doesn’t have the heart to be mean to him. Occasionally we’re joined by the twins, Joanna and Jolene, but it’s usually just the five of us, and I quite like it that way.

Unwrapping my chopsticks, I dive into my teriyaki chicken sushi while Brody chows down on mac and cheese.

Hm. I wonder if he knows how to make that. I feel like it’s a standard dish I should learn. I’ll add it to my growing list of things for him to teach me.

“So, how was your morning?” Wren smiles at me, his nose twitching with that little tic of his, and I tell them all about my latest classes, although I feel kind of bad that I don’t remember the second half. My thoughts got derailed by Brody. I seriously can’t let that happen again.

“We’ve got a test next week,” I say before popping a piece of sushi in my mouth.

“Yeah, me too. Can’t believe they’re already slapping those on us. These lectures are way more intense than high school.” Tabby gives me a nervous wince.

Wren chuckles and kisses the side of her head. “You’ll be okay. You’re

the smartest girl I know.”

“Not as smart as Indy.” Tabby points at me.

I shake my head, hating the spotlight.

“Are you kidding? You’re like a science whiz.”

“No, I just... have to work really hard.” I keep downplaying the compliment and am super relieved when Percy pipes up... until I hear what he just said.

“At least you’re smarter than this one.” He plops his phone in the middle of the table, and we all lean forward to check the screen.

*Oh crap!*

*What is he doing following Ruby!*

“Who’s The Crimson Jewel?” Wren murmurs, his face wrinkling as he looks at the screen and blinks a few times. Ruby’s dipping her hip, sticking her butt out, and flicking her hair.

The duck face she’s pulling makes me want to hurl, so I glance away from the screen, not caring a rat’s ass about the rest of her stupid TikTok video.

“She’s just this rich bitch who thinks she’s hot.” Percy guffaws. It’s an awkward, cringey sound. “She posts stuff all the time. Check out her bikini, man. It’s barely covering her nipples!”

“Ugh.” Tabby pokes out her tongue and slides the phone back to Percy. “Why do you look at that crap?”

Percy laughs again. This time it’s a high-pitched giggle that grates my spine.

Brody glances at me, but I avoid his gaze, not wanting my face to give anything away. My heart is racing, and all I can do is stare at the table and pray that they don’t link me to Ruby in any way. I’m pretty sure none of her social accounts mention me at all. She wouldn’t want her reputation tarnished by a sad, depressed stepsister.

“She’s promoting this sunscreen oil or something.” Percy’s still gazing at the phone, his eyes bright with... ew, is that like lust or something?

Then he looks right at me.

“What do you think, Indy? You into following celebrities?”

I shake my head.

“That Jewel chick is not a celebrity.” Tabby’s tone is so scathing. “I’ve never even heard of her.”

*Oh thank God.*

“She’s just some pretty piece of ass that needs constant reassurance. She probably has no talent, yet she’s making stupid amounts of money every year with racy photographs and video clips. It bugs me so much that people like that earn big bucks while everyone who actually makes this country run, like the freaking backbone of America, have to work super hard to make ends meet. It’s so wrong. The whole system.” Tabby keeps ranting. “Like how professional sports players are on these stupid salaries and actors get paid so much money when the trash collectors and cleaners and people who look after our cities can barely afford a decent living.”

Her wrath is kind of disconcerting, and I’m shrinking before I even notice.

Brody rests his hand on my back, softly pushing my spine straight. “You obviously don’t love celebs, Tabby.” He grins at her.

“No way. Give me real, genuine people any day of the week. I’m so not into Hollywood bullshit.”

Percy looks a little abashed as he slaps his phone down on the seat beside him. “You’re not into celebrities either, are you?” He’s looking at me again. “I can tell by the look on your face. You’re just as repulsed as Tabby is.”

I try to smile but have no idea if it looks like one or not. “I don’t...” I shake my head. “Yeah, I guess I’m not really into them.”

“It’s lucky none of us know any.” Brody grins.

Then Wren pipes up. “Or it’s lucky none of them know us!” He laughs. “I think they’d get iced out or seriously dissed if they came near our table right now.”

I force out a laugh while Tabby giggles and kisses Wren’s cheek. I throw Brody a grateful smile for what he said about none of us knowing any celebrities.

He winks at me, then goes back to shoveling pasta into his mouth.

I nibble on my sushi. My appetite has kind of disintegrated.

Man, Tabby’s reaction to the rich and famous was kind of harsh. I need to make sure she *never* finds out that I’m related to one of the wealthiest men in America.



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## REMEMBER YOUR JOB

Brody

I WANDER beside Indy as we leave yet another lecture, lifting my face to the sun and enjoying the flash of warmth and brightness. It makes me realize that I'm an outdoors, practical kind of guy. Having to sit through mind-numbing lectures is enough to do my head in, but Indy is so freaking passionate about science and learning anything new that she's captivated. She can't help talking about what she's studying, dissecting the text and explaining it all to me. In spite of my reluctance, she's actually got me kind of interested in what she's doing. Over the last few weeks, she's started talking about what we're learning, kind of teaching me in ways that are easy to understand.

On the nights we're home and not out with her friends (Wren and Tabby like to hang out a lot), after we cook dinner together, she sits down to go over her notes, asking me questions about anything I didn't understand and then rewording it until I can nod that I get it. I figure her explaining stuff to me is helping her, so I'm going with it... and okay, maybe finding some of it interesting.

Who knew biology and genetics could capture my attention? It probably helps that my "tutor" is a little hottie.

I mask my smile by rubbing a hand over my mouth and pulling my expression into line as we reach Tabatha and Wren.

"Muffin?" Tabby looks at her boyfriend.

"No." He frowns.

"Stud Muffin."

His reply is a dark glare.



Tabby giggles. “How about just Tuffy, then?”

“No.” He shakes his head emphatically, his nose and eyes doing a quick tic. “It’s Wren. Just Wren.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Indy tucks her thumb under her bag strap while I do a scan of the area.

A group of three is studying on the bench ten feet away. There’s an Asian-looking guy doing something on his phone by the tree to my right, and just over my shoulder is a circle of girls drinking bottles of water and discussing something animatedly.

No threats that I can see.

“I’m trying to find a cute nickname for Wren. Since his last name is Tuffin, I was thinking Stud Muffin, but he’s adamant.” She fake pouts. “He doesn’t even like Tuffy.”

Indy grins. “Wren’s a good name. I’d stick with that too.”

“Thank you.” Wren shoots her a grateful smile, squeezing Tabby’s waist and kissing her cheek.

“All right, fine.” Tabby swings her arm around Wren’s shoulders.

I’m distracted by my cell phone buzzing.

I check the screen, hoping it’s Jake.

I haven’t been able to talk to him much. Watching someone twenty-four-seven makes for busy work, but we’ve had a few texts back and forth, the odd call when Indy’s in the shower. He’s doing good, still flirting with Carmen and not making any moves because the chick has a boyfriend. I respect that, although I’m secretly hoping whoever this guy is dumps Carmen and frees her up for Jake. My brother either needs to date that girl or get over her.

But it’s not Jake.

“Excuse me for a sec.” I step away from the group and lift the phone to my ear. “Hey, Azim.”

“Good afternoon. Just checking in. How’s the day going?”

“Same as usual.” I look across the green, up to the brick building we just spent the last hour in, then back to the quad area where Indy arranged to meet up with her friends. “All is quiet on the western front.”

Azim snickers. “It’s coming up on five weeks and I’m getting the same report every day. Looks like that stalker has gone underground, or wasn’t after Indy in the first place, which is what I suspected.”

My heart sinks. “So, ah... do I still have a job?”

“At this stage. Detectives still haven’t managed to trace the source of the

letter, and Castle remains edgy. He doesn't like the fact that his baby girl is away from the nest. You being there makes him feel better."

A movement to my right makes me turn, and I study the guy leaning against the tree. He's still on his phone, and I think he must be texting by the way his thumbs are moving. His eyes flick to Indy and her group. From this angle, I can't tell who he might be studying. There are three of them standing there. I shift my body so I can subtly keep an eye on him.

"Did you double-check the GPS app is working?"

I cringe and reluctantly tell him, "Yes. It's working."

It feels like an invasion of privacy to be able to track Indy's phone from mine, but Azim made me install the app when I got the job, and I have to do monthly checks to make sure it's working.

I know Indy would hate it, but Azim's already told me a few times, "It's not up to her. I don't care if she doesn't like it. It's a safety measure she just has to live with."

The longer Indy's here, the more she feels like we're pulling this off, and the more bodyguard-type moves, like tracking her phone, feel out of place.

People don't seem to recognize her here.

But I guess it only takes one.

I don't want her experience ruined, so I'm still running the odd blocking play without her noticing, distracting people's attention before they can finish their "Is that...?" or "She looks vaguely familiar..." thoughts.

Tabatha's laughter catches my attention, and I glance back in time to see Indy and her grinning together. Tabatha leans against Wren just as Percy lopes up with the twins. He's a nice enough guy, in this awkward kind of way. I think he has a crush on Indy but is too shy to do anything about it. And then there's Joanna and Jolene—the cutesy twins from Texas who still wear matching shirts. Yeah. It's weird. In fact, a lot of Indy's friends are a little quirky. It reminds me of Jake, which is probably why I don't mind hanging out with them.

Indy glances over her shoulder to check where I am.

I wink at her, then turn back to check on the guy by the tree. He's still leaning there, texting and thinking he's being subtle about checking out Indy's group.

"Are you standing near Indigo right now?" Azim asks me.

"About ten paces away."

"Move just a little farther, will you?"

I frown and shift, turning my back on her for a moment and walking toward the clump of trees to score some shade.

“Everything all right?” I ask.

“Yeah, just wanted you to tell me honestly... how’s Indigo doing? I meant to ask you last time, but I could hear her voice nearby. Do you think she’s going to survive this college thing?”

“Yeah.” My answer’s simple but honest. “Why are you asking that? Did you not think she would?”

“Well, she’s been a pampered girl her whole life. Stepping out on her own two feet like this is huge, and I know she didn’t want to stand out. I think her father only said yes to this because he thought she’d come home within weeks, unable to handle the stress of looking after herself.”

I frown, hating how little faith her father has in her.

“She’s doing great. I’m teaching her everything I can to make sure she’ll thrive here... even after I’m gone.” I hate saying that, but it’s a real possibility that I have to keep alive.

I didn’t mean to start loving this job so much, but she makes it kind of hard not to.

“Don’t let her father hear you say that,” Azim clips. “Although he talks to Indy most weeks, he’s asked me to get a report from you. I need to word things in a way that won’t offend him.”

“How about telling him the truth? Indigo is an amazing, intelligent person who, finally free from her cage, is proving that she’s capable of pretty much anything.” My voice is getting terse and snappy, but I can’t stop myself.

“Careful, Brody.” Azim’s tone goes low with warning. “Don’t get too close now. She’s a job. Nothing more.”

I clench my teeth and nod, my voice smaller than I mean it to be. “I know.”

“I’ll think of something to say. Don’t worry, he won’t be hauling her home anytime soon. But remember your place in this. Your duty above all else is to protect Indigo Shaw and make sure nothing bad ever happens to her.”



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## WHAT'S YOUR TYPE?

Indigo

I HUG Tabby goodbye and wave as she loops her arm around Wren's waist and nestles against him. OMG, they are so adorbs. Their romance has been like a whirlwind. From shimmying next to each other on the dance floor, to making out at the party, and now they're full-on dating. Like, Tabby confessed to me just yesterday that she thinks she's in love and ready to take things to the next level with Wren. I think they're doing it tonight, and I bet I'll hear all about it soon enough.

I bite my bottom lip, fighting a smile and wondering what that must feel like. That crazy-in-love sensation.

After only one month, it seems stupid fast, but maybe when you know, you know.

I hope it goes well for them.

We've been hanging out a lot together, as like this group, and I do get why she likes Wren so much. He's sweet and kind. A good listener, you know? Like when you're talking, he totally looks at you as if he's absorbing every word out of your mouth, unlike Percy, who struggles to look me in the eye, and the J-twins, who kind of live in a world of their own. Sometimes I wonder why they even hang out with us when they're never mentally present, but anyway.

"See ya, Indy," they say in unison, then wave in unison.

A chill runs through me as images from *The Shining* scour my brain.

I turn to find Brody, but instead am facing a different tall guy with floppy dark hair. His dark brown eyes study my face like he thinks there's words on it or something.

Shifting to the side, I'm about to walk past him when he stops me.

"Hey." He grins.

I immediately look for Brody. He's just in front of me, hovering by the tree and talking on the phone.

He looks a little annoyed, but I can only see the side of his face, so I'm not sure.

"I'm Parker. Like Peter Parker. You know, Spiderman? I mean, my name's not Peter. It's Parker, but you spell it the same."

"Right." I nod, giving him a polite smile.

"What's your name?"

"Indy," I murmur.

"Oh really? Is that like short for anything? Like a nickname?"

I bite my lips together and start praying Brody will hurry up and get off the phone.

"Cause I love nicknames, you know? My brother sometimes calls me Spidey, because my name's like Peter Parker, but probably also because my arms and legs are kind of long and skinny like a spider's. You're really pretty." He swallows, and I jerk my head to look up at him.

"Uh... thank you?"

"You look kind of familiar too. Like, at first I thought I recognized you, but then I was like, nah... but now that I'm closer, I'm wondering if I've seen your face somewhere."

My stomach coils.

No. Please, no!

It's only been a month. I want longer than that!

None of my friends have worked it out, even after the Crimson Jewel TikTok episode from a few weeks ago. Percy hasn't mentioned Ruby again since then. All I can hope is that he doesn't ever Google "Ruby Bell family" or something. Thankfully she doesn't have the same last name as me.

But this guy right here, he is not allowed to come along and ruin it for me.

"We haven't met," I blurt. "I don't know you, and you don't know me."

"Oh, yeah, like I know we've never spoken, but I'm sure I know your face from somewhere."

"Well, we go to the same college, so you've probably seen me around."

"Yeah, maybe." He looks doubtful.

I point past him and start walking. "I better go, because... my friend..."

uh...”

I don't bother finishing my sentence and just kind of take off, making a beeline for Brody.

He's hung up the phone and is walking toward me, eyeing up Parker with a curious, steely gaze.

“It's nothing.” I grab his wrist and spin him around so we're walking the opposite direction from the person who is trying to ruin my day.

“Who was that?”

“I don't know, but he was totally awkward and trying to flirt, and he thought he recognized me.” I make a face. “Aw, crap. I hope he doesn't figure it out. That's the last thing I need.”

Brody doesn't say anything for a few steps, then softly murmurs, “You know someone's gonna figure it out eventually, right? Someone might see a photo or something. Do you really want to keep hiding the truth from everyone? Especially your friends? What if you meet someone you like? You can't keep pretending forever.”

“I know. I know that! But I just want to enjoy the ride for as long as I can. People change when they figure out the truth. They just don't... look at you the same. And I don't want Tabatha to hate me.”

Brody's smile is sweet. “She won't hate you. She likes you for who you are as a person.”

I glance up and can't help the little kick in my heart when I catch Brody's eyes on me. He has nice eyes.

His head jerks up and he looks forward, breaking the connection.

I immediately miss it, so I start talking before actually thinking about what I'm going to say. “It's hard to know who to trust, you know? Like, I dated this guy once. I was really into him, and I thought he really liked me, but it turns out he only wanted to see my place, meet my dad, see if he could sponge off me. I took him out to dinners and paid for everything, thinking I was being all feminist and in control. But then I found out that he was just using me. It wasn't *me* he wanted, it was what I had. He was after bragging rights.”

Brody's eyebrows bunch with a sharp frown. “How'd you figure it out?”

I shrug, the disappointment searing me all over again. “All he ever wanted to do was hang out at my place. Whenever my dad was around, he'd leave me to go talk to him. And then Valentine's Day came along and he asked me to take him to this really expensive restaurant for dinner. It made

me feel kind of tragic that I was yet again having to organize our date. When we got to the place, he spotted a couple actresses he really liked and spent most of the night talking to them, dropping my dad's name like he owned it. He made out that he had really strong connections with Castle Shaw, and the actresses lapped it up. They invited him to join them... and he didn't even turn to check on me or see if I wanted to be included." I dip my head, feeling like the world's biggest loser. "I left before the entrée arrived."

"Did you pay?"

"Nope. I told the maître d' to bill him for the food, since he wasn't finished." I raise my chin, trying to feel more triumphant than I actually do. "I even ordered the lobster, knowing I wouldn't touch it."

Brody grins, nudging me gently with his elbow. "Good girl."

The little comment makes my insides warm, but I still can't muster a smile. "He called me later that night, totally pissed that I'd done that to him. And I told him I never wanted to speak to him again, then hung up."

"Ouch," Brody murmurs. "Looks like it hurt."

My shoulders slump forward. "I just... I don't want people linking me to Castle Shaw or Nova Abebe. If I can help it, I don't want anyone here to ever know. This is the first time in my life that I actually feel like me. Or that I have a chance of figuring out what me even feels like. People treat me differently here. I don't want to lose that."

He tips his head thoughtfully, leading us around a study group working hard in the sunshine. "I get why, but what happens when they figure it out and realize you've been lying to them?"

"How much am I really lying? A name? That's hardly a big deal. I'm still the same person."

"Yeah." He shrugs. "I just think it's hard to fall for someone, or be someone's best friend, if they don't one hundred percent know who you are." His eyebrows dip together, his jaw working to the side for a moment.

"Maybe." I can't quite admit that I think he's probably right. Dammit.

"You could just stay single forever." Brody gives me a playful nudge with his hip. His smile isn't reaching his eyes the way it normally does, and I can tell that he's making an effort to lighten the mood.

"Ha ha." I poke out my tongue, then wrinkle my nose. "Would that be so bad, though?"

"Ouch. You did get burned. What was this butthead's name?"

"Jameson," I mutter.



“He can’t do that to you.”

“Do what?”

“Destroy your future happiness. Don’t let one idiot stop you from all the things you want.”

I can’t help a little smile. “And what do I want?”

“Well, you know, the whole falling in love, relationship thing. Being part of a family.”

“Ugh,” I roll my eyes dramatically. “You read too many romance novels. Family, love... it’s not all it’s cut out to be.”

“The right one is.” His soft voice turns my head.

I watch him swallow, then run a hand through his hair. He won’t meet my gaze, and I’m suddenly intensely curious about his family. He’s told me a little about his twin brother. Jake studies at Stanford, got there on a full scholarship, which means he’s smart and he knows how to work hard. Brody’s also mentioned his grandpa once or twice, just fleeting comments like “My grandpa taught me...” or “My grandpa used to say...”

I haven’t found the courage to ask him about his childhood. If I do that, he might ask about mine, and I’m worried about the can of worms that could open. I mean, my childhood wasn’t terrible, but it wasn’t normal, and ugh—my mother!

Talking about families somehow feels more intimate than music and TV shows, pizza and brownies.

“So, tell me about your perfect partner.” Brody pulls me back into the conversation. “What’s he... or she... like?”

I study his face for a second, watching that playful gleam come back into his eyes.

“He,” I clarify softly.

“Okay, what’s he like?”

“Um...” I shrug. “I’m not sure. Maybe loyal, private, honest, kind, not judgy or sexist.”

“What does he look like?”

My nose wrinkles. “How should I know?”

“Come on.” He drags out the words. “What are you attracted to? Tall? Short? Black? Asian? What’s your jam?”

*You! You’re my jam!*

The thought makes me blush, and I purposely hunt for anything on the right side of me so I don’t have to look up and to the left, giving myself

away. I silently study the guys throwing a football on the grass, showing off for the girls stretching out their legs in the sun, trying to capture a few rays before their next class begins.

“I know. You think I’m shallow, right?” Brody sighs, a grin tugging at his lips. “Personality counts for more.”

“Well, it kinda does.”

“Yeah, but you want to have chemistry too, right?”

I swallow and dare to look up at him. “I guess.”

He stops, lightly touching my shoulders and spinning me to face him. “You’ve never had a knock-your-socks-off kiss before, have you?”

“I...” My laughter is awkward and breathy. It takes me a minute to find my voice. “Well, have you?”

“A couple.”

I frown, not understanding why I hate his answer so much. “You’ve been in love before?”

He snickers and shakes his head. An emphatic no.

“Oh, so just like a physical thing? Knock your socks off, but *not* knock your heart out?”

“Well, nearly.” He lets me go, and we keep ambling along together. “The first girl I ever got hot and heavy with ended up kneeling me in the balls by mistake. As I was writhing around and she was desperately apologizing and trying to get off me, she elbowed me in the chest, knocking my heart out, then spun around to say sorry and whacked my nose.”

My mouth drops open as I picture this account in my head. Then, before I can stop myself, I burst out laughing.



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## THE KNUCKLEHEADS

Brody

INDY'S LAUGHTER is the best sound in the world.

There. I said it.

I believe it.

The best sound ever.

I'm not even exaggerating. It's this sweet, melodic, happy tune, and it makes her entire face shine. I've never heard it this free and loud before.

For a second I forget how to do anything and just stop dead in my tracks, gazing at her beautiful face.

She slaps a hand over her mouth, muffling her apology. "I'm sorry." She giggles some more. "Don't be offended. That's totally awful what happened to you, but you have to admit, even just a little bit, that it's pretty funny."

My mouth stretches into a wide grin and I bite my lower lip, my right eyebrow arching as if to concede.

This makes her laughter rise again. She slaps a hand back over her mouth, but her shoulders are still shaking.

"All right, all right." I walk past her, grabbing her hand and tugging her along. "We're gonna be late for class."

She continues to snicker and snort, unaware that I'm still holding her hand.

I, on the other hand, am hyperaware of it, and I tell my brain to let the hell go. Bodyguards do not hold clients' hands! Azim's warning filters through my head, so I slip my fingers free as we walk up the stairs to Anthropology 101. By the time we reach the door, her giggles are under control, and we slip into one of the back rows just as the professor calls our

attention.

Indy opens her laptop, shooting me one more smile before tuning into the lecture.

Damn, she is so freaking beautiful.

If I knew embarrassing stories about myself would get her laughing like that, I would have been telling them to her right from the start.

But would she have laughed then or just rolled her eyes?

I can't deny it, no matter what Azim says. It's pretty freaking hard to look after someone as brilliant as Indy and not feel anything for her. This is a job... but it's becoming more, and I don't know if I can stop that from happening.

I don't know if I even want to.

The day is done. Well, the workday, anyway.

Tonight, we're heading around to Fitzzy's Bar. Percy's older brother runs a trivia night every Tuesday, and we've been invited to join the team. I walk beside Indy, noticing the way her hand keeps skimming past my arm as she's talking. Each brush is a small electric shock, a buzz reminding me how engaging she is. How much I love my freaking job.

Scanning the street, I quickly assess the people around me, feeling okay as we make our way to the bar. It's close enough to walk, as are a lot of places in this little college town. We've hardly used the car at all, which has been a nice change from LA, where you need the car for almost everything.

"So, that's why Oprah is my favorite philanthropist."

I nod, having picked up most of her description of what Oprah Winfrey has accomplished. I had no idea how much good her foundation is doing and the way she's empowering girls in particular. It kind of makes me glad she's one of the rich ones. At least she's using her millions to take care of people. You've gotta love that.

We turn the corner and spot the bar. I have my fingers crossed that this place isn't full of arrogant assholes. I don't want some sleazewad making a move on Indy. I'll just have to make sure I don't take my eyes off her tonight.

Not. A. Problem.

Her hair is up in a high ponytail. She likes to wear it that way, and I can't

help wondering if it's all part of her disguise. Adjusting the glasses on her nose, she grins at me, then slips into the bar.

"Indy! Bro! Over here!" Wren raises his hand to grab our attention.

We weave around the tables, taking the last two chairs moments before the microphone screeches and our attention is drawn to the stage.

"Welcome to trivia night, peeps! It's great to have you all here. I'll start the first round in just a few minutes. Make sure your team name has been given to the luscious Anika Malinga." A cheer goes up around the room while Anika throws her boyfriend a look that's supposed to say "Shut up" but really says, "Aw babe! You think I'm luscious?"

I chuckle and try to catch Indy's eye, but she's busy doodling a pretty border on the first answer sheet. Wren slipped it to her when we sat down. "You've got the neatest handwriting. It's like a font." She didn't argue with him, because he's right. Her handwriting is like a font.

Wren's watching her too, his eyes flicking between her hand and her face. He catches me staring at him and quickly jerks his gaze back to the stage.

My eyebrows dip for a second, but then Wren's leaning his chin on Tabatha's shoulder and whispering something that makes her smile. Her lips seem tighter than usual tonight, like her smile's not as carefree as normal. But then she brushes her fingers down Wren's cheek and spins to give him a quick peck on the lips.

Hmmm.

Shifting in my chair, I move a touch closer to Indy, not missing Percy's gaze either. His eyes are constantly flittering over Indy, although he tends to stare until she starts looking up, and then his gaze darts away like a jumpy rabbit.

Percy's brother, Barnaby, finishes explaining all the rules, then gets a loud cheer from everyone as he pumps each team up to win. Percy twitches in his seat, shooting us a nervous glance before turning back to his brother. Man, it's hard to believe these two are related.

Percy personifies awkwardness, while Barnaby is this dynamic showman.

Images of my four brothers storm through me. I guess we were all different too—Cooper was the quiet, stoic one, Deeks was wild, Michael was sweet, Jake knew everything, and then there was me, the clown.

"Why'd he call me that, Grandpa? Am I really just some big dumb idiot?"

"No." Grandpa chuckled, pulling me into a sideways hug. "They call you that because you're funny. You can entertain, make people laugh."

“What good does that do anybody?” I kicked the dirt, still feeling kind of dark that Cooper told me to stop horsing around. He called me a big clown, and he didn’t say it in a nice way. Then everyone else jumped on board and started hassling me too!

“Brody, son. I know Cooper was mad at you when he said it, but—”

“Cooper’s always mad at me! He’s the world’s biggest killjoy!” I crossed my arms and huffed.

“Now don’t you go being mean.” Grandpa’s reprimand was soft. “Cooper’s a serious person. That doesn’t make him bad, he just wants to make sure things get done. He’ll figure out that he doesn’t have to carry the weight of the world eventually. He was forced into a role he wasn’t meant to play years too soon. Just cut him some slack and let him be your older brother. He loves you, even though he doesn’t show it the same way you do.”

“He’s always telling me off. Telling me to hurry up and stop messing around.”

“That’s only because he wants to finish up quickly, and you slow things down.”

“I’m trying to be funny! Make it more interesting!”

“Exactly. And that’s not a bad thing.” Grandpa bent down so he could look me in the eye. “Even at the age of nine, you know this world needs some color and sunshine. We can’t all be serious like Cooper. There’s no balance in that. If you look around at God’s creation, everything he’s designed... it’s all balanced. Night and day, sour and sweet, right and wrong, good and bad, sorrow... and laughter.” He flicked me lightly under the chin, his eyes sparkling with a grin. “We need clowns. It’s people like you who are going to brighten up this place. Cooper makes the world run on schedule, while you make it sing and smile.” My lips twitched a little. I was starting to feel better. Grandpa always had a way of doing that. “So, you go be a clown, Brody Boy. You be the best clown the world’s ever seen, because I can tell you one thing for certain, I’ve never smiled more than at this time in my life. You boys make me a happy man, and I’m sure grateful for that.”

My smile fades as Grandpa’s voice evaporates in my head. Damn, I wish he were still here. The night he died killed my clown, and I’m not sure I’ll ever get him back. I try, but it’s just not the same. How do you be an entertaining clown when you’ve got such black memories tarring your past?

“All right. Let’s begin!” Barnaby starts Round One of trivia night and we, The Knuckleheads (don’t know who came up with that one), start off strong.

After five rounds we're neck and neck with Brain Box.

Indy's really getting into it, writing furiously as answers are whispered to her from around the table. I don't know much, although I kill in the movie round, getting seven out of the ten questions right. Between the five of us, we managed to score full points for that round, and Tabby actually grabbed my hand and kissed it after the answers were read out.

I stole a quick glance at Wren, but he just grinned at me, unbothered by it.

"Round Six is..." Percy's brother does a quick drum roll on his leg. "Horror!"

Oooooos go up from around the bar while I shudder. I've never been a huge fan of horror—books or movies. They creep me out.

"Okay, question one. Which Stephen King novel was made into a movie starring Kathy Bates?"

Oh, well, I know that one.

"*Misery*," Wren answers before I can.

In fact, Wren answers almost every question without a pause.

"Dude, did you help write this round?" I hassle him.

Tabby murmurs, "This guy is a horror fiend."

"Nothing like feeling that chill, man. I love it." Wren laughs.

Percy joins him. "Yeah, I totally love that too."

"Ew. Not me. I can't stand horror." Indy shudders, completely unaware of the smile slipping from Percy's face.

Wren gazes at her.

"What?" She shrugs. "We don't all have to like the same things."

"Yeah, I know." Wren grins and blinks at her. "But I'm gonna try to change your mind."

"Ah... good luck with that." Indy's cute little finger pops up and she waggles it back and forth. "Because it's never gonna happen."

"We'll see." He laughs and I shift my chair a little closer to Indy, under the guise of reading over her shoulder.

"All right, last question for this round. What is used to describe someone obsessed with exploring cemeteries?"

"Ew, gross," Tabby mutters while Indy poises her pen and looks to Wren for the answer.

"Taphophile," Wren whispers.

"How do you know that?" Tabby's a little shocked.

Indy scribbles down the answer. We all know he's right. He said it with



such conviction.

“My uncle’s a caretaker of a graveyard. I used to love hanging out there when I was a kid.”

My insides clench, then start writhing—the sound of spades digging into wet dirt, rain pouring over me as I puffed and panted, trying to make the hole big enough.

“Now we know where you get your creepy horror fetish from.” Indy holds up the answer sheet, and one of Anika’s helpers swings by to collect it.

I blink, trying to clear my mind.

“You guys should come with me sometime. Walking around a graveyard at night can be super fun.” Wren starts making ghoulish noises. Tabby squirms and leans away from her boyfriend. He laughs, snatching her into a hug while Percy pipes up.

“I love graves. Burials. Creeping around in the dark. Yeah. Yeah, that’s really cool.” He stares at Indy while he says it, this lunatic kind of smile on his lips. “I’ve always wondered what it’d feel like to be buried, you know?”

Indy swallows while my eyes zero in on Percy. “What did you just say?”

Percy notices my expression, his eyes bulging for a second, awkward innocence returning to his face as he looks to Wren for help.

“Dude, you are one sick man. I love it!” Wren holds up his hand for a high five.

I rest my arm around the back of Indy’s chair, lightly curling my fingers over her shoulder, reminding her that I’m here, and that I’d never let anything happen to her, especially getting buried with some sicko—like that stalker, or Percy Walters.

The quiz continues with ever-increasing noise as people around us get drunk. The weird “Percy’s a sicko” moment seems to fade away, but I still can’t stop watching him as the evening wears on. I analyze his every move, trying to figure him out.

After Round Ten comes the bonus round, which is worth double points and includes one question per round topic. We blitz it and end up winning the whole thing. Brain Box is pretty pissed and is still arguing their answer for number eight when we stand to get applauded and accept our free meal vouchers for the next time we come to the bar.

“Not bad.” I look at my voucher with a grin as Indy and I walk home. “Did you have fun?”

“Yeah.” Indy nods. “So much. We did good, right?”

“Totally. You’ve got a smart bunch of friends.”

“You killed in the movie round.”

“And Wren made short work of the horror one.” My smile fades.

Indy nudges me. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“I didn’t like the way he was looking at you tonight.”

“What?” Indy laughs. “Wren? What are you talking about? How was he looking at me?”

“He kept checking you out. So did Percy.”

“Yeah, well, Percy’s always...” She cringes. “I almost feel sorry for him. He’s so awkward.” She pulls a face. “And he wants to know what it feels like to be buried! Ew!” She waves her hands in the air, and I have to ask.

“Think he might be our stalker?”

We both stop short, look at each other, and then Indy cracks up laughing. The sound soon has my lips twitching, and I join her.

It does seem a little absurd—poor, awkward Percy.

Still, I should probably run his name by Azim, just quietly. Just in case.

“As for Wren looking at me, I don’t know what you mean. He’s with Tabby, and they are so obviously into each other. She told me she loves him. In fact, I’m pretty sure they did the deed last night.”

She raises her eyebrows, looking all cute.

“She told you that?”

“Well, no, but yesterday afternoon she told me they were going to, and even though I’m super curious and want to ask, I feel like that’s information she should be able to volunteer unprompted.”

I nod, agreeing with her.

“Wow. So, they’re in love. That seems fast.”

“Right?”

“Although...” I tip my head. “People can fall in love quickly.”

Indy snorts. “Only in romance novels.”

“Hey, they’ve been together about a month. People sometimes know by then.”

“Whatever, Mr. Mills and Boon.”

I snicker and shake my head but can’t help warning her one more time. “Wren was looking at you, though. You just didn’t notice.”

Indy stops to gaze up at me. “Hey, I know you’ve been trained to always be alert and assessing everything around you, but don’t be paranoid, okay? Don’t try to overanalyze every little glance and gesture.” She grins. “Wren

doesn't have a thing for me. People don't check me out like that. Not unless they think I'm famous, or they stare at me because they think they've seen me before, but they can't figure out where they know me from."

"Uh, that is not the only reason they look at you." I give her an incredulous look. How can she not have noticed the double takes she gets? People check her out all the time, and not because they think she's famous.

"Why else would they?" She lightly slaps my arm. "I mean, maybe that Parker guy, but I still think he was just trying to find an in, hoping I'd admit to being Indigo Shaw or something."

I laugh at her, still shaking my head in disbelief. "You have no idea, do you?"

"What? I'm serious!"

"So am I!" I lean down so I can look her in the eye. "Fame's got nothing to do with it. They're checking you out because you're beautiful."

She lets out a nervous titter and shakes her head. "No... I'm... not me. My mom, yes. Ruby, of course. But I'm the weird, depressed one. I'm not... They don't take photographs of me because I'm pretty."

"Well, they should, because you are." My hand's touching her face. When did it move there?

I glance at my fingertips, lightly resting against her smooth skin.

I should move them away, but I can't.

And now my eyes are on her lips, those glossy, luscious lips. Her tongue skims over them, a soft breath follows, and I'm just leaning forward to prove how right I am. To prove the world doesn't see her the way she sees herself.

But suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

I whip around, my body on full alert as I shield Indy behind me. My heart's racing, and I can't explain what's come over me. It's just this creep factor, this chill, like there are eyes on me. Eyes I can't see.

"Brody, are you okay?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Yeah, sorry, I thought I..." I point over the road. "Must have been a cat or something."

Indy frowns, then starts walking, her heels clipping on the concrete sidewalk.

I move in beside her, my senses on overdrive as I turn every sound and wave of light into something more sinister.

Seriously?

What's got me spooked?

Is it the unsettling horror round? Is it the fact that I was about to kiss Indy?

Or is it something else... maybe the reason I'm even here in the first place?



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BRINDY

*Indigo*

BRODY WAS GOING to kiss me. I'm sure of it.

The way his eyes lingered over my lips. The way he leaned in.

And then he just shot away, like he'd suddenly realized what he was about to do. He turned his back on me, and then we walked home in this tense silence.

Ugh. It was way awkward.

I didn't know what to say... or how to feel.

Do I want Brody kissing me?

Logically, of course not!

But...

My insides curl with this warm, tingling sensation that I can feel all the way down to my toes. My imagination takes charge, living out a kiss with Brody until I snap my eyes shut.

"Stop it," I berate myself. "It's not happening. Too complicated. Just... shut up." I keep whispering to myself as I flush the toilet and walk out to wash my hands.

Tabby's waiting for me. She's been kind of jittery this week, and I want to ask her why but don't want to pry. She usually tells me everything. If I ask, maybe she'll then expect something in return, and I don't want to let slip that I'm crushing on Brody. It's awkward enough as it is.

Pumping the soap into my hands, I get the water running and take my sweet time, glancing sideways at Tabby while she finishes up a text. Shoving the phone into her bag, she taps her forefinger on her elbow, and I have to ask. "Are you okay? You seem a little..."

“A little what?” Her large eyes take me in.

I glance in the mirror, avoiding her gaze. “Do you have a test or something coming up? You seem edgy.”

“I’m not—” She tuts and shakes her head, ducking down to make sure we’re alone.

I give her a quizzical frown.

“I’m fine. I’m just...” Her shoulder hitches. “Do you like Wren?”

“Uh... yeah, he seems cool? Why?”

“I don’t know.” She shakes her head. “I really love him, like crazy love him, but...”

“But what?”

Her nose wrinkles. “I...” After a beat, she lets out this weird laugh I can’t decipher, then wraps her arms around my shoulders. “It’s nothing. I’m just overthinking it. No guy is perfect, right? And Wren is cool. You’re right, he... I like being with him. Having a boyfriend is awesome. We so need to get you one.”

My gaze narrows as I study her a little more closely. “You know you don’t have to have a boyfriend to be happy, though, right?”

“But I love it.” Her lips twitch. “I mean, I really do.”

This conversation is confusing the heck out of me.

I dry my hands, still eyeing her as she gives me a broad smile. “I guess I’m just a little over watching horror movies.” She winces. “And his taste in music sucks. Death metal is so not my jam.”

I snicker, imagining her as more of a pop kind of girl.

“But those things are minor, right? They’re not like ‘I should break up with him’ things.”

I nod. “They do seem minor, but maybe you should talk to him about taking turns picking movies or something.”

“Yeah.” She shudders. “Those horrors do really creep me out. But I don’t want to make him feel bad. He really loves them, and sometimes you have to compromise in relationships.” Her smile is tight as she glances to the floor.

“You want to be honest with him, though. Like, talking about stuff might bring you even closer together.”

She bobs her head. “You’re right. I should just tell him. Why is being honest so scary sometimes?”

“Because you can’t always predict how the other person is going to react?”

Her lips purse to the side and her finger starts tapping again.

“But you love Wren, and he loves you, right? So telling him how you feel doesn’t need to be scary.”

She nods as she loops her arm through mine. “Right again. And being in love is awesome.” She giggles. “I guess the good thing about those scary movies is that I get lots of cuddles, burying my face in his chest.”

“Maybe that’s why he always wants to watch them.” I wriggle my eyebrows.

She laughs, but it’s one of those fake “let’s stop talking about this now” kind of laughs.

We head into the cafeteria and I search out Brody, finding him hovering by Wren’s table. Our eyes connect and I smile at him while Tabatha lets me go and makes a beeline for her boyfriend.

The second she reaches him, she parks it on his lap and starts kissing him like he’s her oxygen. Like our bathroom conversation didn’t even happen. I’m still kind of confused by it.

I guess I really do hang out with weird people.

Except Brody.

My insides trill as I watch him glance down at the “lovebirds,” his eyebrows lifting while he fights a grin.

“Hey, pretty girl.” The voice beside me makes my head turn.

My heart sinks when I spot Parker standing up from one of the long yellow tables and blocking my way.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Oh really? Why?”

“Well... you know.” He blushes a little. “I kind of wanted to finish our conversation, and... well, maybe... you know... see if maybe Spiderman was your favorite superhero?”

“Huh?”

“Because of the Parker thing. And the long arms? And I’m trying to ask you out.”

“You’re trying to—Oh! Okay. So...” My voice trails off, and I can’t find any words.

My mouth is opening as if I want them, but they’re just not coming.

Giving him an awkward smile, I wonder how rude it would be to just keep walking, but he’s staring at me and kind of in my path. Like, I’d have to walk around him, which is so obviously rude.



Okay, this is awkward.

I cross my arms and glance down the long table, spotting groups of students, some chatting, some eating, a few sitting there reading a textbook or something on their phones.

“Do you not like me? You’re gonna say no, aren’t you?” Parker’s shoulders slump forward, his face looking kind of sad as he shoves his hands in his pockets.

“It’s really sweet, I just... I...”

How do I do this without hurting his feelings?

Glancing up, I spot Brody walking toward us.

“Oh great, here comes your bodyguard.” Parker rolls his eyes.

“What?” I whisper. “Why’d you say that?”

“Because he’s always trailing you around. Is that why you’re saying no, because he won’t like it?” Parker almost sounds hopeful, like if that’s my reasoning, then maybe I’m not rejecting him because I want to but because I have to. “I could talk to him.”

Gross! Like, worst idea ever!

I don’t need someone’s permission to date someone else. That’s totally archaic.

But how do I be honest right now?

*Parker, I’m saying no ‘cause I think you’re weird.*

That’s way too mean.

*I’m saying no ‘cause Spiderman’s my least favorite superhero.*

That would crush him.

But I can’t let him think what he’s thinking!

“He’s not my bodyguard,” I blurt, my brain scrambling to get away from anyone thinking that idea. “He’s my boyfriend.”

My eyes round, my heart crashing to a stop.

*Shit! What did I just say?*

Parker doesn’t seem to notice my panic.

“Yeah, right,” he mumbles. “You’re just saying that so I won’t talk to him. I’ve never seen you guys hold hands and kiss. You’re not a couple, you’re just making it up so I don’t feel bad. Girls do it all the time. Here, do you want to give me your fake number too?”

*Aw, that’s so sad.*

“I’m serious.” I swallow, still trying to eradicate the idea of Brody being my bodyguard and make Parker feel better at the same time.

I quickly shift past “Spiderman” and walk to Brody, stopping him before he can get within earshot of Parker.

“Are you okay?” He touches my arm, looking past me to narrow his eyes at the guy who thinks I’m a big fat liar.

Time to prove him wrong.

“Can you do me a favor? Whatever happens next, just go with it.” I whisper the words as quickly as I can, then grab Brody’s hand and pull him toward Parker. “So, this is my boyfriend, Brody.”

Brody gives my hand a surprised squeeze and I squeeze back, telling him to shut up and sell this thing.

“Hey, man.” Brody lifts his chin in greeting.

Parker stares him down.

And I hold my breath.

After a beat that seems seriously way too long, Brody stretches out his hand. “Nice to meet you.” Then he swings his arm around my shoulders. “So, how do you know my girl?”

Parker’s still looking dubious, studying Brody’s arm casually swung over my shoulder and narrowing his eyes. “Uh... I’ve just seen her around. We’ve bumped into each other a couple times.”

“Cool.” Brody grins. “So, we having lunch together or what?”

“This must be quite new, huh?” Parker points between us.

“Oh, um...” I glance up at Brody, putting on a smile and hoping he’ll save my butt. It is his job. Well, not the boyfriend part, but definitely the butt saving.

“Why do you say that?” Brody asks.

“Well, I’ve just never seen you two this friendly.”

“Yeah, well, we usually like to keep it under wraps, but it’s getting harder and harder to hide it, right, baby?” He smirks down at me, and my lips twitch. Oh man, I love that twinkle in his eye.

“That’s right.” I snuggle into him.

“It’s way easier to just be open about it all, so... from now on, just... you can call us Brindy.”

I roll my eyes before I can stop myself and look up with a dry look.

Brody’s grinning his beautiful grin, and Parker is looking all skeptical again, so I pat Brody’s chest and laugh.

“Oh, Brody Boo. Don’t you go saying that in public.” I laugh again, shaking my head at Parker. “He’s so silly. No one calls us that.”

“Yeah, they do. All the time. Brindy this and Brindy that.” Brody’s laying it on thick, and I have to force out another fake laugh.

“But they don’t need to, because—”

“Or they can, because Brindy is awesome.”

“Oh, shut up, you.” I grab his face, giving him a firm, silent warning.

Brody opens his mouth again to keep making this worse, and I do the only thing I can to shut him up. Rising to my tiptoes, I grab the back of Brody’s neck and pull him down to me.

Our lips touch, my senses hyperaware of everyone around us. Are they watching? Are they buying it? Is Parker? Will he stop hounding me if he knows I’m taken?

Mm. Brody’s lips feel good. They’re still on mine.

Which means we’re still kissing.

I’m kissing Brody.

And I need to pull away now.

*Indy! Stop kissing your bodyguard!*

I jerk back, biting my tingling lips together. My swallow is thick and I’m almost too afraid to look up, but when I do, I see Brody’s eyes on me. He’s drinking me in with an expression I’ve never seen before. His gaze is soft with affection and maybe a little hunger. His lips are still a little parted. Our eyes connect again, and I’m lost as the rest of the world blurs around me.

We don’t say anything to each other.

We can’t.

All we can do is act, move in unison until our lips are back together, fused in an uncontrolled moment. Brody wraps his arms around my waist, lifting me off the floor and deepening the kiss. My legs swing over his hips, my fingers threading into the back of his hair, lightly fisting a handful when his tongue skims against mine and sends my senses reeling.

Time and space are suddenly irrelevant. There is only this kiss.

My socks must be somewhere across the other side of the room. Surely they’ve been knocked clean off, because this kiss...

This kiss.

It’s everything.



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## A NEW DISGUISE

# Brody

I CAN'T STOP THINKING about our afternoon kiss. It's impossible not to.

When we finally pulled away from each other and the world came back into focus, we suddenly both realized what had happened. I quickly placed her back on the floor and blinked like I was coming out of a trance.

Parker had walked off. I couldn't spot him anywhere.

What I did spot was Tabby's open-mouth surprise and Wren's raised eyebrows. Percy looked ready to kill me until I met his gaze, and then he just slumped into his seat and started picking his sandwich apart, one crumb at a time.

Indy cleared her throat and brushed past me like nothing had happened.

And we haven't talked about it since.

Now we're sitting in the living room, her legs swung over the side of the armchair by the window as she studies one of her massive textbooks.

I'm sitting there watching a basketball game with the mute button on so I don't disturb her. The big screen lights the room with a soft glow. The sun's set and we haven't moved to turn any lights on yet, just the reading lamp over Indy's shoulder.

I want to talk to her about the kiss. About how much fun it was teasing her and playing pretend. About how maybe I don't actually want to play pretend, even though I should because this is a job and argh!

"So, that Parker guy." Yeah, I kinda can't help myself. "You think your problems are solved now?"

Her eyes round, her head jerking my way, but then she quickly looks back to the textbook. "Um... maybe. I mean, he left, so that was good. Maybe he'll

stop trying to flirt with me every time I see him.” She clears her throat, her cute little toes twitching as she grips the sides of the book. “And we managed to convince everyone at the table that it was just for show. Which, you know... it was.”

She won't look at me, and it hurts to swallow.

“Cool.” I try to sound more upbeat than I feel. “Glad it worked. Are you sure you, um... don't want to keep it going? I'm not sure everyone at the table actually believed us.”

“Yes they did.” Indy slaps her book closed. “If I stick with the same story, they'll have to believe us eventually, right?”

“Right. Okay.” I bob my head, then look up to the TV again.

“I still think Parker recognized me, though. You know? He's trying to figure out where he knows me from and... it's gonna happen again, isn't it? Whether you're my pretend boyfriend or not.” She starts biting her thumbnail. Spinning around to face me, her knee bobs uncontrollably. “My disguise isn't enough.”

“You sure you just don't want to come out with the truth?” I feel kind of bad asking, considering I'm hiding behind a fake name myself, but Indy doesn't have to keep fooling her friends. They're nice people. They're not going to use her.

“Yes, I'm sure!” she snaps, looking annoyed. “How many times do we have to have this conversation?”

I raise my hands in surrender and turn off the TV. “Well, if you really want to hide, you're gonna need to do something more drastic.”

“Like what?”

“Why don't you... do something different to your hair.” I drop the remote on the coffee table and face her. “You could cut it or... oooo, dye it purple! That'd look awesome!”

“What? No! I'm not dying my hair purple.”

“Why not? Your name's Indigo. It's perfect for you.”

She makes a gagging face, and I laugh.

“Come on. A different color, just like fugitives do in the movies, would work. And we could cut it even, go for an entirely new vibe. People won't recognize you.”

With a firm shake of her head, she rejects my idea yet again. “I don't want to stand out.”

“But you do stand out,” I argue.

Her eyebrows bunch together as she mutters, “Only because I’m famous.”

“No. Because you’re beautiful. Remember?” I grin and wink at her. “How many times do we have to have this conversation?”

She scowls at me, but I can see she’s fighting a smile.

“Let me dye your hair. Even if the new look doesn’t work in throwing people off the scent, it’ll still be a fun thing to do, don’t you think?”

She closes her eyes for a moment.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to picture myself with purple hair.”

“Do you like what you see?”

Her eyes snap open, her brown gaze intense. “Have you ever dyed hair before?”

“Yup. And I can cut it too. Jake and I used to do each other’s hair.” I shrug. “I was the better barber.”

She points at me, trying to look fierce, but being anything but. “You screw up my hair, I’m gonna—”

“Hair grows back. Bad cuts don’t last.” I rise from my chair, finding her intimidation tactics adorable. “Let’s do this thing.”

She reluctantly rises from her seat, touching her black locks and giving me a nervous grimace.

I laugh. “It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

It’s nice to have something else to focus on. Something practical that doesn’t involve me reliving the kiss every two seconds.

We head to the local store and manage to find some purple dye and hair-cutting scissors.

“My black hair’s gonna show through. This’ll be a waste of time.”

“Not if we bleach it first.” I dig the phone from my pocket and do a quick search on ‘how to dye black hair,’ and am soon reading up on the steps. “This could take all weekend,” I murmur.

“Maybe we shouldn’t.” She bites her thumbnail again. “It’s too much effort.”

A couple strolls past us, the young woman doing a double take as she glides past Indy. She dips her head toward her husband, and he glances over his shoulder after she’s whispered something to him.

I gently take her arm and lead her away. “Come on. It’ll be worth it.”

She trails after me as I gather bleach and a few other essentials. I also chuck in some protein bars, and Indy grabs a packet of peanut butter chips

before we reach the counter.

Adjusting her glasses, she keeps her chin tucked down while I'm paying. With a little sigh, I swing my arm around her shoulders and pull her against me, trying to obscure her even more. To my surprise, she snuggles in, and we walk out of the store looking more Brindy than we ever have.

I keep my arm around her the entire way home until we walk in the door and things suddenly get awkward. We pull away from each other and don't talk about whatever the hell is happening between us.

"Hair dye," I croak, shaking the box in the air and getting busy reading the instructions.

While Indy changes into an old shirt, I go over the small print a couple extra times to make sure I'm not going to screw up Indy's beautiful hair. It's kind of a lot of pressure. If I screwed up Jake's, he'd be pissed off, wear a cap for a few days, and all would be well. I doubt Indy will let me get away with the same thing.

*Oh man, let me pull this off.*

Finally set up, I get to work with the bleach, trying to move and look like I know exactly what I'm doing. I had a Korean friend in high school who decided he wanted to go blond, and I helped him do it. Yeah, I risked my rep as the tough offensive lineman. People wouldn't get that the guy who could squash you also didn't mind playing hairdresser, reading romance novels, and okay, I've painted girls' nails before too.

What? It's fun.

"All right," I murmur, reading the instructions again and being taken back a couple years when Sam and I spent the afternoon turning him into a blond version of himself. Oh man, his mom freaked out. It was worth it just for her anguished screams.

"Min-Jun, what have you done!" She started crying, and Sam (the name he insisted we call him) went to work trying to calm his mother down before his father got home.

I slipped out of there before she saw me, and to this day, I'm pretty sure she never found out that I was the one to humiliate their family. Sam warned me that she'd never forgive the person who helped him, and he was grounded until the end of the school year. Poor guy.

Although, I saw him over that summer and his hair was still blond, so he obviously won the argument in the end.

I run my gloved hands through Indy's hair, hyperaware of her every



breath. She seems to have relaxed a little, and I'm stoked she trusts me with this. Soft R&B is playing in the background—Zayn Malik, his deep British accent rapping out a tune I've never heard before. I let it wash over me, concentrating on the task.

Indy closes her eyes and we don't say anything to each other. There's only a mellow beat, the slick of the dye, her hair running between my fingers, the curve of her knuckles as she holds the towel around her shoulders, the smooth skin of her forearm skimming past my hairy arm as I move around her.

"There we go." I pile the hair on top of her head and clip it into submission. I then start wiping any residue bleach off her face before it can stick to her skin and leave a mark.

I'm just kneeling between her legs, drawing the wet cloth down the edge of her hairline, when her eyes pop open and she's looking right at me.

She studies me like I'm important and I go still, looking straight back into her eyes, unable to breathe for a second. The sparks between us are thick with electricity, and I'm locked in place.

My swallow is gummy and audible. How can it not be? Indy's staring at me, telling me something with her eyes. Something I shouldn't want to hear so badly.

My lips part, but I stay put, not making the moves I want to.

I can't.

Azim would freaking kill me.

She's a job. Nothing more.

*That is such bullshit!*

"I really liked kissing you today." Her whisper is so soft I nearly miss it.

But then the words register and my body moves before my brain can stop me.

Ripping off the stained gloves, I glide my fingers around the edge of her neck, resting my thumb on the tip of her perfect chin. My fingertips are on fire, the energy buzzing through me enough to short-circuit my brain.

I want to say something—*Me too! Hellz yeah! You know it!*

Anything would do right now, but I can't speak.

I can only act.

Leaning forward, I close the space between us, drinking in her sigh as she breathes into my mouth and sets my heart racing.

Her hands rest lightly on my arms, then travel slowly up to my shoulders,

her soft lips pulling me in like a freaking drug.

I don't hold back, continuing our kiss from this afternoon exactly where we left off. She wraps herself around me, her pert breasts squishing against my chest as I pull her off the chair and into my lap. I fall back on my butt, the kitchen cabinet catching me before I'm flat against the hard tiles.

Indy lets out a little moan that fires right through my body, and I glue her to me, splaying my hand against her back and tipping my head to deepen the kiss.

We're in sync, our tongues moving a tango that's perfectly in time.

And that's where we stay, mouth-dancing on the kitchen floor until my watch alarm starts beeping, telling me to stop all the kissing and start rinsing out Indy's hair.

Oh man, it's the best freaking make-out session I've ever had in my life.

I know it shouldn't have happened, but I don't regret one second of it.

I've just had my heart knocked out.



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## DEEP AND MEANINGFUL

# Indigo

MY HAIR IS PURPLE.

Like bright, vibrant, beautiful purple.

And I freaking love it.

Maybe because it looks amazing. Or maybe because Brody is the one who dyed it for me. He also cut it to my shoulders, so I've got this sexy, purple long bob going on.

I feel so stylish.

And I think I'm falling in love with my bodyguard.

Tabatha's right. Having a boyfriend is awesome!

A thrill races through me, a smile twitching my lips as I fight a grin.

It's been five days since my drastic hair change.

Five perfect days of secretly making out with Brody when my body can't control itself.

My smile stretches a little wider. Damn, he is one good kisser. Like, OMG, my mouth has never been more grateful.

I relive our morning make-out session, our mouths minty fresh from toothpaste, our tongues on fire with that mix of peppermint and sizzle.

I know it shouldn't be happening. If my father found out, Brody would probably be fired on the spot. We keep telling each other that we should cool it, but then we're looking into each other's eyes again and we're drawn together with a magnetism we can't counter.

My heart flutters wildly as I try to focus on what the professor is saying instead of the fact that Brody's strong, tree-trunk thigh is resting right next to my leg. He's staring at his laptop screen, unaware of the way my body's

trembling at his close proximity.

His eyes dart to mine, a secret sideways look that makes his lips curl at the edges.

Maybe he is aware.

I bite my lips together, trying to control my smile.

“Okay, so focus on that with your reading tonight. We’ll delve into it further tomorrow, but make sure you’ve read the chapter thoroughly. Take some notes, have a better understanding before I see you on Friday.”

Laptops shut around the room and I blink, suddenly wondering which chapter she was talking about but too embarrassed to ask.

Brody rises from his seat, hitching his bag and smiling down at me. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah.” I stand, annoyed with myself for missing the last half of the lecture.

*Get your head in the game, Indy.*

I clear my throat, forcing a smile before inching out of the row and walking up the stairs. We pop into the corridor with a bunch of other students. Brody’s eyes start scanning the crowd, and I can sense his hand twitching. He wants to grab my fingers, wrap them in his own, but we’ve talked about this. Too much PDA will only draw more attention. I’ve fed the lie to Tabby that Brody was just a decoy to get rid of Parker. She didn’t believe me, so I had to admit that I’m crushing big-time on Brody—well, that part’s not a lie—but I have indicated that dating my roommate is a terrible idea, so I’m trying to resist my attraction. That shouldn’t be a lie, but it totally is, because when it comes to this towering hunk beside me, I apparently have zero self-control.

“Hey, Purple Girl.” Wren appears, grinning at me and lightly nudging me with his elbow as he steps in time with us.

I grin, not minding the nickname. Tabby and Wren love my hair. But you wanna know the best part? They didn’t even recognize me until I sat down right next to them.

Wren was about to ask me who I was when he looked properly at my face and his mouth dropped open. He’s been calling me Purple Girl ever since.

“Hey, Wren. How was class?”

“Yeah, pretty good. I didn’t fall asleep in this one, so that’s gotta be a good sign, right?” He winks at me and laughs.

Brody chuckles, then lifts his chin. “You meeting up with Tabby now?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna study in the library.”

I’m so relieved that whatever Tabby’s doubts were have seemed to sort themselves out. I love Wren and her together, and I don’t want horror movies to break them up. I’ve been resisting the urge to whisper in his ear, “Pick a rom-com next time!” I shouldn’t meddle in someone else’s relationship.

He looks at me. “You guys wanna come?”

“Nah, we’ve got chemistry.”

Wren rolls his eyes, his head shake and snicker making my gut pinch.

“What?”

“I still can’t believe you’re taking all the same classes. You live together, you study together. Don’t you get sick of living in each other’s pockets all the time?”

I let out a shaky laugh, probably giving myself away, but Brody just swings his arm around my neck and pulls me close in a playful, brotherly kind of way. “Hey, I’m not complaining. I think it’s cosmic intervention or something. Like the universe knew we wouldn’t get sick of each other. I wasn’t overly stoked to find out I was going to be living with some chick I never met, and then when I found out we were going to be in all the same classes, I was like ‘Whoa, no way!’ I started making plans to look for another place, but then…” He looks down at me with a mischievous grin. “She kind of grew on me, like a fungus.”

“Oh!” I slap his stomach playfully and poke my tongue out at him.

He doubles over, putting on an act that has me laughing and completely forgetting my fleeting surprise of how easily the lies come out of him. He makes it look so natural, I’m nearly believing his story as well.

“I don’t know how you guys don’t get sick of each other.” Wren’s still looking skeptical, so I jump in, trying to sell it a little more.

“Don’t worry, it surprises me too, but life just has this way sometimes, you know? Like how you and Tabby met at that party. Did you have any idea you’d show up that night and meet the girl of your dreams?”

His nose twitches and he blinks, his smile going dopey, and then he shakes his head. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“I totally am.”

He chuckles. “Okay, you two lovebirds, who totally want to deny that you *are* lovebirds, go and enjoy chemistry. We’ll catch you for lunch or something.”

“Sounds good.” My voice wavers, and I punch out a laugh that’s overly

bright.

Brody chuckles as we walk away. “We really have to work on that laugh, little mouse.”

I nudge his thigh with my hip, but it doesn't even disrupt his step. With an eye roll, I hug my laptop to my chest and hide my smile behind it.

It really is amazing, you know?

Like, Wren has a point. It'd be so easy for Brody to drive me freaking crazy. We're together all the time. But he just doesn't. He's funny and entertaining. We like most of the same stuff, so it's always easy to find things to talk about.

I bite the edge of my lip, thinking about the time we've spent together recently. It's been mostly physical. Kissing and feeling until our bodies are on fire. We haven't gone all the way, which, believe me, was a serious challenge the other night, but we just sort of haven't. Something has stopped us both. We haven't talked about it or anything, we've just pulled back, out of breath, and then looked at each other and smiled.

I'm too nervous to tell him I'm a virgin. Maybe he just senses it and that's why he's not pushing boundaries. I wonder if he's a virgin too.

Giving him a sideways glance, I try to figure it out. He's too tall and good-looking. I bet girls were all over him in high school. He was on the football team, sporty, charming, fun. There's no way he hasn't been laid.

But I should probably ask sometime, right?

Although that seems way personal and private.

*But if he's kind of like your boyfriend, then shouldn't you be going into the personal and private stuff?*

When I think about it, we haven't really talked about anything deep and meaningful. Everything's light and fun, mostly.

Is that bad?

If I think I'm falling for him, I probably should venture into the big feels territory, right?

Like, I actually don't know that much about him. It's all surface stuff. But what's underneath the part of him I can see? We're all kind of like icebergs in a way, hiding portions of who we are.

But if we're serious about each other, then we should probably change that. I told Tabby that talking and honesty brings people closer together. Did I mean that?

Yes. Yes I did. At least I think I did.

Whatever. I need to be brave about this.

Tonight.

Tonight, I'm going to tell him something deep about myself. And then he can return the favor. Even just one thing. One thing to prove what I'm feeling is legit. That all these zinging emotions have some weight to them.

I bob my head, my resolve hardening with each step while my mind spirals into the chaos of trying to figure out what deep and meaningful thing I'm going to share with him.

It whirls all afternoon as I toy with different topics, then immediately shy away.

How do I bring this stuff up?

It's weird. I don't talk about my feelings with people.

But then Angelica helps me out.

Not directly; it's just that she calls me before we're sitting down to dinner and I'm forced into a conversation I don't really want to have.

"Things are great!" I tell her for the third time. She's prying, looking for more, but I'm just not willing to budge.

"Okay. If you say so, but are you sure you're still happy living with that bodyguard? I know what it's like to have someone around twenty-four-seven. It can get tiring. Burk's offered to swap out for a week or two, if you want a change of scenery."

"Nope. I'm good. And besides, if Brody suddenly disappears, people will wonder where he's gone."

"Why would that be a problem? You can just let people know your bodyguard needs a vacation or something."

"Uh..." *Shit!* I completely forgot she doesn't know that I'm pretending he's just a friend. "He hasn't earned a vacation yet. It's only been like a month or so. He's fine. I just want to keep things as they are."

"Well, you know you can call and change your mind anytime, right?"

"Yes." I nod, wanting to wrap up this call ASAP.

"Okay. Well, I'll tell your dad you said hi, and I'll call again in a week or so."

"All right." Part of me wants to tell her she doesn't need to do that, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. She's obviously making an effort, and I should seriously appreciate it. "Bye, Angelica."

"See ya, Indigo."

I hang up and drop the phone on the couch before walking to the table.



“You okay?” Brody slides my plate of food across to me. He’s made us a yummy looking stir-fry with the works.

“Smells good.” I pick up my fork with a grin. “Is that teriyaki?”

“Yep. I saw the sauce mix at the grocery store the other day and wanted to test it out.” He spears a chunk of chicken and pops it in his mouth. “So, the phone call. Is Angelica trying to get rid of me or something?”

I laugh and shake my head. “She just doesn’t get that I’m not sick of you yet. She’s used to having a couple bodyguards and they rotate between her and Daddy, so they get a little variety.” I crunch a floret of broccoli and smile at Brody. “But I don’t need variety.”

He grins at me, digging into his own food, and I figure now’s as good a time as any to take this relationship to the next level. We’re eating dinner together, that he cooked for us, and I’m all cozy in one of his giant sweaters, which is like the comfiest dress in the world. If that’s not relationship goals, I don’t know what is.

“Yeah, Angelica’s just trying to play mom, I guess. I mean, I know she knows I already have one, but she’s probably aware of the fact that my mother is pretty useless. I think she feels kind of responsible to look out for me or something.”

“You don’t like that?”

“Well, I mean, she’s nice and all, but I don’t know. It’s not the same as a mother who genuinely cares for you. Sometimes I don’t know if she’s doing it because she really wants to or if she’s trying to score points with Daddy.” I shrug and shake my head. I feel Brody’s gaze on me, and I look up to meet it. This opening up isn’t so scary, so I plunge a little deeper. “I guess I should be grateful for what I’ve got though, right? At least she’s around. I just sometimes wish I had that whole mother-daughter thing. Like the real deal. You know?”

Brody gives a thoughtful shrug and focuses back on his plate.

I wait, expecting some kind of response, but he doesn’t say anything.

The chicken on the end of my fork remains poised in midair, between plate and mouth—waiting, waiting.

I even raise my eyebrows, quietly indicating for him to fill in the gap, like *Oh yeah, I know what you mean. I’m really close to my mom. Or... I don’t really know my mother either. Or... something!*

With a soft huff, I place my fork down and lean my elbows on the table. Maybe he doesn’t like serious conversations. I get that. I’m not huge on the

deep and meaningful either, but, tough, you know?

If we're going to move this thing between us to an actual relationship, I need to know more.

"How about you?" I ask. "Are you close to your mom? Or your dad, maybe? Or was it Grandpa Markum who raised you?"

He speaks about his grandpa so much. I'm making a guess that it's his dad's dad, but I don't know his mother's maiden name, so I can't...

The muscle in Brody's jaw is clenched really tight.

My eyebrows dip together as he speeds up his eating, scraping his fork across the plate and quickly shoveling in the rest of his food.

"You want a drink?" he asks, his mouth still full of food as he gets up from the table and moves to rinse his plate.

I stare at his back, perplexed by the fact that he's ignoring such a simple question.

His broad shoulders are bunched tight beneath his T-shirt, and I can feel the tension radiating off him.

*What the hell is he not telling me?*



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## AN OCEAN OF CARPET

Brody

INDY'S STARING AT ME. I can feel her eyes on my back like two laser beams.

Focusing on the plate, I rinse it until it's practically gleaming, then shove it in the dishwasher, keeping my gaze anywhere but her face.

My eyes are itching to look at her, to try to figure out what she's thinking. Why'd she have to ask me about my freaking family?

My dad, of all people.

And then she assumed that Grandpa Ray was a Markum. I shouldn't have spoken about him so freely. What have I gotten myself into?

Bile swirls in my gut, threatening to inch up my throat as the long-buried nightmare surfaces too close, teasing the edges of my brain and threatening full meltdown.

I glance at her before I can stop myself, and she's still staring at me with this confused look that's bordering on hurt. Dammit. I don't want her to be disappointed in me. Or mad. Or any of that negative shit.

Shutting the dishwasher, maybe a little too hard, I lean against the counter and cross my arms. "Ah, no. I wasn't close to my parents. My mom, sort of, but she died when I was young, so..."

"And your dad?"

My throat gets clogged and starts to ache, so I put on my best smile and shake my head. "He was my old man." I shrug. "Nothin' more."

She tips her head, her expression softening as she no doubt jumps to a bunch of conclusions that are all wrong. Well, some of them might be right, but she'll never guess what really went down. And I never want her to.

Her eyes narrow as she swivels in her chair to study me some more. “What are you not telling me?”

“Nothing.” I shrug, smiling again. “Hey, do you want to watch a movie or something? I feel like you’ve been studying really hard and a movie would be perfect. How about that one, uh, about the Korean girl and the guy. What’s his name? Peter and she’s, ah... Lara Jean? You know the one I mean, right?” I click my fingers and start walking for the living room, but she jumps from her seat, resting her hand on my chest to stop me.

I could barrel straight over her, but there’s no way I ever would. The idea of hurting her kills me. So I’m stopped dead in my tracks by the smallest person I know.

“Tell me something,” she whispers. “Something about you that is true and honest and doesn’t involve a joke or some funny quip. Tell me something real. Something deeper than your favorite color or the sports you played in high school. I want to know you.”

Her eyes.

That look on her face.

She pulls the words out of me with the least resistance, and I’m horrified at how easily they tumble free.

“My dad was a drunk. When Mom died, I moved to Montana with my brothers and we lived with Grandpa Ray—her father.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

I swallow, memories sweet and bitter mingling together inside me, a yearning so strong I want to double over and whimper.

Instead, I stand a little taller, my left shoulder hitching as I try to fight the unexpected tears. “Four.”

She reads me like a freaking book, which I’m stupidly holding wide open for her. “You don’t see them, do you? Where are they now?”

“We kind of got separated.” My jaw aches when I clench it, anger at Cooper surging for a moment before shifting to Deeks and Michael, who just ran away. They left us, yet I’d do anything to see them again. I bet if they walked into this room right now, my anger would evaporate, replaced with such a heady relief that I’d no doubt hug them and never want to let go.

“How? What happened?”

Indy’s soft voice, the feel of her hand lightly rubbing my chest, is like a balm, and I end up whispering, “We... Our grandpa died, and we went into the system.”

"They split you up?"

"There were five of us." My voice turns wispy, memories chugging through me, the emotion clogging my windpipe, my brain.

It didn't have to be that way. If Cooper hadn't taken off, he could have looked after us all. He was old enough. We could have stayed at the ranch. But he just... became someone else that night.

A gunshot ricochets off the inner walls of my skull, the ashen look on Cooper's face burning bright in my mind.

Deeks struggled off the floor, breaths punching out of him as he lightly held his throat and gaped down at our father. Blood was drawing a wide circle from the back of his head, his eyes staring up at the ceiling, his mouth a little open as he lay so still there was no way he could be breathing.

"Is he dead?" I whispered, the first sound since the terrible gunshot.

Deeks glared down at the body, lightly nudging it with his toe. Jake scrambled away from Grandpa, frantically poking our father's neck.

After a few painful moments, he glanced up at me, his eyes wide with terror. "Yeah. What do we do now?"

"We hide it." The words popped out of freaking I don't know where. I don't know why I said it, but everyone just gaped at me, and I shouted, "You want to go to jail for this?"

"It was self-defense!" Jake argued.

"Grandpa kidnapped us." Michael rasped. "What are the police going to say about that?"

We all went silent for a long, thick beat, glancing at each other, trying to work out what everyone was thinking.

Cooper finally broke the stillness. His voice was wooden, robotic. He sounded nothing like his usual self as he pointed at each of us. "Michael. Jake. Get Grandpa to the hospital. We'll take care of this."

The order forced our bodies into action. I jumped over the growing pool of blood and helped Michael and Jake carry Grandpa to the back of his pickup truck. Michael climbed in the cab while Jake nestled Grandpa's head on his lap and ordered Michael to drive like a bat out of hell.

The truck skidded down the slick driveway as I remained in the rain, blinking the droplets out of my eyes until the red brake lights appeared at the bottom of the long driveway, then blinked away as Michael turned left down the country road toward the city. I had no idea how long it'd take him to get to the hospital, but it was about two towns over, and I didn't expect to see

them again that night.

“Come on.” Deeks squeezed my shoulder. “We’ve got work to do.”

My insides turned to ice as I trailed Deeks into the house and stood over Dad’s corpse. We didn’t speak a word to each other as Cooper grabbed Dad’s arms and I grabbed his legs. The guy weighed a freaking ton, but we grunted and strained, hauling him out of the house until he was lying in the mud by the back steps.

“I’ll deal with the blood inside,” Deeks croaked.

Cooper nodded, then looked to me. “Grab the shovels out of the cellar. I’ll get the truck. We’ll drive it up to the ridge, bury him, and then push his truck into the lake.”

His voice was so detached, his movements mechanical as he searched Dad’s pockets for the car keys.

“Go!”

I jumped at his voice and ran to the cellar, thumping down the stairs and sealing my fate as a... a criminal.

“Brody?” Indy gently shakes my arm. “Brody.”

I glance down at her, swallowing and trying to hide it all with a smile. “Sorry, what was I saying?”

“You said you got split up from your brothers.”

“Yeah.” I nod and sigh, running a hand through my hair. “Five was too many for any foster home, so they kept me and my twin brother together. Thank God. Don’t know how I’d live without that guy.” I force out a chuckle and head for the living room, grabbing the remote and flicking on the TV. “Grab your dinner. Once you’re done, we can maybe Netflix and chill.” I wriggle my eyebrows at her, but from the look on her face, there won’t be any making out tonight.

A preview starts up on the screen and I dip my head.

She’s still not moving, still not grabbing her food.

She’s just staring at me, that hurt look filling her eyes again.

“I’m sorry,” I croak, “but please don’t make me do this. I can’t. I can’t talk about it.”

Her eyes fill with emotion—is it pain?

Dammit. I’m frickin’ screwing this up so badly.

“Okay,” she finally whispers. “Just as long as you know you can talk to me about anything. Any time. Any subject.”

I nod, grateful she’s willing to drop it for now.

Her smile is soft and a little half-hearted as she grabs her dinner plate and moves into the living room. She takes a seat in the single armchair, looking tiny inside my massive sweater. When she put it on after her shower, my insides went nuts—a mixture of protective instincts and desire swarmed through me as I soaked her in. She was mine. That’s what it felt like in that moment.

Now, as I take the couch, the space of carpet between us feels like a freaking ocean.

But what choice do I really have?

Like she’d feel safe knowing she was sitting next to a guy who buried his father in the dark of night, then helped his brother scrub away the evidence.

No one will ever know what we did. We all swore to keep it a secret.

Our father is just a missing person case that never got solved, because who would honestly think to look at five teenagers who hadn’t seen him in years? His own flesh and blood. We weren’t killers.

Except that maybe we were.





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## THE CRIMSON JEWEL HAS A NEW DRESS

*Indigo*

THE LOOK on Brody's face last night... yeah, well, it kind of turned my insides into a thick shake. I don't know what he's hiding, but it must be kind of harrowing.

It makes me ache for him—that he's been through something traumatic and painful.

It pisses me off—that he won't let me in. Does he not trust me?

It scares me a little—how dark is the truth he must be hiding?

And it makes me doubt. Doubt what I thought might be brewing between us.

Here's me falling hard, wanting more, the next level of depth and intimacy, because I trust him not to hurt me the way Jameson did. But Brody's hiding something too, and he doesn't want to peel back the layers and let me in.

So where does that leave us?

Hot kisses and shallow jokes?

A short-term fling that will leave me heartbroken?

I should abort right now, pull away before I get hurt.

But how?

I stand in the afternoon drizzle, watching Brody finish up his phone call. He catches my gaze, his eyes lighting with a smile that warms me. He looks as though our conversation last night never happened, like nothing has changed.

How does he do that?

"You look a million miles away," Percy comments, ducking beneath my

wide umbrella as he walks up the steps.

I jolt at the sound of his voice. It's weird having him standing right there talking to me. Things have been kind of awkward since I full-out kissed Brody in public.

But then Tabby helped sell my lie about it all being for show, and Percy seems to have chilled a little. We're back to awkward, stilted conversations.

I seek out Wren, who's standing nearby, catching his eye and sending him a desperate plea. He grins, wraps up his chat with the short guy from his physics class, and moves across to us.

"Where's Tabby?" I ask, handing him my umbrella so he can hold it above us all. He's way taller than me and his arm won't get so sore.

"She's coming. Just got a text from her."

I nod and smile, relieved to have Wren standing between me and Percy. He's positioned himself perfectly. I relax, even snickering when Wren starts talking again.

"So, Purple." He dropped the "girl" part this morning. Not sure why.

I glance up at him. "Yeah, Tuffy."

He gives me a narrowed glare. "Watch it."

My smile is cute as I flutter my eyelids at him.

He snickers and shakes his head, then looks to Percy, whose face has broken into a goofy grin.

"What's got you blushing?" Wren asks him.

"I know you guys aren't into this, but come on..." He holds his phone out so we can look at Ruby's Instagram photo.

The red dress she's modeling looks painted on and only barely covers her butt cheeks. The back is cut at such an angle that you can see the side of one voluptuous breast. At least there's no nipple this time.

"Check it out," Percy says gleefully. "The Crimson Jewel has a new dress!"

I make a face as Wren continues to ogle the screen until I give him a sharp nudge in the stomach. He jerks back, his nose and eyes doing their standard tic.

"You better put that away before Tabby arrives," I clip, stealing one more glance at the screen but not having time to read the caption beneath.

Ruby loves to flaunt it.

Wren gives me a sheepish smile while Percy reluctantly slips his phone away.

I roll my eyes and an awkward silence starts to brew beneath my umbrella.

*Hurry up, Brody. Finish your phone call! I need you here to make it all better.*

I hold my hand out and notice the rain has stopped. “You can put that away now,” I murmur, taking the umbrella off Wren and folding it down.

“Who is Brody talking to every time he gets that daily call that moves him a few feet away from us?” Wren’s eyebrows bunch together. “It’s about the only thing to make him stray from your side.”

I glance at Brody. He’s facing the other direction, obviously comfortable now that Wren has moved next to me. He shoves his hand into his jeans pocket and nods. I don’t know what he and Azim are talking about today, but it’s got them chatting like old buddies. Brody is actually smiling, which means Azim might finally be letting him in. Our head of security is a tough nut to crack, but if anyone can, it’s Brody. I’m pretty sure the guy could win over a frost giant if he had to.

“I’m not sure who he’s talking to,” I lie, throwing in a shrug to make it look casual. “He’s got a twin brother. It must be him.”

“Oh yeah? Who’s that?”

“I think his name’s Jake. He’s a student at Stanford. Not sure what he’s studying.”

Wren nods. “They must be close. You know, because they talk every day.”

“They’re twins,” I say, probably a little too sharply.

“You’re sure it’s not some other girl?” Wren teases me. I can tell by the glint in his eyes. “Maybe he’s got a secret girlfriend you don’t know about. You know, because it’s not like you guys are a couple, so—”

“They’re not,” Percy interjects. “That was just for show.”

“Oh yeah, sure.”

Percy frowns at Wren, his expression sharpening. “It was. Indy said so herself. Tabatha confirmed it. There’s nothing going on between Brody and Indy! There’s no Brindy!” He flicks his arms up, then storms off.

Wren and I stare after him before Tabatha’s boyfriend gives me a conspiratorial look and leans in. “It’s not just me, right? That guy’s weird.”

“Yeah, he’s weird,” I softly admit, a chill running through me as I watch him stalk off, his gangly limbs looking out of time with each other.

“He’s got the love hearts for you, Purple.”

I give Wren a sharp look to shut him up.

“What?” He laughs. “You know I speak the truth.”

“Yeah, I just wish you didn’t.”

“Damn, between Percy, Parker, and Brody, you’ve got yourself some kind of male harem going on.”

“Shut up.”

He ignores me and keeps grinning. “It’s like you’re some hot celebrity or something. Everyone wants a piece of you.”

My blood runs cold for a second, but Wren’s too busy hassling me to notice. I watch his face, check the teasing twinkle in his eye, and am quickly comforted by the fact that he doesn’t know who I am.

At least I don’t think he does.

“But tell me the truth.” He’s practically whispering in my ear when he asks, “You and Brody, that wasn’t just for Parker, was it?”

I don’t say anything.

He leans back to gaze down at me, the left side of his mouth curling up. “You can’t fool me. You guys are totally an item.”

My lips twitch before I can stop them, but I can’t help it. His smile is so sweet and understanding, like he’s actually happy for us.

“Good for you.” He nods.

I skip my standard denial and simply whisper, “Don’t tell.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

## THE SECOND LETTER

*To the richest, most beautiful jewel in the world,*

*I see you're moving on. Pretending like you didn't get my letter.*

*But don't worry. I see through your smiles, your tinny laughter. It's too loud. Too false.*

*You need to work on that.*

*You looked so pretty the other day.*

*Red suits you. I love that you wear it. You're not ashamed of your perfect name.*

*Keep those lips rouge, my love.*

*The day they touch mine will be the happiest of my life. I want your red lips painting my face.*

*We shall breathe our last on this world together.*

*Ruby red—the color of blood—the color of my undying love for you.*

*Your suicidal inamorato*



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## ZERO OPTIONS

*Brody*

THINGS ARE DIFFERENT WITH INDY.

I mean, the making out is still great, the little jokes, the being together... but it's not the same. She tried to open up to me, and I shot her down, cut her off. I hurt her.

We haven't said another word about it to each other, but it's this silent thing hanging between us. And it's bugging me.

Pacing the hallway, I listen to the water of Indy's shower run. If I strain, I can hear her muffled singing, and it makes me smile. I can't help imagining what it would be like to join her, and I quickly shift gears before temptation gets the better of me.

Snatching my phone off the end of the bed, I dial my brother. He always has something intelligent to say; maybe he can help me with this.

“Sup little bro?”

I don't even bother with a comeback, instead launching into what I have to say. “Have you ever told anyone about the night Grandpa died?”

“What do you mean?” Jake's voice is wary.

“You know what I mean. About Dad. Have you ever told anyone?”

There's a long pause, and I can picture the shock moving across Jake's face. I know him well enough to know his exact expression right now. I look to the floor, rubbing the toe of my Converse over a small hairline crack in the wood.

“Why are you asking me this? Why even bring it up? Have you told someone?”

“No.” I calm Jake's rising voice. “I was just wondering if you had.”



“Of course I haven’t! I’ve blocked that shit from my memory, left it in the past where it belongs.” The quake in Jake’s voice tells me he hasn’t been one hundred percent successful on the blocking front.

I sigh.

“Dude, seriously? What has gotten into you?” Jake asks.

“Nothing, I guess. I just...” I tut and squeeze the back of my neck. “Doesn’t it ever eat at you? What we did?”

Another silent pause, this one shorter but way more icy. “He killed Grandpa.”

“Yeah, I mean, I know. I mean... logically... it’s all justified, right? But... sometimes I feel... I don’t know. I feel like maybe we should have played it differently.”

“It was your idea!”

“I know! I was fourteen and freaking out, and it was my idea to hide everything!”

“And it was a good one. Get the cops involved? Are you kidding me? We couldn’t tarnish Grandpa’s name that way. He kidnapped us. He broke the law to keep us safe. He *saved* us. Can you imagine what a nightmare life would have been after Mom died if he hadn’t come?”

I shudder but still mumble, “Dad never went after you and me.”

“He would have. Cooper would have skipped out. Michael and Deeks would have left, and then all his drunken-ass attention would have been zeroed in on us.”

I close my eyes, hearing Michael’s whimpers and Deeks’s cries of pain, Mom’s weeping. I see Cooper’s stoic face, bruises mottling his back and legs. He never made a sound, just took it without fighting back or making a fuss. He told me once that it was the quickest way to get it over with.

“Deeks always makes it worse for himself by fighting back,” Cooper whispered, his arm securely around my shoulder as I cried into his chest. “I’ll do my best to always get between him and you guys,” he promised me and Jake. “But if I ever fail, you just take it. Don’t cry. Don’t fuss. Afterward, you go hide and you lick your wounds. Bruises heal. Just... never give him the satisfaction of knowing he’s taken a piece of your soul.”

I nodded, my tears soaking into Cooper’s shirt as I cried a little harder, fear swamping me. He squeezed me against him, his voice trembling when he said, “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure he never hurts you. *Everything.*”

"It was the right call, Brody." Jake's voice pulls me back to the present. "Don't ever regret it."

I nod, my hearing kind of fuzzy as memories of Cooper start to disintegrate in my mind.

"Hey, by the way, I got this call from—"

A beeping hits my ears, and I glance at my phone screen. "Man, I gotta go."

"Okay. Call me back later."

"Yeah." I hang up on my brother and answer Azim's call, trying to put on a chipper tone that hides the black storm swirling inside me. "Hey, Azim. How's it going?"

"You're done."

The words come out cold and final.

My back snaps straight. "Excuse me?"

"You. Are. Done." Azim's voice is trembling with what I can only assume is rage. It sure sounds like it.

My forehead bunches so tight, I can actually feel it as I look around my room and try to figure out why the hell he's so pissed.

"Brody Adams. Nineteen years old. Untrained. Uncertified. LIAR!"

My blood runs cold.

For a fleeting second, I wonder if I should try and deny it, but what's the point?

I doubt he's gonna trust anything I say ever again.

"How'd you find out?" I croak.

"How could you lie to me? I gave you an important assignment! I trusted you with that girl's life and you played me like a fool!"

"Azim. I'm so—"

"Don't! Where are you right now?"

"At the apartment."

"Good. Pack your bag and get your ass back here."

I grit my teeth, making a fist in the air and suddenly hating myself.

*Shit!*

"What about Indy?" I manage. "Will you send someone else to watch her?"

"She's not at risk. Another note arrived yesterday, making it obvious that the threat's against Ruby. The police have some solid leads. It's looking hopeful."

“So Indy’s safe?”

“Yes. And now Castle has wasted weeks’ worth of pay on a fake bodyguard!” Azim is fuming again, his voice rising. “He’s beyond pissed, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he thinks about pressing charges against you. Falsifying documents! Using a fake ID! You could serve jail time for that!”

Bile swirls through me and I close my eyes, resting my hand on my knee so I don’t keel over.

“I didn’t mean for it—”

“Just get back here. We’ll deal with it when you return the car.”

“But Indy—”

“I’m already looking for a replacement for you, although the necessity doesn’t seem as urgent now. You said people don’t seem to know who she is. She’s settled. Happy. Showing how capable she is. She can live without a car for a few days. I’ll arrange for her to get a replacement, and I think I can talk Castle into giving her a trial on her own. I imagine she’ll be more than pleased. She never wanted you there in the first place.”

My gut sinks. The thought of leaving her is nearly as bad as what I have to return to.

I wish I could counter Azim’s comments, but I keep my mouth shut. I’m in enough hot water as it is. I doubt my boss will be very happy to know I’ve fallen for his daughter and I haven’t fought the urge to do so. He’d probably hit the roof if he knew how we’ve been spending her study sessions over the last couple weeks.

“Are you packing your bag yet?” Azim snaps. “I expect you back in Hollywood tonight!”

“I don’t want to leave her so suddenly. I need to—”

“If you don’t leave the apartment in the next thirty minutes, I will be calling the Fitzroy police department and asking them to escort you from the premises. I would be well within my rights. You’re just lucky that Castle Shaw likes to get his own personal take on things before passing it over to the authorities. You have one chance, but only if you return here *right now*.”

I work my jaw to the side. My insides are sawdust. My choices are zero.

“Thirty minutes. Are we clear?”

There’s only one answer I can give him. “Yeah,” I rasp. “But—”

He hangs up, leaving me nothing but a brutal dial tone. My legs give out and I slump onto the end of my bed. Resting my head in my hands, I stare down at that crack in the wood.

I have no idea how Azim found out, or what even triggered him to question my ID.

How did this happen?

My brain starts churning, trying to figure out answers I don't have.

But there's one pounding thought that's dominating the rest.

It's a cruel question that I wish I didn't have to face.

*What the hell am I gonna say to Indy?*



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## IT'S HAPPENING ALL OVER AGAIN

# Indigo

THE FIRST THING I notice when I flick off my shower is my phone ringing. I hurriedly wrap a towel around myself and check the screen.

“Daddy,” I whisper, not sure if I’m in the mood.

Placing the phone on the vanity, I let it go to voice mail and dry myself off. But I haven’t even reached my feet when the phone starts ringing again.

“Argh.” I press the green circle on my screen and put it on speaker. “Hey, Daddy.”

“Where are you?” He sounds way serious, and I wrap the towel around myself, securing it tightly while I frown at my reflection.

“I’m at home. Is everything okay?”

He doesn’t say anything for a thick beat, and I start to worry.

“Daddy. What’s wrong?”

“Another letter came.”

I go still, my hand halfway to my bottle of moisturizer. “What did it say?”

“It was for Ruby. The police are following up a solid lead. We’re waiting to hear.”

My insides uncoil. “Okay. Well, that’s good, then, right? He’ll be caught and we’re all safe now.”

“There’s more.”

I bite my lower lip and stare at my reflection, trying to prep myself for how bad this might be. “What?”

“Your bodyguard is—” He sighs, a heavy sound that ties my stomach back into knots.

“Is what?” My trepidation is cut off by curiosity. Why is he bringing up

Brody?

“I’m so sorry. I’ve let you down.”

“Daddy, what are you talking about? Brody’s great. He’s a wonderful bodyguard.”

“He’s not a bodyguard. He’s a liar.”

I can’t speak for a second. Trying to absorb that is like trying to suck ice cream through a straw.

“Um... what?”

“His name is Brody Adams. He’s a nineteen-year-old loser with no qualifications. He’s been working off a false ID, and he’s fooled us all. The man he was working for vouched for him as a favor, but don’t worry, I’m going after them too.”

“He’s...” I shake my head. My brain won’t compute. “What?”

“Brody Markum is not who he says he is. He’s been lying to us all this whole time, and I’m beyond livid. He will not get away with treating us this way. Don’t you worry. Azim is firing him as we speak. He’s coming back to LA tonight where I can sort out this whole mess!”

My heart is thundering. I grip my towel, my reflection starting to blur as tears fill my eyes.

Brody’s a liar?

But no... I can trust him.

I... I thought I could trust him.

“He was just using this situation to get a decent job, and who knows what else he had planned.” Daddy keeps talking, but my ears are buzzing too much to pick up everything he’s saying.

*No. I don’t want to be used again.*

*No! Not Brody!*

“I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know that I have agreed to let you stay on for now. I’m very proud of how well you seem to be adjusting to college life on your own, and I’m willing to give you a trial until Thanksgiving break. When you come home to celebrate with us, we can discuss it then, but for now, you’re a free woman, just the way you wanted to be.” Daddy’s so obviously trying to sound pleased when he’s actually not, but I barely take in what he’s saying.

Brody’s a liar.

He lied.

To me.

Why? Why would he do that? Why would he be so nice to me? Has he got some sinister plans or something?

Anger starts to bubble as I relive all his sweet looks, his cute jokes, his soft touches. The way he so naturally protected me.

But it was all just fake!

No wonder he didn't want to tell me about his past. He didn't want to give anything away! That whole bullshit with his grandpa. He probably doesn't even have a twin brother. He's probably just making that up too. What's the bet this Jake is his accomplice and they have some grand scheme to get close, then swindle me out of everything!

Jake and Brody don't even look alike! I told him that when he showed me the photos, and he just laughed.

"I know. It's weird, huh? But there you have it. We are definitely twins."

Whatever!

"Daddy, I have to go," I somehow manage to say. My voice doesn't even sound like my own right now.

"Okay. Just know that I have your back. Brody is not getting away with this."

I sniff and nod, not sure what to say. Even if I did, would I physically be able to?

I can't believe this.

Brody's been lying to me this whole time.

And I fell for it, just like I always do. Because I'm a pathetic, spineless creature who is always so desperate to be liked that I'm blind to the truth right in front of me!

Covering my mouth with a trembling hand, I suck in a breath and try to feed off the anger and not the heartache. Half of me wants to plop onto the steam-soaked tiles and cry like a baby, but that won't achieve anything.

Brody's leaving. He's going back to LA.

And I am a world-class fool.

Of course he doesn't care about me.

Nobody ever truly does!

"Dammit, Brody." I grit my teeth.

He's not allowed to get away with this!

I'm not letting him walk out the door until I give him a piece of my mind!

"Liar," I mutter, pulling on my clothes and trying not to let it hurt me.

All those kisses.



They were fake!

Fake!

My heart starts to crack and I whimper, pushing my hand into my chest.

“Shut up, stupid heart. Don’t you dare cry. Be mad, Indy. Just be mad!”



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## A SUCKER PUNCH

Brody

“IS IT TRUE?” Indy storms into my room, her wet hair soaking into her T-shirt and creating two large circles.

The cotton fabric is tinged a faint purple, and I stare at it, unable to look her in the eye.

“Are you a liar?” Her harsh voice is a sharp slap to my heart.

I glance at her face, then quickly look away, not wanting to absorb the full power of her anger.

Instead, I go still. A glum, no doubt stupid, expression is on my face. I can feel it.

How do I answer her questions?

Her eyes fill with tears, her beautiful lips starting to shake as she reads what I’m not saying.

It’s a resounding yes.

Yes. I am a liar.

And I have no excuses. Not really.

I could try to sell the whole *I needed to give myself options* thing, but what does that even matter? She trusted me with her heart, and I’m doing a freaking good job of breaking it right now.

It kind of kills me, so when she steps forward and delivers a stinging slap on my cheek, I take it without complaint. I probably deserve it anyway.

Swiping a thumb under my nose, I rise and yank the empty bag out from under my bed.

“How could you do this? How could you look me in the eye and say all that bullshit! You led me on! You used me!”

“I didn’t use you,” I retort, unable to help myself. How can she think everything we’ve just been through was bullshit?

Unzipping the bag with a quick whoosh, I storm to my dresser and start throwing my clothes on the bed. “I needed a job, okay? And yeah, I lied about my name and my age, and all right, my total lack of qualifications. But I still think I did a pretty good job of looking out for you.” I stand with a huff, resting my hands on my hips. “I’m sorry. Okay? I wish I could take it all back, but—” I shake my head, my insides flaming with shame. “The truth’s out there now, and you’re obviously pretty pissed about it.”

“Of course I am!” she screeches. I’ve never heard her pitch so high, and I can’t help wincing and taking a small step back. “I opened up to you! I let you dye my hair! I let you kiss me, and it all meant nothing to you!”

“That’s not true.” I finally look her in the eye, my voice softening to a whisper. “That’s not true. None of that part was a lie.”

“Whatever.” She crosses her arms.

It stings.

No, it’s worse than that. It’s a sucker punch.

She thinks she means nothing to me?

“How can you... How can you say that?” I run a hand through my hair, then reach for her.

She backs up, moving like I’m a snake ready to attack.

I drop my arms, my chest squeezing so tight it hurts.

“I meant every one of those kisses. Every word I said—”

“You can’t tell me that every word you said is true when you have been lying to me this whole time! Do you even have brothers? Did you honestly grow up with Grandpa Ray? Or were you just making up lies so I wouldn’t know the truth! No wonder you didn’t want to tell me anything!”

The way she’s spitting the words shuts me up for a second.

She has no freaking idea how hard that was to talk about!

She has no idea what I went through, and she’s standing there judging me.

Miss Perfect with her entitled life. I’m not saying she hasn’t faced pain, but she hasn’t experienced anything close to the terror I lived through!

I snap my next drawer open, not even wanting to look at her. “I thought you’d understand.” My words are cutting because I don’t know how to make them anything else. “You know, you who spends her days pretending she’s something she’s not. Going by a different name, practically disowning her

family! You don't think Tabatha is going to feel exactly the way you do right now when she finds out who you really are?"

"I'm not out to hurt her! If anything, I'm protecting her! She wouldn't want to be friends with some celebrity's daughter. You know how much she despises all that Hollywood crap!"

"Yet you think I'm out to hurt you." I hurl my clothes at the bag, missing it entirely. My sweater rolls off the bed, landing on the floor behind it. "You think I took this job to somehow swindle you out of something. You believe it all so easily. One fucking phone call and you've put me in a box with concrete sides and zero leeway!"

She goes silent. I snatch a quick look at her, my insides wilting at the tears rolling down her cheeks. But then I look into her eyes and I know.

She's made up her mind.

How quickly people can turn on you.

I gather my mountain of clothes and punch them into my bag. "The part that kills me is that I could tell you every damn truth in the world right now and you've already decided you don't want to hear it. You've made up your mind, and I don't have a hope in hell of changing it."

She sniffs and I look at her in time to see her mouth open, then close, her expression crumpling as she storms out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.



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## A THOUSAND WOUNDED PIECES

*Indigo*

BRODY'S BITING words tear me to shreds.

I fling myself onto my neatly made bed, grabbing one of the throw pillows and screaming into it.

How dare he judge me when he's the one in the wrong?

I rest my head on the pillow, curling into the fetal position as I glare at the wall.

His words ricochet through me—taunting, slapping, hurting.

Is he right?

Will Tabby really hate me if she ever finds out the truth?

But I was just trying to protect myself!

*And what was he doing?*

I grip the pillow beneath my head, my body shuddering as it wars with doubts and needs.

Half of me wants to run to him. His arms around me, his solid chest against my cheek—it'll make it all better, and we can pretend like this isn't happening.

It's just a name, right?

What's in a name?

*It's more than a name!*

A small voice speaks to me, the logical one that overrides my emotions and reminds me that he's been playing me this whole time.

But that look on his face when I accused him of using me, of the fact that I meant nothing to him.

He looked like he was about to cry.

But then he got all pissy—a sure sign of guilt.  
I squeeze my eyes shut, my insides being torn in half.  
A door clicks behind me.  
Bringing my knees a little closer to my chest, I hold my breath and try not  
to move.  
He's standing in my doorway, I can feel it.  
I should roll over, say goodbye.  
But I can't move.  
A heavy sigh, followed by a soft farewell. "Goodbye, Indy. Take care of  
yourself."  
I say nothing, unable to speak past the solid lump in my throat.  
Take care of myself?  
How?  
Without him around, how am I supposed to do that?  
Panic nearly makes me leap off the bed and chase after him.  
Don't leave me! I can't do this without you!  
*Yes, you can.*  
The soft voice holds me still. Keeps me silent.  
A jingle of keys.  
Footsteps on the wooden floor.  
A door shutting.  
The finality of that click makes me buckle.  
My stomach jerks—an agonizing hiccup—and then I'm sobbing. Tears  
and snot coat the pillowcase as my heart splinters into a thousand wounded  
pieces.





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## SOME THINGS YOU CAN'T IGNORE

# Brody

THE DRIVE back to Hollywood is a long and torturous journey.

All I can see is Indy's petite body curled on that bed.

Oh man, I wanted to go to her, slide in behind her and wrap my arm around her waist, pull her against me and promise I'd never hurt her again.

But I couldn't make myself do it.

I don't deserve her anyway.

A lying criminal like me probably deserves jail time. Whereas she deserves a guy who will love her and treat her like the precious person she is. A guy who will see past the wealth and privilege, will love her for who she is as a person.

I could have done that for her.

Hell, I *was* doing that.

But now I can't.

I have to walk away. Ultimately, I'm doing her the biggest favor, even though it hurts like a mother right now.

Gripping the wheel, I let the anger and pain ride through me. I still don't know how they found out I was using a fake ID. I thought that thing was fireproof.

No one knew.

Except—

With an irate growl, I grab my phone and find Cyrus's number. I don't bother with pleasantries when he picks up.

"You sold me out? What the shit, man!"

"Hey, I didn't have a choice."

“I paid you back and everything. I thought we were good!”

“It had nothing to do with that. Castle Shaw’s a powerful man.”

“How did anyone even know to call and check up on me? How could you fold so easily?”

“The guy was laying it on pretty thick. Threatening me with a lawsuit if I didn’t come clean. I tried to hold out for as long as I could, but I can’t lose my business over this. I’m sorry, Bro.”

“Which guy? Was it Azim?”

“I don’t know his name. He’s security for Castle Shaw. He said he was checking on you because something didn’t add up.”

“How? I don’t get it. They cleared me for this job. No red flags. Now suddenly, after weeks of working for them, I’m under a microscope?”

“Well, have you done anything differently? Anything to make anyone suspicious?”

I shake my head. I can’t think of anything.

I mean, yeah, I’ve fallen for my boss’s daughter, but no one knows about that. We’ve managed to sell the cafeteria kiss as a ruse to get Parker off Indy’s back, but maybe that alerted someone.

Percy’s face brushes through my mind. That look he gave me after the kiss.

But he doesn’t know who Indy is, does he?

How would he even have connections with the Shaw family?

Unless he started researching The Crimson Jewel.

I clench my teeth and grit out, “I gotta go, man.”

“Good luck. And again, I am sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I understand.”

I blitz through the rest of the trip, lucky not to get caught by any cops, and pull up to the Shaws’ gate with my armor on. I hate it when people are pissed with me, but I have to take it the way Cooper taught me to and not let them see how much it hurts.

Taking the concrete steps two at a time, I walk in the open front door and am immediately directed to Castle Shaw’s den.

“You.” He points at me, his finger shaking. “What the hell did you think you were doing!”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“I trusted you to watch out for my daughter!”

“And I did that,” I assure him. My voice is confident because it’s the

truth. I don't have to sell anything. When it came to protecting Indy, I did my job and I did it well.

Except for maybe all the kissing stuff, but still, she never got injured or hurt or threatened or—

“A fake ID. You really thought you could get away with it?”

I nearly quip that I did for over a month, but I know better and keep my lips sealed.

It's probably best if I just let him get this all out. It might make him feel better, and potentially more forgiving.

My reasoning is pathetic at best.

He's gonna pummel me with all he's got.

Shit. I'm going to prison.

“Now you stand there and you tell me the truth! I want every word of it! Right now!”

My throat gets thick and gummy, making the words really hard to get out, but I somehow manage to croak, “My name is Brody Adams. I'm nineteen years old, and I've got a high school diploma to my name. I never thought college would be an option for me. I'm not a... Well, school's not really my thing. So I went to look for work, and other than bagging groceries and working at a gas station, I couldn't find anything that paid more than minimum wage. Then I got this job with Alpha Security. It was an awesome gig, until I accidentally threw some punk out of his father's club and he swore I'd never work in this town again. If I wanted a shot, I had to change some things. So I got a haircut, a fake ID, some certifications.” I dip my eyes to the floor, unable to look Mr. Shaw or Azim in the eye. “You wouldn't have hired me without that stuff.”

I risk a glance up. They're both still glaring at me, and I fold before I can stop myself.

“Look, I'm sorry. I know what I did was wrong. I shouldn't have lied to anybody, but I swear to you that I'm very capable of protecting your daughter, and I would have given my life to keep her safe... if that's what it'd come to. I'm not a loser. I just needed to be a few years older, and a little more qualified... on paper, that is. I can do this job.”

Castle gives me a deadpan stare and opens his mouth, but I raise my hand to stop him.

“I know I'm fired. I know I can't stop that now, but please... please believe that my intentions were never devious or bad or anything. I just

needed a job, and I knew I could do this one... really well.”

The side of Castle’s mouth twitches, and he looks up to Azim. The man nods, and then their stern gazes are right back on me again.

“Indigo called while you were traveling back.”

“She did?” I rasp.

“She’s asked me not to press charges. She told me you were a good bodyguard but understands why I’m firing you. She never wants to see you again.”

My hope sizzles, a stone-cold brick lodging in my chest.

“Brody Adams, you are to honor this request. You are not to see, talk to, or get within a hundred feet of my daughter. Ever.”

And the brick moves into my stomach.

“Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you choose to violate this request, then I will be forced to notify the police. I have all your falsified paperwork here, and it won’t be hard pinning a number of charges on you. I have the best lawyers in the country, so I wouldn’t bother crossing me.”

“No, sir.”

“Azim will walk you out.” He glances up at his head of security. “Swing past your office on the way so he can return the car key and his fake driver’s license.”

Azim nods, and I trail after him with lead feet.

Glancing back into the room, I try to catch Mr. Shaw’s eye, give him one more look of remorse or maybe a little gratitude, but he’s looking down at his computer, his fingers clicking swiftly over the keys.

“You’re lucky.” Azim turns to me as we enter his office.

I stop beside his desk, burying my hands in my pockets and not feeling lucky at all.

I just lost Indy. Big-time lost her.

“He was close to calling the police. In fact, I couldn’t talk him out of it. Indigo’s call made all the difference. She must have thought you were doing all right.”

“Yeah,” I croak.

Azim holds out his hand. “The key. And all your false identification. Anything from your wallet.”

I sigh and slap the key into his hand before pulling out the cards from my

wallet that bear the name Brody Markum.

Azim studies my license. “This is good, you know. Whoever made this has got talent.”

“Please don’t make me give you his name.”

With a little head shake, Azim settles my nerves. “I’m not here to ruin people’s lives. I’m just here to protect the ones I’m paid to.”

“I wouldn’t have let anything happen to her.”

“I know.” He looks like he means it, and I’m grateful.

Damn, I hate that I let him down. The disappointed twitch of his lips is killing me.

Gazing at his desk, I avoid eye contact and try to figure out how to walk out the door. The second I leave this property, I will never be back, and all ties with Indigo Shaw will be severed forever.

I don’t know how I’m gonna do that. I—

My eyebrows dip together as I gaze at the name and address on the pile of mail I’ve been staring at.

*ATTN: Burkhard Tuffin*

How do I know that name?

I pick up the envelope.

“Hey!” Azim barks. “Put that down.”

“Who is Burkhard Tuffin?”

Azim snatches the letter off me and hands me the keys to my car. “That’s not your concern. You’re done here. I know you didn’t mean any harm, but your time with the Shaw family is over. I’m sorry to say this, but you need to leave this property *now*, or I won’t be able to stop Castle from calling the police. He won’t put up with any more of your bullshit. You’re lucky you’re getting off this easy. ”

I back away from Azim’s harsh tone, rattled in ways I can’t even explain.

Tuffin. I know that name, but after the shit-fest this day has become, I can’t track the thought long enough to figure out where I’ve heard it before.

Rubbing a hand through my hair, I don’t bother saying goodbye as I slip out of Azim’s office and head for the front door. I’m three steps away when

sharp staccato heels stop me in my tracks.

“Well, hello.” Ruby’s sultry voice makes my skin crawl.

I give her a sideways glance and pick up my pace.

“Rushing away so soon?”

“I’ve been ordered to,” I clip, unable to help myself.

“Aw.” She’s beside me in two quick steps. “Poor Brody.”

Her long fingernails trail up my arm. I shift just out of reach, her eyes narrowing as she’s so obviously aware of my subtle message.

“You know, I don’t care. So you lied about your name and your age. Big deal.” Her head tips to the side, her lips curling into a sensuous red smile. “Now that you’re back, maybe you could guard me. I’m sure Castle wouldn’t mind. I’m not his precious little daughter, and after that last letter, I could use some beefed-up security.”

Her fingers curl around my bicep when she says the words “beefed up,” and it takes everything in me not to wrench away from her grasp.

I don’t want to hurt her, so I delicately remove her hand from my arm and change the subject. “Do you know who Burkhard Tuffin is?”

“Who?”

“Burk-hard Tuf-fin,” I repeat slowly, like I don’t know she speaks English.

She pouts, obviously steamed that I’m not falling for her flirtatious vibes. Her tone changes in a heartbeat and she snaps, “I don’t know anyone called Tuffin.”

“Burkhard. Does a Burkhard work here?”

“Ew. What kind of name is that?” Ruby flicks her hand like she’s done with me, then struts away, muttering under her breath.

Fat lot of help she was.

“Tuffin. Tuffin.” It’s an unusual surname. If it’s sparking some familiarity, I must have heard it before. But where?

I lope down the steps, my brain a stormy mess as I try to dodge the fact that I’m once again a jobless loser, and my fake ID is now gone. Back to square one. Back to bagging groceries. Back to no Indy.

The brick in my stomach weighs a freaking ton.

On top of that is the niggling anxiety I can’t shake. A tornado is swirling through me when I reach the bottom of the stairs, and I pause so I don’t get run over by the sleek black car that just pulled up. The windows are tinted, and I have no idea who the passenger is until a security guard jumps out the

driver's side and walks around to open the back door.

He eyes me up. At least I think he does. I can't tell with his shades on, but I'm assuming he's staring me down.

Opening the door without a word, he helps Castle's girlfriend out of the car.

Angelica spots me and jerks still before slipping her shades to the bottom of her nose and giving me a glare that makes my bones cold.

*Get the hell away from here.*

I can read that message loud and clear.

I keep moving, hunching my shoulders and staring at the ground as I walk past.

"Burk, take the shopping bags up to my room. And don't let Ruby see you. I have a surprise for her in there."

"Yes, ma'am."

My step falters and I can't help a glance over my shoulder.

The security guard is opening the trunk, filling his hand with expensive-looking shopping bags.

"Burk," I whisper to myself. "Burkhard Tuffin." I frown. "Tuffin. Tuff —"

My phone rings, disrupting the storm in my head. For a second, I thought that tornado was leading somewhere, but my ideas are derailed when I see Jake's name on my screen.

"Hey, man." I spot my car and reluctantly unlock it, dumping my bag on the passenger seat before slipping behind the wheel.

"Thanks for calling me back, Bro." Jake's sarcasm is not to be missed.

I look to the roof of my car—an eye roll so exaggerated it actually hurts. "Sorry. I'm just a little busy being fired."

"Again?"

"Dude, don't say it like that. You're making me feel like a total loser."

"My bad." Jake mumbles a quick apology, then asks. "What was the excuse this time?"

I sigh and tip my head back. "This one was totally on me. They found out I was using a fake ID and that I'm not certified to be a bodyguard. Shit. I don't even know how."

"You've been using a fake ID?"

I clench my jaw, not wanting to go into it.

"Man, I didn't know that. That's... Why?"



“I don’t know! I needed it to get the job. He added a couple years to my age and gave me a bunch of qualifications. It was solid.”

“And you never told me.”

I can hear his irritation and mutter, “I didn’t think you’d approve.”

“I don’t.”

“My point exactly.”

Jake lets out a heavy sigh, mercifully dropping the subject. Sort of. “You know, it kind of explains the bizarre phone call I had yesterday. I was gonna tell you before. This guy called me asking all about you.”

I close my eyes, feeling sick. “Did he give you his name?”

“No. He just called and asked me to verify my name. I told him I was Jake Adams, and then he asked if I had a twin brother named Brody who worked for Alpha Security.”

“What’d you say?”

“Uh... yes, because it’s the truth. I said you used to work for Alpha Security but had a new job now. Then I went to ask him who it was, but he just hung up. It was weird.”

“Did he sound old or...?”

“Nah, probably our age. What’s going on, man?”

“I don’t know. Everything was going great, and then I get this call saying they found out who I am, and I have no idea what triggered them, and then —” I go still, the tornado turning into a nuclear explosion as *finally* my memory comes clear. “Stud Muffin.”

“What?”

“Tuffin! Wren Tuffin.”

“Who’s Wren?”

“Shit,” I whisper, firing up the engine as cold dread sweeps through me.

Why am I feeling this way? Wren’s our friend. He wouldn’t sell me out. *Wouldn’t he?*

A knot forms in my throat and I rasp, “Jake, I gotta go.”

“No way. Don’t you leave me in the dark.”

I put the phone on speaker, dumping it on the passenger seat while I reverse out of my spot, and start telling Jake everything.

“So you think Wren is connected with this Burk guy and he was the one who got you fired?”

“It’s gotta be, right? Tuffin’s hardly a common last name.”

“Okay, let’s run with that for a second. Let’s say it’s true, but... why? Is

he worried about Indigo or something?”

“Maybe he wants me out of the way.” I accelerate through an intersection and head for the highway. “Calling me out means I automatically get fired.”

“But he had no way of knowing they wouldn’t replace you with someone else immediately.”

“What if he did? What if this Burk guy was the one who suggested Shaw let his daughter try things on her own for a while?”

“Okay, so you get kicked out of the picture, which means Wren, or anyone, has free access to Indigo without you in the way. But why? Does Wren have some kind of crush on her?”

“I...” My heart’s starting to thunder, Wren’s face flashing through my brain—his twitching nose, his erratic blinks, the way he’d sometimes watch Indy when he thought I wasn’t looking.

“Didn’t you say he has a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“Unless that’s all bullshit. Maybe you’re not the only one who’s been playing pretend.”

And now my heart is beating between my ears. A warning drum that’s making it hard to think straight. “Shit, I gotta call Indy.”

“Uh... is that the best idea? Didn’t her dad place some kind of restraining order against you?”

“I don’t care. It’s not official anyway. It was just a threat.” My voice is coming out erratic and jerky.

“Brody—”

“I gotta go. I gotta make sure she’s okay.”

“All right, man, but keep me posted. I’m here if you need my help.”

I nod, unable to speak as I press the gas pedal to the floor.

That anxious feeling in my gut is starting to grow, and it only gets worse when I dial Indy’s number and get no reply.



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## A GULLIBLE FOOL

*Indigo*

I STARE at the vibrating phone in my hand and can't bring myself to answer it.

Brody's name flashes on my screen, but what is there to say?

After half an hour of nonstop crying and a missed class, I called my father.

He was adamant that Brody was going down for what he did. I understood why Daddy was so pissed. Brody lied to get this job, and that wasn't cool. But when my father started ranting that he was going to make sure Brody was sent to prison, I just couldn't handle it.

So I freaking begged.

I begged for him to simply fire Brody and be done with it.

He finally agreed on the condition that I never have any contact with Brody again.

How can I break that so quickly?

I don't want him thrown in prison. Sure, he lied, and that freaking stings... but he never meant to hurt me. And it was just his name and age, right?

I mean... I can't get his words out of my head.

I was yelling at him for doing this to me, when I've been doing it to Tabby.

Dammit, I'm such a hypocrite!

Closing my eyes, I fight off a fresh flood of tears. I'm still not rushing to tell Tabby the truth, even when she called me before. I thought about it, but then she totally distracted me when she admitted to breaking up with Wren.

I couldn't believe it!

It all feels so sudden.

Surely the horror movie thing wasn't the tipping point, was it?

She started crying and saying she just couldn't do it anymore.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to talk about it." She sniffed and I didn't push her.

I didn't really want to talk about it either. I had my own heartbreak to deal with, and with her so upset, I didn't think it'd be the best time to admit that I've been hiding who I really am.

That actually, I'm related to Ruby—The Crimson Jewel.

Ugh. That's going to go down like a lead balloon.

Will Tabby hate me?

Is this just another failed friendship attempt?

When am I gonna feel like I belong somewhere?

I sniff, my phone starting to vibrate again.

With a tearful huff, I turn it off. Seeing Brody's name again is just too tempting. I can't hear his voice right now. I can't risk it. Even if he is calling to apologize or whatever, I just... I don't want to get him into trouble.

Burying the phone in the bottom of my bag, I hitch it a little higher onto my shoulder and keep walking toward campus.

I may as well get to my last class of the day. It'll be a good distraction, right? And then I can go back to the apartment and curl up with a bag of peanut butter chips to make myself feel better. I still have Brody's sweater on the chair in my room. Will it hurt too much to wear it? Or will it ease the pain somehow?

Wiping my face, I pinch my cheeks just a little, hoping I don't look as disgusting as I feel. I slathered makeup on to try and hide the cry-fest, but I don't know how successful I've been. I just hope I don't bump into anyone.

"Hey, Indy."

*Argh!*

I keep walking, but the male voice behind me won't let up.

"In-dy!" he calls, laughing as he runs to catch me. I can hear his footsteps and am forced to slow down.

"Oh, hey, Wren. How's it going?" I force a smile, which he hasn't noticed yet, because he's striding along beside me, completely unaware of my inner turmoil.

He looks kind of chipper for a guy who's just been dumped.

“You doing okay?” He looks down at me, and I make my smile a little broader.

“Of course. I just...” My voice trails off when a sudden look of confusion screws up his face.

“Where’s Brody?” He looks all around and then snickers. “Oh my gosh, have I entered an alternate reality or something? Your roommate isn’t by your side! What’s going on?”

His playful teasing disappears the second he looks back at me, his eyes quickly filling with sympathy.

“Hey. Don’t cry. What’s the matter?”

I sniff and shake my head.

“Did you guys get in a fight or something? Did you break up?” His arm comes around my shoulders, guiding me off the path so I’m not blubbing my way past other students. I’ve already seen a couple people double-glancing at me, and one girl is outright staring.

Wren shoots her a look that makes her jump and she scuttles away, resting her chin on top of the textbook she’s hugging.

“Don’t mind them.” Wren turns me around so I’m facing the grove of trees on the other side of the green. “Talk to your ol’ buddy Wren. Or do you want me to call Tabby for you?”

“No, it’s okay.” I shake my head. “I don’t really want to talk about it.” I frown and murmur, “Aren’t you guys broken up?”

His lips dip with a frown, and he lets out a sad sigh.

“She called you, huh?”

“Yeah. Just before.”

He sighs again. “She said a break, not... broken up. I guess I’m still feeling kind of hopeful.” Crossing his arms, he stares at the grass between our feet, his nose twitching while he blinks rapidly. Poor guy. Does he want to cry right now? “Did she say something else?”

I bite my bottom lip. “She didn’t say much. She’s kind of upset. Didn’t really want to talk about it.”

“Just like you.” His sad expression no doubt mirrors mine. “You’re looking a mess, and if you don’t want curious stares, then maybe you should skip class and I’ll take you home.”

I sniff. “I don’t know if I want to go home either. The apartment is so empty.” I shudder. “And quiet.”

“Damn. You guys must have had one hell of a fight.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I half snap, half wail.

“Okay.” Wren rubs my back, gently shushing me. “It’s all good. Let’s just...” He points to his left. “Let’s walk this way for a little bit. We can shuffle our sad asses around the campus for a while. Maybe that’ll make both of us feel better.”

With a reluctant sigh, I trail after him until he slows his pace and we’re soon ambling along together. We don’t say anything to each other. Walking in companionable silence isn’t bad, but after I don’t know how long, I start to feel awkward.

We’ve reached the other side of the campus now, having rambled down every twisting pathway there is. I glance at my watch. Holy crap!

“Wow. It’s way later than I thought it was. Thanks for walking me around, though. I think I’m feeling a little better.”

“Hey, what are friends for, right?” He draws us to a stop and I glance around me, trying to figure out exactly where we are.

Which building is this?

We’re at the back of it, and I can’t see any signage around.

“Where are we?” I ask, annoyed with myself for not paying better attention.

There’s like no one else around. We must have wandered into the back end of the school.

“Not exactly sure.” Wren grins.

I look up at the sky. “It’s gonna be dark soon. We should head back.”

“Yeah, totally.” He grabs my hand and starts leading me to the right.

I hesitate. For one, it’s weird that he’s holding my hand, and secondly... “I don’t think that’s the right way.”

Gazing ahead, I can see the path narrowing even further and dipping around the corner.

“We should go back the way we came.”

“It’s all good.” Wren’s grip on my hand gets a little tighter. “Come on.”

“No, Wren. I don’t want to go that way. We should—” He yanks on my arm, making me gasp with fright. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t say anything, just tugs me a little harder.

That’s when the spark of fear ignites in my chest.

“Wren?”

He doesn’t reply, dragging me farther down the narrowing pathway.

And the fear blooms.

“Stop it,” I whisper, my brain struggling to compute this sudden change in a person I thought I knew.

He’s not listening to me.

I try to wriggle my fingers free, but he just squeezes that much harder, then spins around, capturing my other wrist and pulling me close.

His breath is on my skin. It feels like spiders are crawling up my spine. A shudder runs through me as he presses his nose against the side of my head. His hot breath gets my gag reflex going.

“I’m gonna enjoy this.” His voice is revolting and foreign. “I’ve been dreaming about it for weeks.”

Walking me backward, I stumble and trip until I’m rammed into a concrete wall.

“Ow,” I whimper, but the sound is cut off by his lips. They’re rough and brutal. I squirm to get him off me, pushing at his chest and trying to turn my head away.

“Stop fighting, honey. Just go with it.” His smile is heinous, the dark glint in his eye telling me that good things are not coming my way.

The second his fingers curl around my throat, the blooming fear in my chest spikes out of control. That terrifying sensation of my air supply being cut short, that blinding panic as I gasp for breath, overwhelms me.

*I’m gonna die!*

*He’s killing me!*

Pressing his forehead into my cheek, he sniffs my skin, then lightly kisses the edge of my jaw while I grasp his wrists and struggle to set myself free.

*No! I want to live!*

*I need to live!*

As hysteria tries to take me out, my body is suddenly injected with a fight instinct that makes me lash out.

I raise my knee hard and fast, just the way Azim taught me.

Wren yelps, doubling over as his grip on me relaxes.

I wrench out of his grasp and start to run.

“No!” he roars, lurching after me.

I scream, jerking backward when he snatches my bag and tries to hinder my escape. I wrestle the straps off my shoulders and scramble away from him, tripping in my haste.

My knee hits the concrete with a painful thud, but I jump back to my feet and start running. It’s a jerky, erratic escape, my arms flailing by my sides as



I try to gain some ground.

I've never been fast. I'm a long-distance runner. I can plod along for miles, but my short little legs barely make much ground, and I can hear Wren closing the distance—fast.

With a terrified whimper, I lurch to the left, ducking between two buildings. There's no way I can outrun him. My best bet is to hide and hope like hell that he'll run right past me.

Trying every door I pass, I'm let down by the fact that they're all locked.

My whimpers are turning into gut-wrenching sobs of fear as I'm met with repeated shutouts.

Wren's coming at me again. I scream and dart down the first alley, picking up my pace to try and get to the next corner before he sees me. Darkness is descending, but not fast enough. I need the shadows, and make a beeline for the first ones I see.

I nearly cry with relief when I realize it's an open door. I bolt through it and find myself in a large storage space. Wooden crates are stacked high around me, and I weave through the aisles, creeping as quietly as I can and trying to keep my breathing under control.

"Indy!" Wren shouts before letting out a maniacal laugh. "You forgot your bag." I can hear him jiggling it.

My insides jerk and I jump to the side, pressing myself around the corner and leaning my back against a stack of crates.

"There's no point hiding! This ends with me taking you out of here, all right? There's this cool place I want to show you."

I hold my breath, laying a hand over my stomach to try and stop it from shaking. I don't want him to hear me. Closing my eyes, I fight the swell of terror.

My throat is aching. My teeth are starting to chatter as the shakes try to take out the rest of my body.

I don't know what the hell is going on right now.

Wren?

What does he want with me?

Shit, does he know who I am? Has he known all along?

This is crazy.

Is Tabby in on it too?

No. Not Tabby. She just dumped his ass. I wish I'd asked why!

Maybe Percy knows.

Weird ol' Percy.

Dammit, I am such a gullible fool!

Tears trickle down my cheeks.

Wren's still moving around, his footsteps coming in and out.

"In-dy," he kind of sings, his voice a mocking tune that makes my skin crawl. "I'm gonna find you. And we're gonna have some fun. Some sweet, sweet fun."

I tense, then nearly pass out when I hear the familiar click of a gun being cocked. He does it slowly, gently, like he's trying to be quiet, but I know that sound.

My mouth opens, terror roaring up my throat. Thankfully my scream is silent, my mind somehow warning me to shut the hell up.

He's got a gun. And this sick horror fiend is probably not going to use it to mercifully shoot me in the head. He'll probably just injure me so I can't get away, and then he'll find demented, twisted ways to slowly end my life!

Closing my eyes, I set more tears free as I will myself to be a quiet little mouse.

*Little mouse. Little mouse.*

I try to think of Loretta. My bedroom. A safe place that can stop me from freaking out.

But then a hand covers my mouth.

I scream, but the sound is muffled as I jerk and try to wrench myself free. But he's too powerful.

Iron hands spin me around and the scream in my throat evaporates, coming out as a pitiful, muted sob when I see who's holding me.

Brody.

I wilt against him, resting the top of my head into his chest, my entire body quivering. He cups the back of my head, his other hand running down my spine before he gently takes my hand and leads me out of the storage room.

Wren's around the other side. I can hear him shuffling, still singing out my name.

The second we're out of the building and far enough away not to be heard, we break into a sprint, not letting up until we reach Brody's car. He opens his door, guiding me inside and pulling away into the darkness.



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## WHATEVER IT TAKES

Brody

MY BREATHS ARE COMING out sharp and erratic.

I have no idea what to do right now.

The only thought churning through my brain is cutting out Wren's tongue and then maybe dismembering him, piece by piece.

Indy's sitting in the passenger seat, holding her knees and whimpering softly. She's shaking uncontrollably, and I don't know what to do.

Distance. That's the only thing I can think of.

I need to get her as far from Wren as I can.

But, shit, she shouldn't be in my car. If her father finds out, it's a one-way ticket to jail, and then how the hell will I protect her?

"I'm sorry," I murmur. "I know I'm not supposed to be here right now, but I couldn't let you get hurt."

Taking a hard left, I screech around the corner and make my way out of Fitzroy, checking the rearview mirror as I go. No one's following us, and it calms me enough to dull my fight-or-flight reflex.

"Are you okay?" I finally ask, my insides settling enough to form words.

Indy doesn't say anything, and I let it slide for another two miles before I can't handle it anymore. As soon as I spot a turn-off, I take the road and pull the car into a wide patch of grass on the shoulder. Darkness shrouds us as soon as I kill the lights. The black cloak provides a second of safety, so I cut the engine and turn to face her.

The dusky night is bright enough to make out her face. It'll be completely dark soon, with only moonlight to help me. I hope it's enough. I need to see her. To know she's okay.

As gently as I can, I cup her cheek and force her to look at me.

“Talk to me,” I whisper. “Did he hurt you?”

“He kissed me.” She sucks in a ragged breath while a haze of red crosses my vision. “Tried to... choke me...” She touches her throat and I move her hand away, leaning forward to inspect the tender skin. I can’t see any obvious marks. I rub my thumb gently down her neck, hoping it’s a balm.

“Just... really... scared.” The words come out between sobs, and I unbuckle her seat belt, pulling her onto my lap. It’s awkward with the steering wheel in the way, so I push the seat back as far as I can. It gives her enough room to settle against me.

“Is this okay? I know you said you never want to see me again, but—”

She nestles her wet cheek against my shoulder, her arms coming around my neck and clinging tight.

“I never said that,” she whimpers, her body starting to tremble with tears. I close my eyes, relief flooding me.

She didn’t say it.

Her father did. And he’s probably still gonna have my head for this.

But man, it’s worth it.

I hold Indy close, stroking her back and kissing the side of her head.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “I’m here. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Why did he do that? What does he want with me?”

“I don’t know.” I run my fingers down the back of her head. “I’m trying to work it out.” My mind is running over with possibilities and connections, but I can’t really make sense of them all. The only solid notion I have is that Wren and Burk are somehow connected, but what I don’t get is why the hell this is all happening.

Unless Wren is somehow the stalker.

But does Burk know that? Or is Wren using his inside knowledge to manipulate Burk too?

Indy sniffs, her lips brushing across my neck. “You came back for me.”

Her sweet voice makes me smile. “I just got an ugly feeling, and I had to. I know I’m breaking all the rules, but—” Emotion cuts me off for a second. “I couldn’t walk away. I had to get to you as fast as I could.”

She sucks in another breath, and I wonder if she’s about to start crying again.

“It’s okay.” I kiss her cheek and hold her that much tighter. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I should have trusted you,” she whimpers. “I believed Daddy so easily, and I let you just walk out that door without giving you a chance to explain. I walked right into Wren’s trap when I should have been beside you, fighting... for you.”

“Hey.” I gently push her away from me so I can look into her eyes. “You haven’t done anything wrong. I lied to you. And that’s not okay. I want to tell you everything, but I’m scared of losing you.”

She shakes her head, the whisper of a smile pulling at her lips. “Brody, I...” Her words trail off, uncertainty making her stutter. “I...”

“If you knew everything, you... you wouldn’t want me. You’d walk away. And you’d have every right too. Shit, you should probably start running right now.”

Confusion mars her expression. “Who are you? Why are you saying this to me?”

“Because I want to protect you. I don’t want you to get hurt. I want you to be with someone you deserve.”

“And why wouldn’t I deserve you?”

Tears blindside me and I blink, desperately trying to hold them off. Grandpa told me never to be ashamed of my tears. I was the biggest crybaby as a kid, but he told me people process emotions in different ways.

But still, Cooper was always so stoic, and in this moment, I want to be just like him.

“Brody, look at me.”

I struggle to do as she asks, so she forces my chin up. I’m staring into those beautiful brown eyes, and I’m lost for a second.

“Tell me who you are. What are you hiding from? Are you part of this whole Wren scheme?”

“No.” I jolt, repulsed by the idea. “It’s not that at all.”

“Then what?”

“I...”

Her eyes start to glisten, and then the words are tumbling out of me before I can stop them, a rush of truth from my past. I start with my drunken father and dying mother, no doubt confusing her as I plow through my life on the ranch and that fatal night that changed everything.

“So, Cooper saved Deeks’s life and then... we hid it.” My face scrunches up so tight it hurts. “It was my idea.”

“To protect your brother.”

“And Grandpa Ray, I guess. He did kidnap us.”

“For every good reason.”

Tears are trickling down my cheeks. I can't stop them. “And then he died anyway, so it was...” I shake my head. “It was all for nothing.”

“So, you became someone else?”

“Not initially.” I sniff, slashing a knuckle over my cheek. “Jake and I got put into foster care. Cooper took off, and we don't know what happened to him. He wasn't around to keep us together, so Michael and Deeks got sent to a group home, and we were put with this pretty decent family, at first.” My jaw works to the side. “But then they moved out of state and we were sent someplace else, and then another place and then another, and I think another. I...” I shake my head. “I've lost count. When we graduated high school and Jake left for Stanford, I thought this would be an awesome chance to finally have control over my life. But then I couldn't find a decent job, and then I did but I got fired, and I was living in this shitty apartment. I needed work, something that paid well, and when the chance to work for your dad came up, I just... I had to make it happen.”

She doesn't say anything, and it takes all my courage to look back into her eyes.

They're glimmering, but not with anger. Sympathy is etched into her features, her hands soft as she brushes her fingers through my hair. “I'm sorry you had to go through that. And I thought I got a bad rap. I know nothing.”

“Hey, it's all relative to our personal story, right? I just... I guess I want you to understand where I'm coming from, and I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before. And I'm sorry I lied.”

“I get why you did,” she whispers.

My smile feels shy all of a sudden, my voice husky. “So, do I need to pass you your running shoes?”

The affectionate grin she beams me makes my heart expand like it's taking its first real breath. Ever.

“Brody Adams—”

“Barrett,” I softly correct her. “It was Grandpa Ray's name. My mom's maiden name. I wish I could officially claim it, but if you're gonna call me anything, make it Brody Barrett.”

She smiles again. “Okay. Brody Barrett, we've got lots more to talk about. There are so many details I need, and that's gonna take time.”

I nod, wondering where she's going with this.

“Which means that you need to get me back to LA, right now. I have to tell my father that you and I belong together, whether he likes it or not. So, let’s just get home and figure out what the hell Wren’s problem is, then put this whole thing behind us so we can move forward.”

“You want to move forward... with me?” I can’t hide my surprise.

She looks at me like I’m crazy. “Of course I do.”

“Even after everything I just—”

She cuts me off with a solid kiss, and I let the doubts disintegrate in my brain. Her warm body pressed against mine sets off new charges of determination.

As I cup the back of her head and deepen the kiss, my conviction turns to concrete. Indy’s right. We do belong together, and I’m gonna fight to make that a reality.

Whatever it takes.





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## AND THEN... NOTHING

# Indigo

NERVES RACE THROUGH ME, settling into a heady thrum as I buckle up and we prepare to head back to Hollywood.

I can't believe everything Brody just told me. My mind is reeling, yet I'm not afraid.

All I can feel is this deep sympathy, an aching pain for the scared teenager he must have been. Having his father bust in like that, basically killing his grandfather in the process. They must have all been so afraid.

"How'd you hide it?" I softly ask.

Brody starts the engine. It rumbles to life, and we sit in vibrating silence for a moment.

"We buried his body up by the ridge. Got rid of his truck. Scrubbed the floor." His voice shakes unevenly.

I bite my lips, wondering how much more to ask. "No one ever came looking for him?"

His shoulder hitches. "I was too scared to even think about that. The guy was a drunk loser. I don't know if he had a job or any friends. I've got vague memories of someone in uniform visiting our first foster home, but Jake did all the talking." Brody's voice drifts off for a moment, but then he sniffs and starts nodding. "Yeah, I'm guessing they just put it down to a missing person case."

"You must have been terrified."

"Yeah," he croaked. "Worst thing that's ever happened to me. Followed very closely by today. When I was driving back here and you wouldn't answer your phone. That dread in my stomach got worse and worse."

“How’d you find me?”

Brody sniffs, tipping his head with a reluctant smile. “Azim made me install a phone tracking app. Thankfully, Wren grabbed your bag, so I was able to pinpoint his location.” He gives me a pained look that makes me want to cry. “I nearly walked right past you, but I just caught this movement out of the corner of my eye.”

Resting my hand on his cheek, I give him a watery smile.

*I love you.*

The words whisper through my brain, but I don’t have the courage to say them.

I can see how much he cares about me, and it’s making my heart do weird things. Things I’ve never felt before.

Leaning forward, he brushes a kiss across my lips. “Let’s get you home safe.”

The words “safe” and “home” don’t seem to pair very easily right now, and I can’t help a small snicker as he flicks on the lights and does a quick U-turn.

“What?” He grins at my laughter and I’m about to tell him, but instead I let out a scream as a set of headlights seems to appear out of nowhere, charging toward us.

“Ah!” Brody cries out, wrenching the wheel to avoid it, but it’s no use.

A pickup truck rams into us.

My neck pings forward and then back, slamming into the headrest. Black spots scatter across my vision as Brody’s car skids off the road, tumbling into the ditch with a bone-shattering crunch.

Fear punches a fresh scream straight out of me, pain following swiftly in its wake.

My head is spinning, the black dots converging into a large mass.

“Brody,” I rasp, reaching out for him, unnerved by his silence. My fingers fumble over his body, figuring out that he’s slumped forward and resting against the wheel. Unbuckling my seat belt, I nearly drop onto him, the angle of the car working against me. “Wake up.” I shake him, but he’s still not saying anything. I feel around his face, my hand skimming his mouth. A soft breath whispers over my skin and my body shudders with relief, until I feel a wet, sticky sensation beneath my fingertips. “Brody!” I gasp. “You’re bleeding!”

The door behind me wrenches open.

I yelp, straining away from the two strong hands when they snatch my arms and haul me out of the car.

“No!” I scream and try to fight, but my limbs have turned to rubber.

They pick me up off the ground, and I’m hauled out of the ditch and thrown into the bed of the truck. My elbow smarts as it hits the unforgiving metal, but I lurch up, trying to scramble back out.

A firm hand slaps across my mouth.

I scream and struggle but am no match for the strength I’m battling.

A foreign, sweet smell fills my senses, the material shoved into my face making me gag and writhe. The black dots I’ve been fighting merge instantly. My body turns to liquid and then... nothing.



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## WALK ON, EVEN THOUGH IT HURTS

Brody

A SCREAM ECHOES through the back of my mind.

It's distant and far away.

The dreamy haze I'm shrouded in won't let me pinpoint its location.

But I can feel the fear.

It sends a shock wave through my senses, and my eyes jolt open.

The world is sideways. My sludgy brain tries to work out where the hell I am.

With a soft groan, I go to sit up, but the movement makes me want to puke.

I rest my head back against the hard surface and try to figure out what I'm leaning against. My arms are deadweights as I lift them, my clumsy fingers exploring my dark surroundings and finally alerting me to the fact that I'm lying against a steering wheel.

I hiss the second my fingers touch the sticky patch above my eyebrow.

"Ouch." I force my body back, carefully investigating the wound.

Blood is coating the side of my face, I can feel it.

No wonder my head hurts so freaking much.

I swivel to look at the passenger seat, that fearful warning building to a crescendo.

"Indy."

She was with me.

We were—

"Indy!" I shout again, fumbling to unbuckle my seat belt so I can investigate the area.

Did she fly through the windshield? Fall to the floor? Try to escape and faint on the way out?

The truck.

Two headlight beams crystalize in my brain.

They came out of nowhere.

My heart starts to race, threatening to punch out of my chest as I scramble to find my phone. I grapple around in the dark, finally wrapping my digits around a shattered phone. I can feel the splintered screen and shout out a string of curse words when the buttons refuse to turn the device on.

With a gargled roar, I shove the driver's door open and stumble out of the car.

"Indy!" I shout, tripping my way around the vehicle.

The silence that smothers me drops me to my knees. I crawl around the grass on her side of the car, praying for some kind of reveal.

But I'm all alone.

She's gone.

Taken.

"Indy." I sob her name, slumping onto my butt and wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do now.

My aching body is telling me I may as well just give up.

"You're stronger than this, Brody." Grandpa's voice fills my brain. "Now you stop that crying and get yourself up."

I sniffled into my arm and shook my head. "I can't. It's too hard."

"Hey." Grandpa crouched down beside me. "Don't you give me that. You're an ox, Brody Barrett. You're tough. You're strong. You can do this."

The mountain trail ahead of us looked steep and mean. My brothers soldiered forward while I sat on my butt, my scraped knees on fire, the palms of my hands sore and swollen.

"I know it burns right now. You took a big tumble." Grandpa wrapped his arm back around me, giving me another sideways hug. "But you just think how good you're gonna feel when you get back from this hike. Not only will you have the satisfaction of knowing you completed it, but you did it when you were hurting. That makes you the toughest of us all." His eyes glimmered with a smile. "I'm pretty sure that's gonna earn you an evening on the couch with zero chores and five very willing butlers who'll treat you like a king."

I laughed, kind of loving that idea.

Hauling me back to my feet, Grandpa lightly pinched my chin. “The hardest things in this life are often the most worthwhile. Never give up on the important fights, especially when things start to hurt. You keep going, one foot in front of the other, and you’ll make it eventually. God always makes a way.” His lips grew into a broad smile. “Today, I’m your way, and I love you too much to let you quit.” Reaching out his hand, he let me take it and he helped me up that hill.

He actually stayed by my side for the rest of the hike. I don’t remember my evening of being treated like a king. There are a few blurry images, I guess. But I’ll never forget that hike.

“One foot in front of the other,” I rasp, forcing my limbs to cooperate.

After a few painful beats, I’m standing.

And then I’m walking.

It’s a slow shuffle, as I nurse my aching side and battle a head that wants to float right off my body.

I swear I’m losing my mind, falling into a dead faint when two hazy blobs of light start coming toward me. It takes a moment to realize they’re headlights, and my arm shoots into the air.

“Hey,” I croak, waving as frantically as I can.

The car slows and then pulls to a stop beside me.

“You all right, son?” I open the cab door, the interior light answering his question in a heartbeat. “Geez! Get on in here.”

I struggle into the seat, my head flopping back. “Need a phone.”

“I don’t have one of those.” He winces and I shake my head, struggling to believe him. Who doesn’t have a cell phone? “But I can take you anywhere you need to go. I’m thinking the local hospital will be a good start.”

He hands me a white handkerchief. I give him a dubious grimace. “You’ll never get it back the same.”

Holding it close to me, he stifles a chuckle. “You need it more than I do.”

I take it and start dabbing my head while he takes off down the road.

“LA. Hollywood,” I instruct him.

“All that way? There’s hospitals closer than that.”

“Please. It’s an emergency. I have to get to the home of Castle Shaw.”

“The billionaire?”

“His daughter’s in trouble. I need to help her.”

The desperation in my voice must be ringing loud and clear. The man presses a little harder on the accelerator. “Let’s get you to a phone first.



Sounds like a call to the police might be in order.”

I’m skeptical but feel too sick to argue with him.

Less than twenty minutes later, we’re pulling into a truck stop and I’m calling the police.

Of course they think I’m playing a prank.

“Indigo Shaw,” the operator practically chuckles. “Daughter of billionaire Castle Shaw? You think she’s been kidnapped.”

“Yes!”

“Sir, this line is for emergencies only. A prank 911 call comes with serious consequences.”

“I’m not—argh!” I slam the receiver down and wish I knew Azim’s number. I seriously doubt an operator will just put me through to the house.

Dammit!

“LA! Hollywood!” I shout as I run back to the beat-up old truck and start praying that it’ll magically move at the speed of light.

I don’t know where the hell Indy is right now, but I can feel it in my core—she’s in trouble, and I won’t rest until she’s safe in my arms again.



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## WHERE AM I?

*Indigo*

I LET OUT A SOFT GROAN.

*Where am I?*

My forehead crinkles as I try to shake the fuzzy haze from my brain.

Reaching up to press my fingers into my forehead, I'm suddenly stopped by something hard.

"Ow," I moan.

I lift my hand, and once again my knuckles whack into something solid.

*Is that wood?*

*What?*

My eyes fly open and I'm facing utter darkness.

Like a darkness I've never experienced in my life. It's cold and eerie, an inky blackness that I can't penetrate. I am completely shrouded.

My chest starts to heave, panic finding an instant home in my heart.

With jerky movements, I try to investigate my surroundings.

I'm lying on something hard. Like wood. I think it smells like wood.

When I raise my knees to move, they hit a barrier the same way my hand did.

Gliding my fingers over the rough surface, I search for answers, quickly finding an edge, which leads to a wall.

I do the same on the other side and work my way up until I realize with sickening dread that I'm in some kind of box.

A rectangular-shaped box.

Like a coffin.

The revelation runs through me. It's a wave of sheer terror.

*Have I been buried alive?*

My eyes bulge, taking in the dark truth around me, and a scream explodes out of my mouth.



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FAVORITE NUMBER: 315

Brody

RHETT, the old pickup driver with a heart of pure gold, drove me all the way to the Shaws' gate. It was an hour out of his way, and I still can't believe he did it.

I told him everything as I sweated, dabbed my aching eyebrow, and tried not to panic.

He didn't say much in response, just nodded and made the appropriate noises of sympathy and concern. There are seriously no words good enough to ever express my thanks.

As I slip out of the car, I look back at him.

"Do you need me to stick around?" he asks in his gravelly, bearlike voice.

"No, I've got it from here. Thank you. I..." The words dry up in my mouth because they don't even begin to cover my gratitude.

He raises his hand with a kind smile, reminding me of Grandpa Ray. "I was in the right place at the right time. Makes me feel pretty good about life when that kind of thing happens. You take care, son." He extends his hand, and I shake it. "You'll find her."

His faith gives me hope as I wave goodbye and watch him reverse onto the street.

But then I turn back to face the gate and the dread sets in again—that dark, underlying warning that this is bad, and it could potentially get worse.

With a thick swallow, I walk to the intercom, pressing the buzzer with a quivering finger.

Azim answers, his sharp voice coming through the speaker. "What are you doing back here?"

“Indy’s in trouble!” I rush out the words. “I tried to call the police, but they didn’t believe me.”

“They’ve already called here, warning us that some guy was pranking them.”

My eyes grow big as I stare at the security camera. “And?”

Azim pauses. It’s a long beat—ominous and terrifying. “We can’t reach her.”

“Let me in!” I shout. “Please, you gotta let me help you! I was with her when she was taken.”

“You shouldn’t have been anywhere near her!”

“Let! Me! In!” My roar sounds more wild animal than human being, but a moment later there’s a buzz and the gates slowly part.

I rush through them, sprinting up the driveway and taking the stairs three at a time. I burst into the gleaming entrance and find a huddle of security guards outside Mr. Shaw’s den.

I barrel through the suits, shoving them aside until I see Indy’s father on the couch, nursing a tumbler of alcohol and glaring at me like I’m Satan himself.

“Indy’s been taken. I was driving her back here to sort out this whole mess when my car was hit by a—”

“What were you doing with her? I told you to stay away from my daughter!”

“I was saving her life! When I got back to Mont U, she was hiding in a storage space, trying to escape a guy with a gun. A guy—”

“What guy?”

I ignore the question, spinning around to eye up the security. My eyes zero in on Mr. Shades, and I’m running for him before anyone can stop me.

“What are you doing?” someone shouts behind me, but I’m too busy fisting a jacket and shoving Burkhard Tuffin against the wall.

“Get your hands off me,” he grits out, fighting me off.

I press my forearm against his chest and put all my weight into squashing him against the wall. “Where’s Wren? I know he’s taken her!”

Rough hands tug at my shoulders, overpowering me and pulling me back. “Let him go!”

Azim’s shouting now, looking ready to thump me as he stands between me and his security guard.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“He’s in on this!” I point an accusing finger at Burk.

The guy has the audacity to shake his head like he doesn’t know what I’m talking about.

That’s bullshit!

I turn to Azim, silently begging him to understand me. “Burk and Wren have the same last name! I saw the envelope in your office, and I know they’re related somehow.”

“How do you figure that?” Azim’s skeptical.

“They have the same last name, and you can’t tell me that Tuffin is common! What’s the connection?” I glare past Azim’s shoulder, trying to catch Burk’s eye.

The guy is busy straightening his jacket and avoiding my glare.

“Burk!” I thunder. “We’re running out of time!”

A muscle in his jaw jerks, and he pulls his sleeve straight.

“Dammit! He took her! He’s gonna kill her!”

Burk looks to the ground, his nostrils flaring slightly.

That’s when Azim’s steely voice cuts the air. “Burk. You know about this?”

No response.

He grabs his wrist and lifts his chin, staring straight ahead like a soldier at attention.

He’s not answering the questions. Because he can’t!

Busted.

So freaking busted!

I wrestle free of the guards holding me, my nostrils flaring as I lunge after him again.

But Azim stops me. I surge against his fend off, shouting past his ear. “You know Wren! You knew he was gonna be at Mont U! You set this up!”

Castle moves in front of me, approaching Burk with a horrified stare. “Is this true?”

Burk sighs, rubbing a finger under his nose. His eyes skim past mine before he mutters, “You should have sent me instead. I was supposed to go. I would have kept her safe.”

“Bullshit!” I bark. “You set this up! Where is she?”

Castle jumps on my bandwagon, pointing an accusing finger at Burk and shouting, “Where’s my daughter?”

Burk clenches his jaw and shakes his head.



“Where’s my daughter! Where is she! Tell me! Tell me now!”

“I don’t know!” Burk finally snaps, his voice rising to a shout.

The room goes still, yet I feel like I’m standing in a vat of boiling oil. Anger is bubbling around me. The heat directed at Burk is a blue flame of fury.

“Call him,” I spit. “Find Wren!”

Burk hesitates, biting his lip and looking dubious. Glancing over his shoulder, he seeks out something in the entryway, but there’s nothing there.

“Do it.” Castle’s command is soft but steely. “If Brody’s right, which I think he is, your life’s over. Don’t make it worse than it has to be. I’ve got the best lawyers in the country. You decide how deep you want to be buried. How long you’re gonna spend behind bars!”

Burk glares at Castle for a thick beat, glances over his shoulder again, then lets out this defeated huff. Digging the phone out of his pocket, he makes the call.

“Put it on speaker.”

He does as he’s told, and we all hear one more ring before Wren answers.

“Hey, cousin. It’s done, just like you told me to.”

Angry breaths start shaking my body. Azim releases me, his skin paling as he spins to gape at Burk.

“It’s nothing like I told you to,” Burk snips. “What’d you do with her?”

“Come on, man. Where’s your sense of fun? Your way was boring. This way... we get to watch. Here, let me send you the link.”

A sick dread fires up my throat as we wait the agonizing seconds it takes for Burk to open his latest text and click on the link. The sound of Indy’s scream filling the room pulverizes me. Castle stumbles back like he’s been punched in the face. One of the guards lurches forward to catch him.

“I put a camera in there.” Wren starts laughing. “This is a live feed!”

“Put a camera where?” Azim whispers.

Burk squirms, gaping at the screen, and Azim doesn’t hesitate. Drawing his gun, he points it straight at Burk’s head and mouths, “Ask him.”

Closing his eyes, Burk looks ready to throw up as he softly asks, “Where’s that camera? What am I watching?”

I reach out, wanting to snatch the phone off him and see for myself. Indy’s stopped screaming, but her breaths are erratic and punchy. She’s panicking and I have to know why.

Azim pushes me back, slapping my hand away while Wren lets out this

hysterical laugh. “A box in the ground.” His voice is high with glee. “A box in the ground. A box in the ground.”

My hands curl into two tight fists. Castle lets out an agonized moan.

Burk covers the mouthpiece to muffle the sound, but Wren still hears it.

“Who is that? Are you with someone?”

“No one.” Burk’s lie is quick and completely see-through.

“Are you crossing me or something? What the hell’s going on?”

“No. We’re family. I wouldn’t do that.”

“I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to.”

“No you haven’t,” Burk snarls. “You complicated everything.”

“That wasn’t my fault! It was that idiot bodyguard. He wouldn’t leave her alone for a heartbeat. I saw it that first night at the party, so I hooked up with the ditzy best friend instead. I tried to find any opening I could, but he was just always frickin’ there! So I gave you the intel and he got sent away. I acted as soon as he was gone! And your bullshit idea to make it look like an accident was... it was boring! This is so much better! Come on, Burky, let me have my fun!”

“Tell me where she is.” Burk’s eyeing Azim’s gun, his voice quaking.

“Why? You gonna try to save her now? You know that’s gonna kill your booty call, right? She ain’t puttin’ out if you don’t finish this like you promised her you would.”

There’s a deathly silence as we all glare at Burk.

Castle’s body pings straight, his wide nostrils flaring.

*Who else is in on this? What booty call?*

We all want to ask, but no one can say a damn thing because we can’t give ourselves away to Wren.

“Plans have changed, man. I need to get Indigo.”

“Oh really? So you need to play the hero bodyguard, huh? Then you’ll just kill her off later, when no one suspects a thing?”

Burk clenches his jaw, then mutters, “Something like that.”

Oh, I want to punch that guy so hard right now!

Wren sighs like Burk’s decision is the biggest downer but finally mutters, “I still want to get paid.”

“It was never about the money for you. You’re a twisted psycho. You did it for the game.”

Wren snickers, then cackles and agrees, “Don’t I know it! And I had me some fun. That ditzy girlfriend was—”

“Tell me where Indigo is.”

“You’ll probably find her dead.”

“But I’ll find her.”

“And that’ll make you look like the failed hero. The desperate man who tried! Brilliant!” Wren’s theatrical flare is wearing thin, and I’m seconds away from screaming at him to get on with it. “Okay. Here it is. You ready?”

“Just tell me!” Burk snaps.

“315. My favorite number.” And then he hangs up.

“What does that mean?” Castle asks, his voice frantic. “What does that mean?”

Burk rubs his head while Castle points a trembling finger at him. “Tell me what 315 means!”

“I don’t know.” Burk shakes his head.

“315,” I whisper, trying to figure it out. “A box in the ground. It’s a plot number!” I shout. “He’s buried her in a cemetery.”

“But which one?” Azim’s eyes are large with panic.

I try to dredge up every memory of Wren I can think of, scouring my brain for some kind of clue. And then, like some divine spark, it hits me.

That night.

The quiz night.

I snap my fingers. “Your uncle. He looks after a cemetery, right?”

“My dad.” Burk frowns.

“Where is it?”

Burk’s now ashen. He slumps against the wall.

“Where is it?” Azim snaps. “Tell us!”

He mumbles out the name, and I’m running for the door, Azim right on my heels.

“Castle, call the police!” he hollers as we rush out.

He lets me jump into the passenger seat of his SUV, and we scream away from the Shaw residence, the clock mocking me as I try to calculate how long she might have been buried for, how much air she might have left.

“He buried her alive,” I choke. “That sick bastard.”

Azim doesn’t say anything, just floors the gas and drives through the streets like a Formula One racer.



---

MY PERSON. MY CREW.

*Indigo*

I'VE STOPPED SCREAMING.

It took me a while, but logic managed to break through the panic and remind me that I have a limited air supply. I need to save it up.

So now I'm breathing shallow.

My throat hurts.

My head is aching.

In fact, my entire body is pounding.

It's really hard to breathe shallow when all you want to do is wail and panic.

Tears trickle down my cheeks, running into my ears as I fight the terror coursing through me.

I'm gonna die.

If I'm not found soon, I'll run out of air.

And how will they even find me if I've been buried?

A sob jerks my belly, a soft whimper coming out of my mouth before I can stop it.

I've never felt so hopeless before.

"Brody." I whisper his name, wishing for him with my entire being.

If he was here, I know he'd protect me, save me, keep me safe.

He came back for me. Even when I yelled at him and accused him of faking our entire relationship. He defied my father to save me. He risked so much.

And then he told me the truth.

He let me in.

I had him back for the shortest of moments, and then we were ripped apart. But if I hadn't let him walk away in the first place... if I'd just trusted him...

His voice fills my mind, and I recapture his soft confession. His tragic past that he didn't want to share with me. But then he did, because... we have something. A connection. A bond.

Like nothing I've experienced before.

He's my person.

My crew.

"My love," I whisper, wishing I'd told him when I had the chance.

I love him.

I do.

I love the way he smiles, the way he can always make me laugh. The way he's taught me so much without making me feel like an idiot. He's sweet and kind. And I love that he treats me like I matter. Like I genuinely matter. And even though he lied, it wasn't to use me. He just needed a job. And he did that job really well, with no ulterior motive.

I can trust him.

I don't have to be afraid to trust him.

Closing my eyes, I let my belly rumble with another cry.

I've finally found the one I've been looking for. The person who makes me feel like I've found home.

And now it's too late.



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## UNEARTHING THE FUTURE

Brody

AZIM SCREECHES to a stop outside the cemetery. I'm running out of the car before the engine is cut, vaulting the fence and landing with a thud on the other side.

Pulling out the flashlight I grabbed from Azim's car, I click it on and start hunting the rows of graves.

The creep factor in the air is especially high as a cool wind blows past me, ruffling my hair and making me shiver.

I can't believe Indy is trapped here somewhere, probably terrified.

*God, please keep her alive. Let me find her.*

The prayer spins around in my brain as I race left, desperately hunting for plot numbers in the hopes of finding my bearings.

I'm so busy concentrating that I don't even see the blur rushing toward me until it's too late.

I'm tackled to the ground, a solid fist smashing into my cheek.

"You're not Burk!" Wren screeches. His voice is high and manic.

I grunt, swinging back with the flashlight and trying to gain control of the flailing fists trying to pound me.

The connection isn't solid enough, and I only manage to disrupt his violent rhythm for a moment.

As I wrestle him off me, I fight my rising panic.

I don't have time for this!

Indy needs me.

She needs me *now*.

With a growl and a hefty surge of anger, I swing my flashlight again, this



time rolling my body and smashing him into the concrete gravestone behind us.

He yowls but makes a dive for my throat, his finger pinching my neck, his thumb pressing down on my windpipe.

With a frantic gasp, I smash my arm down across his, loosening his hold and gaining control of the fight.

Digging my knee into his chest, I grab his fist before it can hit me again and bark, “Where is 315?”

He starts laughing, and I ram a fist into his face.

“Tell me!”

“She’s gone, man.” He snickers, his bloodstained smile hideous when I beam my flashlight at him. And then he starts singing a made-up nursery rhyme that turns my blood to ice. “The video’s gone quiet, there’s no more breathing. Indigo’s gone quiet, she’s not breathing!”

It takes every ounce of willpower not to start smashing the flashlight into his temple, pummeling him until he’s a bloodied mess beneath me.

Instead, I grip his shirt, leaning close and seething. “You’re done. The cops are coming.”

He stills for a second, his breath catching.

“If you’re right about her, you’ll be charged with first-degree murder. You’ll be in prison for the rest of your life!”

“Brody!” Azim shouts.

“Over here!”

I listen to his footsteps drawing near, squinting when the flashlight beam cuts across my face, then lands on Wren.

“Tell us where she is,” Azim demands, adding another layer of pressure as he leans down and beams the light directly into Wren’s face.

He squirms beneath me, shifting his head away.

Azim grabs his chin and forces him back. “Tell us!”

“315,” he finally croaks.

“Where is that?” My spittle hits his cheek. “Where!”

“Five up, two along,” he snarls, and then his face breaks with a psychotic smile and he starts laughing again. “But you’re too late. Indigo’s gone quiet...” He starts singing again.

I jump up and sprint in the direction he was pointing, spotting the fresh mound of dirt before I register any numbers.

“Indy,” I rasp, dropping to my knees and clawing at the earth.

I scoop mounds of soil away, my movements frantic. She can't be dead. Quiet doesn't mean dead. It means calm, like she's found her control.

Please. Please let that be true!

I'm racing a clock, knowing I might already be too late, and this damn earth isn't shifting fast enough!

"Please," I beg, hysteria threatening to take me out.

Police sirens wail in the distance. I keep digging like a desperate dog.

"Here!" Azim drops a shovel beside me and starts scooping with his own.

I stumble to my feet, grabbing the shovel and getting to work.

"Wren's handcuffed to the fence," he tells me as we dig. "The police will pick him up as soon as they get here."

The sirens are getting closer, but I can't speak or acknowledge it.

All I can do is dig.

Flashes of rain and another grave haunt me, cracking through the back of my brain like lightning.

Dad's body tumbling into the hole we made. Staring down at his limp form, feeling nothing but contempt. A shovelful of dirt landed on his head. I glanced up at Cooper, his face a white mask.

"Get to work." His voice was hollow, devoid of life.

I picked up the shovel and did what he told me to, covering that body so we'd never have to face him again. We buried a curse from our past that night.

"But not tonight," I mutter under my breath.

Tonight, I'm unearthing the hope of my future.

I won't fail.

*Indy, I won't fail you.*

The silent promise spurs me on as I dig out another chunk of dirt, moving faster than I ever have before.



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## A BATTLE WON

*Indigo*

A THUD MAKES ME JUMP.

It's a sharp whack above my head and I flinch, my eyes bulging wide.

I go still, too afraid to breathe. To wish.

*Is someone here to help me?*

"Indy!" A deep voice hollers my name.

It's muffled, but it's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard in my life.

"I'm here!" I shout back.

There's a pause, and then the movements above me grow frantic.

"She's in there! She's alive! Go! Dig!"

It's kind of terrifying, still trapped in the darkness, listening to the noises around me, but I do my best to stay calm. The second the wood around my head starts to splinter and the sweet nectar of fresh air seeps into the gap, I lose it.

The sobs I've been trying to control suddenly burst out of me.

Squinting against the beam of light that brushes over my face, I raise my aching arm, and it's quickly captured by a strong hand.

I'm hauled into an embrace, the arms around me trembling as they hold me close.

"Thank God," he rasps. "Thank you, God."

Brody.

I close my eyes and let the tears slip free, wrapping my arms and legs around him. Clinging to him with a renewed strength. "I love you," I whisper. "I love you."

I keep saying it, whimpering into his ear until he pulls back and looks at

me, his eyes glassy with this disbelief and wonder.

I choke out this weird sound—a mix between a laugh and a sob, a combination of joy and embarrassment. He pulls me against him again. I press my cheek to his, wrapping my arms around his solid shoulders and never wanting to let go.

“Indigo!” Someone’s crying my name.

I think it’s my father, but I don’t want to move.

“Indigo!” He says it again, and then his hands are pulling me away from Brody.

Before I can protest, he lifts me into his arms like a princess and starts walking me out of the cemetery.

“Daddy, wait,” I try to protest.

“Shhh. I want to get you checked out.”

Rushing me to the ambulance, he sits me in the back and won’t let me say another word until the paramedics examine me.

I know it’ll be faster to just shut up and take it, but all I want is Brody.

He found me.

He came for me.

“What happened to your hair?” Daddy murmurs, his thumb rubbing the back of my hand.

I touch the colored locks resting on my shoulder. “Purple,” I rasp.

“I can see that.” He snickers.

“I like it.”

He tips his head to study me, his critical eyes drinking me in as he toys with the ends. “I do too.” Leaning forward, he presses his lips against my forehead, then wraps his arm around me.

A tired smile crests my lips as I lean against his shoulder. He likes my hair. One battle down.

But a really huge one still stands before me.

He’ll no doubt make me fight to let Brody be a part of my life again, but this is a battle worth waging, and I am *not* going to lose it.

Brody and I belong together.

I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.



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## THE SHAW VOLCANO

Brody

WATCHING Indy being carried away by her father is torture, but I know I can't chase after her. It's not my place, and if I try to follow, I could end up in cuffs.

"Wren secure?" I ask, thinking of cuffs and hoping that psychopath gets permanently put away.

"Yeah." Azim pats me on the shoulder. It feels like I'm being hit with a mallet, but it's just exhaustion hunting me down, wrapping around my ankles and making it impossible to stand.

I sway and drop to my knees.

I'm covered in filth, my nails packed with dirt. The urge to cry swamps me, but I sniff it away. She's safe. The fear ebbs slowly from my core as I blink and stare down at the hole in the ground. The box the police helped me rip open is behind me, the crowbar lying in the grass.

"She's safe," I whisper.

People move around me in a fuzzy blur. I close my eyes, dipping my head and wondering how I'm ever gonna stand or walk again.

I want Indy back in my arms.

Her whispers in my ear were the sweetest thing I've ever heard.

She loves me.

It's unbelievable. I don't deserve it, yet I know she meant it. When I looked at her face and that affection in her eyes...

She loves me.

An exhausted, shell-shocked laugh pops out of me.

"Brody. Time to go." Azim's back at my side again. "Castle wants you at

the house.”

“Why?”

He helps me to my feet. “He wants to sort out this mess, but Indigo’s refusing to leave without you.”

I nod and stumble after him, searching for Indy. I spot her in the passenger seat of her father’s car. She sits up, her eyes large and hopeful. I’m about to walk toward her, but Azim pulls me back, ushering me into his car.

“You’ll see her at the house.”

He’s driving off before I can protest.

I glance over my shoulder and don’t relax until I see Mr. Shaw’s car pull in behind us.

Resting my head back, I let out a long sigh.

“You saved her life tonight,” Azim murmurs, pulling a packet of Wet Ones from the glove compartment.

I can’t speak. The aftermath is taking its toll. The terror hasn’t completely ebbed. It lingers like a musty smell from the corner of my brain.

“I nearly lost her,” I croak, thinking of Grandpa Ray and how I can never get him back.

My hands shake as I attempt to clean the dirt away.

“But you didn’t. And we’re going to make sure we figure this out so she never has to be in danger again.” Azim starts huffing and muttering under his breath, “... Burk was thinking. That guy has some serious explaining to do. I didn’t even know he had a cousin. We need to up the game with our background checks. Between you and him, I’ll be lucky to keep my job after all this.”

I pull out another wipe, rubbing at the dirt, my mind kind of numb.

I just need to see Indy. Touch her. Make sure this nightmare is actually over.

As soon as we pull up to the house, I jump out and am waiting by Indy’s door when her father stops the car. Popping it open, I help her out, wrapping my arm around her and kissing the top of her head.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just exhausted.”

“I know what you mean,” I murmur.

She pulls back, and we share a weary smile before being ushered up the steps.

“The police can have him as soon as I’m done. I want to know the truth!”



Castle is barking orders like some chief of police.

Indy winces. "Daddy's on the warpath."

"He has every right to be," I say softly, brushing my knuckles down her cheek. "We nearly lost you tonight."

She blinks, her eyes turning glassy.

I take her hand and lead her inside. Castle is hovering over Burk, who's seated in a chair with two police officers sitting on either side.

Ruby's standing near the doorway beside her mother.

They turn at the sound of us, but neither of them moves to check on Indy. They can obviously see my arm around her and my clear intention not to let her go.

Ruby's eyes bulge. "What the hell did you do to your hair?"

Indy crosses her arms, shrinking against my side as we pass them. I flick Ruby a warning glare, and she frowns at me but doesn't say anything else.

I can sense Angelica stiffen, her hard gaze hitting me with a slap that stings. I straighten my back against it, wondering why she's still so pissed at me. Yeah, I lied. I get it! I'm sorry, but I wasn't the one who buried Indy. I was the one that got her out. She's home, safe and sound, and I'm not about to let anything else happen to her.

"Burk, you tell us what the hell you've been up to!" Castle demands.

An officer raises his hand to quietly remind him. "Sir, he has the right to remain silent."

"Not in front of me he doesn't! If you want to leave the room for this, you go ahead. My security can handle it, but this man is not walking away without giving me some clear answers."

Burk's stoic expression starts to fold.

"You tell me who you're working with and why you wanted to end my daughter's life, or I'm going to make sure my lawyers lock you up for the rest of eternity. Your cousin has no future left after what he did to Indigo, and you're an accomplice to this crime. Tell me why. Tell me now!"

Geez, angry Castle Shaw is like facing an erupting volcano. I shy away from it, bringing Indy that much closer until her father glances over his shoulder and spots us.

His laser glare cuts a line between us. She moves aside, recrossing her arms and giving me an apologetic smile.

I get it. This is not the time to be fighting for our relationship. We'll wait until he's cooled off over Burk before breaching that one.

As soon as her father turns away, she reaches out and runs her finger down the palm of my hand, silently reminding me that I won't be fighting alone. I could kiss her for the subtle move... if I knew it wouldn't make things worse.

I wink at her, then turn my attention back to Burk, who looks on the verge of breaking.

His gaze shifts from the floor, bypassing Castle and landing straight on Ruby.

I frown and glance at the door.

She's shaking her head—just a quick jerky movement that we're obviously not supposed to notice.

But Azim does. His eyebrows dip together, and he moves toward her.

“What's going on?” he asks.

She raises her right eyebrow, her haughty expression twisting my guts. “That's what I'm waiting to find out,” she clips, her eyes narrowing on Burk. “I have no idea what he's been up to, but I'd truly love to know why he's put Indigo at risk. Think very carefully about your answer, Burk. This family won't tolerate any more of your lies.”

Burk's face goes even paler than it was before. The look of hurt flashing on his face actually makes me pity him for a moment. His forehead dents into a confused, wounded frown.

“Lies?” he rasps. “I did this for you. To make you happy!”

She balks, her mouth dropping open on a gasp. “What are you talking about? I had no idea what you were up to!”

His pain is being overridden by anger. It's a sharp contrast, so swift it's like whiplash.

“Save the bullshit for someone else!” Burk tries to stand but is shoved back down in his chair. “You wanted her gone, but college wasn't enough. You told me permanent! The letter was your idea!”

Ruby's eyes bulge, and she shakes her head.

“Stop it!” Burk shouts. “Stop lying to everyone! We had a plan. I was gonna go as her guard. Tell them!”

“I don't know what you're saying.” Ruby's voice pitches. “Why are you doing this?” Her eyes dart to Indy before she flashes an angry glare at Burk.

“You told me you loved me,” he whispers, and I'm starting to wonder if Ruby is Burk's booty call. The one Wren spoke about on the phone. “I did this for you. I would have done anything for you.”

“Oh my gosh,” Indy whispers looking, from Burk to Ruby and back again. “Are they a couple?”

The shock in the room is vibrating as we all scramble to make sense of this.

Indy points at her sister. “You wrote that note knowing Daddy wouldn’t let me go to college, but then planted the idea in my head that I should take a guard with me.”

Ruby sniffs and crosses her arms. “You’re crazy. You’re both crazy. I was only joking when I said that.”

“She did.” Burk huffs and shakes his head. “I was gonna go with you. I was gonna...”

“Make it look like an accident,” I grit out.

Burk closes his eyes. “But then Azim chose you, and I had to call on a little help from my cousin. Ruby was offering to pay him, but... that guy doesn’t need much incentive.”

“Stop bringing me into this!” Ruby scoffs, waving her arm in the air. “Why are you turning on me!”

“You wrote the second note too.” Indy looks at Ruby. Her voice is cool and detached. I wonder what she’s feeling—anger, rage, pity, pain. It’s impossible to tell. “Wren couldn’t get me alone because Brody was there.” She looks up at me, her eyes smiling a little. “You did such a good job of protecting me.”

“Until I was sent back here.” I aim a glare at Burk.

He sighs, his defeated posture telling me he can’t be bothered with lies anymore. What’s the point?

“Wren was trying to figure out how to get you away from her. We had to get you fired, but you were so freaking perfect all the time. Then Wren found out you had a twin brother at Stanford. We started digging. Made calls. Hunted him down and found out that your real name was Brody Adams and you worked for Alpha Security. Before we knew it, we had you.”

Azim sighs. “I didn’t even question it when you brought me that information. I was too angry.”

I wince, trying to apologize with a look. Azim shakes his head.

Burk keeps talking. “You got sent back, and Wren got his window. I didn’t give specifics of how to do it, just that it needed to look like an accident.” He lets out a cold, hard snigger. “But Wren never plays by the rules. And now I’m gonna go down with him.” His eyes go dark with rage,

tracking over to Ruby as he spits the words, “All for love.”

Ruby swallows, the first flashes of guilt whispering across her face. She can't hold Burk's gaze anymore.

“You can't lie your way out of this Ruby,” he warns her. “You've always hated Indigo. You wanted her dead. You wanted her out of the way so you could be Castle's precious little girl. Well, you'll never be, because no matter what happens, the doubts have been sewn, and he will never, *never* trust you again! You were never his daughter in the first place.”

“Shut up! Shut! Up!” she screeches. “You bastard!”

“I loved you!”

“You don't love me at all!”

“That's enough!” Castle bellows. “Everyone just calm the hell down!”

Indy bites her lips together, looking to the floor and blinking at tears. I want to wrap my arm around her, do anything to make this better. She's just found out Ruby wants her dead. It's harrowing.

No wonder Indy struggles to trust anyone. Everybody around her has ulterior freaking motives!

But not me.

And she's gonna know that.

I want to take charge, to step forward and tell the police to get Burk the hell out of here, then point to Ruby and demand they arrest her too.

But it's not my place, and I think Castle's about to do it anyway.

He frickin' better be.

“Burk, you're done.” He tips his chin up to the two police officers. “You can deal with it from here. As for you, Ruby Bell.” He turns with a dark scowl.

Angelica gasps and steps in front of her daughter. “What are you doing? Castle! She didn't confess to anything.”

“Oh, come on, we all know she's lying!”

Angelica's expression crumples, her shoulders slumping forward as she blinks at tears. “I don't want her to be.”

Castle's tone softens to a gentle murmur. “None of us do. But you know the truth. I can see you do.”

Angelica sniffs, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Mother? Mom!” Ruby snatches her shoulder, spinning her around. “No way are you siding with him!”

“Ruby, baby. It's so obvious you had a part to play in this.” Angelica's

voice is heavy with heartache. She lightly touches her daughter's cheek. "Why would you do it?"

Ruby's eyes flash with rage as she slaps her mother's hand away. "Why? You ask me why? When I have to live in a house where Indigo fucking Shaw is treated like a damn queen! When I'm nothing but a second-rate citizen. Castle doesn't love me! All he ever thinks about is her. His precious little Indigo." She puts on a scathing voice, then keeps ranting. "He wasn't giving me a chance. I've been trying to persuade him to think of me as his daughter, but he just won't! And she always throws it in my face, boasting about how great she is and how stupid I am! She has everything. Everything! And it drives me crazy! Why can't he love me too! Why! Why!" Her eyes pop with tears, her voice rising to a screeching pitch that hurts my ears. "I hate you, Indigo! I hate you!" She's screaming and pointing over her mother's shoulder.

Angelica is trying to calm her while Indigo shrinks back. I shift sideways to block her. The wrath coming off Ruby right now is chilling.

"We're your family, Castle, and you treat us like we're spare parts that you can just throw away on a whim. I refuse to be at your fickle mercy!"

"Ruby, calm down." Angelica's attempts are futile, and the police step into the fray, grappling to snatch Ruby's flailing limbs.

She punches them away. "Get off me!"

Whatever beast has taken hold of her now is going ballistic.

Angelica stumbles, her heels tipping. Castle steps forward to catch her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders while she starts to wail.

My gosh, this is insanity.

I need to get Indy the hell out of here.

"No!" Ruby yells, whacking the officer with her fist. "Let me go!" She turns back to Indy with a snarl. "You selfish bitch! You ruin everything!"

"Ruby, please." Indy steps around me, raising her hands. "I'm not trying to hurt you. It doesn't have to be like this. Please, just calm down."

Ruby's face mottles with a look of rage, and before I can blink, she's ripped the gun from the officer's belt and aims it around the room.

Police and Castle's security immediately react.

"Whoa!"

"Calm down!"

"Miss, put the weapon down."

Guns are drawn with various clicks and a rush of movement.

Ruby's eyes are wild. "Get back. I'm not going down for this!"

"You let her get your gun?" a cop sputters.

"She's out of control!"

A chaos of movement and noise buzzes around us as officers and security try to get a handle on the situation. But all I'm doing is watching that gun. Ruby's hand is shaking, and I have to wonder if she's ever held a weapon before.

"Let me go! Or I'll use this thing!" she yells, her finger hitting the trigger.

A loud crack fires into the room, and I lurch to my left, diving to shield Indy.

Ruby's scream rents the air, and the gun hits the floor with a thunk. She jumps back from the weapon like she doesn't know what just happened. The two officers clamp their hands on her shoulders and bring her to her knees, pitching her forward to lie flat on the ground.

"I don't know what happened!" She starts sobbing into the carpet. "I didn't do it!"

Clutching my stomach, I flop to my knees. For some reason my shirt is wet.

I gaze down at my hands, noting the red liquid.

*What the hell is that?*

Then I feel the pain, and my sluggish brain finally admits the truth.

*It's blood.*

*You've been shot, man.*

*You've been shot.*



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## HE HAS TO MAKE IT

*Indigo*

“BRODY? BRODY!”

He jumped in front of me. I saw it in like slow motion.

He was diving across, his arm outstretched.

Ruby fired and screamed, then dropped the gun and the police pinned her to the floor.

“I didn’t do it!” she keeps wailing.

I ignore her hysterics, catching Brody’s head before it hits the floor.

“No,” I whimper, rolling him over and spotting the growing red circle on his torso. “No. Help me!”

Azim drops to the floor beside me, pressing his hands into Brody’s wound and shouting over his shoulder, “Get an ambulance here! Now!”

Brody lets out a weak groan.

“You’re hurting him.” I try to move Azim’s hands, but he won’t budge.

“We have to stop the bleeding. Someone find me some towels!”

People are running around the room. Ruby’s tears are now being replaced with vile curses. Burk’s being led from the room while Daddy holds on to a tearful Angelica.

This is insane!

I focus on Brody, running my fingers lightly through his hair. “It’s okay. You’re gonna be okay. I’ll take care of you.” My words are disrupted by short, gasping sobs. “I’ll take care of you.” I lean down and press my lips to his forehead. “Just don’t die. You’re not allowed to die.”

He reaches for my wrist, gently squeezing. I gaze into his face, drinking in that smile.



It's weak but beautiful, and I want to tell him I love him again... every day, from now until forever.

"I love you." He mouths the words. At first, I'm not sure I read his lips right, but then his eyes smile at me and I know he's mine.

"Hold on to that," I whisper. "And tell me again when you don't have a bullet inside you."

The edge of his lips curls up, and he closes his eyes.

"Brody," I whimper, trying to keep him awake.

Ambulance sirens are wailing onto the property. Daddy's hand is on my shoulder. "Come on, Indigo. You've gotta give them room to work."

The paramedics rush in while the police rush out.

The chaos is starting to ebb, yet my insides are telling me this isn't even close to being over.

"Brody, stay strong," I whisper, kissing him one more time before being forced to stand and move away.

Daddy wraps his arm around me as I watch them work. Angelica hovers on my other side, sniffing into a tissue while Azim wipes blood off his hands with a towel.

"Let's get him to the hospital." The paramedics lift Brody onto a stretcher, and he's wheeled out of the house.

I surge forward to go with him, but Daddy's grip on my shoulder tightens.

"Let me go, Daddy," I warn him. "I'm going."

"I can take her," Azim murmurs. "I'll stay with her while he's in surgery. She'll be safe."

My father gives a reluctant nod. "I'll deal with the press."

I jolt to a stop, spinning to look him in the eye. "Protect Brody. He saved my life."

Daddy doesn't say anything, but his solemn nod is kind of like a promise. I have to trust that he won't let me down.

"Let's go." Azim leads me out to his car, and we drive to the hospital in numb silence.

Azim's on the phone for the second half of the trip, checking in with security, getting updates on the cameras and news vans already parking outside our house and the station that Burk and Ruby are currently sitting in.

My mind is still reeling over that one.

Burk and Ruby?

They kept that so secretive. I seriously never would have guessed. And he

loved her enough to kill for her. That's crazy!

"I'll check in with you again once we get to the hospital. Keep me updated on every detail." Azim wraps up his final call.

We pull into the parking lot and I slip out of the car, running into the emergency room and demanding immediate information on the gunshot victim who was just brought in.

The receptionist at the desk is very sympathetic, and I'm soon ushered into a private waiting room. I slump into a seat, the trauma of my day rounding over me like a tsunami. Tears fill my eyes as I grip the arms of the chair and wait. That's all I can do. Just wait.

It's past midnight, and my body feels like it's run two back-to-back marathons. I stare at the wall, anxious for any kind of news, but Brody's still in surgery. That's all I know.

My mother called. Dad or Angelica must have updated her on this crazy-ass day. I didn't want to speak with her, but Azim made me.

"Just let her hear your voice." He shoved the phone into my hand.

With a reluctant sigh, I took it.

"Indigo, baby! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Really."

"What a drama you've had tonight. I'm so glad you're okay."

I nodded, biting my lips together, my brain buzzing with thoughts of Brody. I wouldn't be okay if he didn't make it.

"I can't talk for long, but I just needed to hear your voice for myself."

"Yeah, I'm good, Mom. I should let you go."

"Well, okay. But if you need me..."

She left the sentence hanging like she didn't want to commit to an "I'll always be there for you."

And the truth is, she probably won't be. And maybe I don't need her to be.

Other people have filled the space she left behind in my life. Reliable people who genuinely care about me. I have a father who loves me... and all going well, a boyfriend who loves me too. If Loretta knew what was going on, she'd be here in a heartbeat. I asked Azim to make sure she's left alone.

She works so hard already, and she needs her sleep. She can find out the drama in the morning, and I'll no doubt talk to her as soon as she stops crying.

Ruby might hate me with a passion, but Angelica seemed pretty upset by her daughter's actions, so maybe she cares about me too. And then there's Tabatha. I don't have the energy to call her right now. What am I even going to say?

"How you holding up?" Azim asks, slipping his phone away after what feels like his hundredth call.

I nod, unable to speak. I'm so exhausted I can't even form words. Worry for Brody is eating me alive. The tension headache I'm battling is going to turn my head into a wad of old chewing gum.

Azim's phone rings yet again, and he rips it out of his pocket. "Is he here?... Good. Send him through."

I sit up a little straighter, expecting Daddy to walk through the door. I'll need to look alert and in control, or he'll no doubt insist I go home to rest.

I'm not leaving.

I steel myself for the argument, but when the door opens, I'm faced with the last person I expected to see, yet the most obvious choice.

I glance at Azim, giving him a grateful smile as I rise from my seat.

Extending my hand, I drink in the man before me. His face is pale and wan, worry marring what I assume is a usually calm, intelligent expression. He doesn't look a thing like his twin brother, yet there's something in his eyes that tells me they're related.

"You must be Jake."

His long fingers wrap around mine. "Indigo Shaw."

"That's me."

We stare at each other for a moment, sharing our unspoken concern and fear, and then our handshake turns into a hug. His long arms wrap around me, and I lean into his chest. He's so much thinner than Brody, but his hold is fierce, and for some weird reason I don't feel like I'm hugging a stranger.

He rests his cheek on the top of my head for a moment, then lets out a shuddering breath. "He's gonna make it, right?"

I sniff and squeeze his middle. "He has to."

"Yeah." Jake pulls away from me and nods, then starts pacing the room. "He better, 'cause he's the only family I've got."

I cross my arms, his agitation making my guts twist and writhe. Nibbling

my bottom lip, I wait until he's facing me again, then softly ask, "What about your other brothers?"

Jake jerks still and stares at me.

He's obviously not impressed that I know about them.

"Brody told you?" he whispers.

"He's told me everything."

"Everything." Jake's eyebrows rise, and I give him a nervous nod. "So, you know, then. You know why he's my only family."

I dip my chin, then hitch my shoulder. "You could try finding them. We could do it together. I'm sure we could—"

Jake's laugh is soft and filled with scorn. "What's the point? If they'd wanted us around, they wouldn't have taken off. Even if they did know their kid brother was dying from a bullet wound, they probably wouldn't show up. They ditched us a long time ago. Brody, he's my only family." There's a tremble to Jake's voice—a barely masked emotion that makes my heart hurt.

I give him a sad smile, and he turns his back on it, pacing to the wall and running a hand through his floppy, sandy-colored hair. So different to Brody's thick locks, yet their action is the same. I've seen Brody move that way so many times already.

It makes me wonder what the other Barrett boys look like, how they walk, move, carry themselves. I'd love to see them all together, and in spite of Jake's bitterness, I can't help wondering if deep down, he'd love to see that too.



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## CONTENTMENT

# Brody

WHEN I WAKE FROM SURGERY, I find my two favorite people on either side me.

Jake's grin is a nice surprise. I raise my fist and he lightly bumps it with his knuckles.

"*Never* scare me like that again, Bro. I swear. Worst call of my life."

I snicker, but the action hurts.

"Don't make him laugh," Indy quietly tells my brother off, but that just makes me want to laugh harder.

I rest my hand gently on my torso, figuring I'm alive, so they must have dug the bullet out.

"You need to be careful." Indy adjusts the covers over me, her sweet concern doing things to my chest.

I kinda like it. That squeeze, the pull, the flutter.

Man, romance authors totally know how to describe that stuff. I didn't realize how spot-on they were until I started falling for Indy.

I smile at her, hoping what I feel is showing in my eyes.

She grins back, gently touching my face.

"You been here all night?" I rasp.

"Yeah. So have Jake and Azim. Daddy called a couple times, but he doesn't want the press following him to the hospital, so he's holding down the fort at home."

"Ruby and Burk?"

Jake tuts, and I turn in time to see him shaking his head. "That is some crazy-ass shit. Indy updated me. The whole freaking story."

She sniffs, and I roll my head back to look at her. My arm feels like lead, but I move it so I can cup her cheek. “You okay?”

Leaning into my touch, she gives me a sad smile and nods. “I am now.”

“There’s no way your father will let them get an inch on this thing. Those guys are going down,” Jake clips, sounding mildly satisfied. And he thinks I’m protective.

“I don’t think Ruby actually meant to shoot anyone,” I croak. “She was out of her mind by then.”

“If only you could press charges for obnoxious stupidity,” Indy grumbles.

“They’ve got plenty of other charges to lay against her.”

“I know.” Indy frowns. “I still can’t believe it. Was I really that awful to her?”

“No.” I hope my tone is emphatic enough to reassure her. I don’t want her buying into that lie.

“Anyway, Brody was the idiot who dove in front of the bullet,” Jake pipes up.

Indy’s head snaps in his direction. “To save my life!”

“Sorry, let me rephrase.” Jake fights a grin. “Brody was the hero who dove in front of the bullet.”

“That’s better.” Indy gives him a prim look that I can’t help adoring.

It’s pretty cool that these two have finally met. Too bad it isn’t under better circumstances though.

“You guys look exhausted. You should go home, get some rest.”

“I’m not leaving you.” Indy shakes her head.

“I, on the other hand, am not in love with you, so I might take you up on that.” Jake pulls on his jacket. “Now that I know you’re gonna make it, I might try to catch a few Zs.”

“You should use that private waiting room. There was a couch in there.”

Jake smiles at Indy, then grabs my wrist, giving it a quick squeeze. “Back soon, Bro.”

“I’ll be right here.”

He gives me a look that says it all, and I watch him walk away until he’s past the glass. My eyes then wander around the room. It’s kind of plush. A piece of artwork on the wall, a comfy-looking armchair in the corner. I have the room to myself, and it almost has a hotel quality to it.

“Where am I? This place seems really nice.”

“It’s a private hospital.”

My eyes jerk to her. “I can’t afford—”

“Daddy will pay for everything. You don’t have to worry.”

I give her a doubtful frown. “Are you sure he wants to do that?”

“Hey, you saved my life. He owes you.”

“Still don’t know how happy he’ll be about me dating his daughter.”

She grins. “He’ll get over it. He’ll have to.” She carefully climbs up on the bed, snuggling in beside me, careful not to dislodge any of the wires and tubes stuck to my chest and stomach. “Is this okay? I’m not hurting you?”

“Not at all.” I wrap my arm around her back, nudging her closer and brushing my lips across the top of her head.

“I’m not giving you up, Brody Barrett.” She kisses my chest. “No matter what my father says.”

A little party erupts in my chest—confetti, fireworks, the whole shebang.

With a triumphant grin, I close my eyes, absorbing every feel, touch, taste of this beautiful woman beside me.

“I love you, Indy.” The words are the last thing I murmur before I’m drifting into a dreamless sleep.





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## BARRETT BOYS

# *Indigo*

WE'RE up to day two of Brody's hospital stay. I didn't want to leave him for one minute, but Azim forced me to. He brought in fresh clothes and arranged for me to shower in a private bathroom down the hall.

Thanks to a little sweet-talking, they also put a bed next to Brody's so I could stay the night. I didn't end up using it; instead, I lay beside Brody, and we drifted in and out of sleep together.

It's been hard. Every time I close my eyes, I find myself back in an airless box, fighting to breathe. Brody's shaken me awake a couple times and let me cry against his chest. His soft murmurs help me drift back into oblivion, but it's never for long.

My neck was kind of sore when I finally woke this morning and my arm was completely dead. I got told off by two different nurses, who ordered me away from him, but I just climbed back up once they were gone.

Brody wanted me there, and I couldn't be anywhere else but by his side. It felt right in ways I couldn't even describe. We need each other.

Combing my wet strands of purple hair, I gaze into the mirror and wonder what the day will hold. Hopefully Brody will be awake for a little more of it. He's still got a long way to go, and I have no idea where he'll recover.

Daddy says the press has been merciless, which is why I've been able to stay here and not risk going home. There's going to be a court case, a trial, convictions. Ugh. The idea makes me sick. The press is going to be all over this juicy gossip, and the idea of leaving the hospital completely freaks me out.

I want to protect Brody too, but I'm not sure I have the power.

Thankfully Daddy used his fake name—Brody Markum—when he was passing information on to the press. I will be forever grateful for that, and I thanked him profusely over the phone. He just mumbled something I couldn't quite hear before hanging up.

A light tap at the door makes me flinch. "Indigo."

It's Azim. I relax at the sound of his voice.

"Your phone keeps ringing. It won't let up. Your friend Tabatha says she won't stop calling until you talk to her."

I cringe, watching my face bunch in the mirror.

"O-okay." I open the door and take the new phone Azim bought me. He managed to transfer my old number, which is both a convenience and a curse. Holding my breath, I gaze down at my screen, my thumb shaking as I return the call to Tabatha.

"Hey," she answers, her voice soft and tentative.

"Hi." Biting my lip, I'm not sure what to say.

"So, I heard what happened. Azim called me."

I swallow. Should I apologize that I didn't? It seems wrong that she had to hear it from a stranger.

"I still can't believe it, yet I totally can. I should have told you why I broke up with Wren."

"I should have asked," I whisper. "I was just dealing with Brody heading back to LA, and I was upset. I should have cared more about your pain."

Tabby sniffs like she's fighting tears, her voice wobbling. "I don't know if I would have had the courage to tell you anyway. Although, if I'd known he was actually after you, I would have. I swear, I would have tried to protect you."

"What did he do to you?"

She lets out a shaky sigh. "It wasn't just the horror movies. As things started to heat up between us, he just kept wanting to do weird stuff. Like the first time we did it was in front of one of those horror movies, with people screaming in terror. It was like it turned him on. That should have been a freaking red flag right there, but I'd never had a serious boyfriend before, and I liked him enough to brush it off as weird. But what is wrong with me?"

"Nothing. You didn't do anything wrong. He fooled all of us."

Tabby lets out a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry he used you like that."

"It's not your fault. I just blindly rushed in, riding on that high of some

cute guy liking me. I thought we loved each other.”

“You were brave to dump him.”

“I just couldn’t do it anymore. He was getting beyond weird. He was getting creepy and... and...” Her voice starts to squeak, and then she’s crying into the phone.

“Tabby,” I whisper, my heart bleeding for her. “What did he do? Did he... did he hurt you?”

She brings her tears under control and confesses, “He tried to choke me when we were having sex. That was the last straw. I was so scared. It’s like he’d gone to this other place in his mind, and I had to scream and push him off me. He landed on the floor and just started laughing. Like one of those crazy, evil laughs. I got out of there and swore I’d never be alone with him again. I broke up with him in a text message. I know that’s not great, but I just couldn’t interact with him again.”

I close my eyes, feeling sick. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“You need to stop saying that. It’s seriously not your fault.”

“But he wouldn’t have even been there if it wasn’t for me.”

There’s a heavy pause, and then Tabby speaks softly. “Yeah, Azim told me you’re famous.”

“I never asked to be. Please don’t hate me for hiding that from you. I just wanted a chance to be normal.”

“I don’t hate you. I mean, I wish you hadn’t lied, but I understand. At least, I think I do. When you’re ready, I’d love to talk to you about it some more.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “Thanks, Tabby. Thanks for being so nice to me.”

“What are you gonna do now?”

“I don’t know. Brody needs to get better. Helping him is my only focus right now.”

“So, you’re not coming back to Mont U?”

“I’m not sure yet. I need to think that through.”

“I get it. I mean, I’m gonna miss you so badly, but I understand. I’m going home for a while myself. I just want to be somewhere safe.”

My heart hurts for poor Tabatha.

“If I were you, I’d want to find an isolated spot somewhere beautiful. Somewhere calm and peaceful where no cameras or media could get to me. Heck, I’d even take no Wi-Fi.”

I smile at her suggestion, wishing it was that easy. Man, I'm gonna miss her.

"I have to have some kind of Wi-Fi or cellular connection so I can stay in touch with you."

She sniffs out a laugh. "I understand if you want to disappear completely. But yeah, maybe we can stay in touch."

"I'd like to."

"Yeah, me too."

We go quiet, the awkward sound stretching between us. I have to break it, so I finally whisper, "Take care of yourself, Tabatha."

"You too." She hangs up, and a heavy sadness sweeps through me.

I try to tell myself that I'll see her again, but I just don't know.

Do I honestly want to go back to Mont U?

I can't even close my eyes without having nightmares. How will I cope walking around an environment where memories of Wren litter every pathway and corridor?

I shudder. Wrapping my arms around myself.

Even if I could cope with that, the news coverage on this story will have filtered into Fitzroy. There'll be no escaping it now. Mont U will never be the same again.

A crumpling pain hurts my chest. It's that heavy knowledge that, once again, this life I never asked for is ruining something else.

With trembling hands, I pack up my shower gear, shoving it into my bag with the finesse of a two-year-old. Slipping out the door, I wander down the corridor, not quite ready to return to Brody. He'll see my face and instantly know something is wrong.

I need to process that phone call first. Poor Tabatha. I understand why she wants to go and hide away back home. She needs to heal. And I guess I do too. But where?

Where can I ever go to get away from the stupid media with their overinflated stories and their speculations?

With a deflating sigh, I turn the corner and slow to a stop. Raised voices from the front desk pique my curiosity, and I edge around the corner. Two desperate-looking faces come into view. Two men, maybe in their early twenties, are standing in front of today's receptionist—Rebecca. She's a sweetheart. The taller one with the big eyes and hair that flops over his forehead is looking quietly annoyed while his friend gestures with wild hand

movements and a harsh snarl. “He’s our brother! You can’t stop us from seeing him.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I have very strict instructions that the patient is not to be disturbed by anyone.”

“We have ID,” the tall one softly interjects, pulling out his wallet.

The receptionist looks at his card, her eyebrows puckering. “Your name is not on my list. I’m sorry, but I can’t let you through.”

“That’s bullshit, lady!” The one with the sharp features is pretty mouthy, but there’s something about his hand movements that draws me into the room.

“Rebecca.” I step up behind her, holding out my hand for the ID. “Can I see that for a second?”

The men both jolt, obviously recognizing me as they stand tall. They’re giving me a wary assessment. I try to find the courage to meet their stares, but instead my eyes dip to the driver’s license Rebecca just handed me.

*Michael Adams*

My breath hitches. “Who are you here to see?”

“Brody Adams... or Markum... or whatever the hell he’s calling himself!” the shorter one snaps.

“You say you’re his brother?”

“Yes.” He closes his eyes. “We haven’t seen him in a while, but we heard the news. We’re family, we swear. We’ve driven hours to get here. Please, you gotta let us see him.”

“Where have you come from?”

“Montana.”

Montana?

No way. Have they come from the ranch or something?

Brody told me that place was abandoned. Have they returned?

My lips curl a little at the edges, my shock taking a moment to process.

“What part of Montana?”

“Just this little town, you won’t have heard of it.”

I bet I have! Brody told me about it, when he was reliving the details of

his life... his horrific past. Harborton, Montana, was the one bright spot, the light in his darkness. That ranch saved him... and his brothers have come from there to see him!

They're here. They're actually here!

At least I think they are. They're telling the truth, right?

Narrowing my eyes, I study them, looking for family resemblances. Maybe a little around the eyes, but...

"You don't look like him," I murmur.

"We—" The shorter one lets out a frustrated huff and turns to the guy beside him, his hands fisting tightly.

Actually, though, now that I'm watching them move, they do have some similarities. Michael's got the height of Brody, but the floppy hair like Jake. And the shorter, feisty one definitely has Jake's face shape but Brody's coloring. Maybe they are all related.

I pass the license back and have to fight a grin when it's snatched out of my hands.

Yeah. I think this is them. Call me crazy, but my gut's telling me to give these two a chance.

Crossing my arms, I soothe their irritation with a quiet comment. "But, you know, Brody's twin brother doesn't really look like him either, so maybe you *are* Barrett boys."

They both spin to face me, their eyes wide.

Bingo.

That's what I was looking for.

Total and complete recognition of that name.

My smile grows a little wider. "Rebecca, add their names to the list."

"Miss Shaw, I—"

"Do it," I softly command her.

She gives me a hesitant look, then grabs her pen. "Michael, was it?"

"Yes. And this is Deacon."

I nod, walking around to the side door and opening it for them.

They bust through, giving me grateful smiles.

"Thank you." Deacon takes my hand, giving it a firm shake. "It's nice to meet you, Indigo."

"Call me Indy."

"Call me Deeks." His little smirk is somewhat charming, and I shake my head, figuring the charm gene must be pretty strong among them. Although,

I'd have to say that Brody got the highest dosage.

Michael lets out a shaky breath as we walk down the corridor.

"You nervous?" Deeks throws the comment over his shoulder.

"We haven't seen him in years," Michael murmurs. "What if he hates us for... taking off?"

"It's Brody, man. He doesn't know how to hate."

Deeks's comment makes me like him just a little more, and I lead them straight to Brody's room, dodging Azim's confused stare as I round the corner.

"Have they been approved?" he calls after me.

"They're family," I assure him and score myself another set of grateful smiles.

Brody's going to lose his mind when they walk through his door.

He'll be so stoked to see them.

At least I hope he will be.





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## REUNION

*Brody*

MOVEMENT outside my door makes my eyes crack open.

My vision is still kind of blurry as three figures walk into the room.

I make out Indy right away and blink, clearing my vision so I can see her better.

Then I check out the two guys she's with.

And I blink again.

And again.

Yep, they're still there.

But this can't be real.

They look like... well, like Deeks and Michael, which can't be right because I—

“Hey, lil' Bro,” Michael rasps, a slow smile forming on his wide lips. “Damn, you're huge. Like... all grown up. Shit, man, you've got whiskers.” He lets out this wobbly, awestruck laugh.

Deeks is just staring at me, shaking his head in wonder.

My lips part, tears filling my eyes before I can stop them. It hurts as I try to deny them. My eyes start to burn and sting.

This can't be real.

“Deeks?” I finally whisper. “Michael?”

“Yeah, man. We're here.”

I let out this quivery, astonished laugh and look to Indy, just to make sure.

She touches my shoulder, her misty-eyed smile making this all too real.

My gasping laughter turns into a sob and I cover my face, emotion swamping me so fast I think I'm gonna drown in it.

“It’s okay, man.” Deeks moves around the bed, his arms gently encircling me.

And then Michael’s there. I wrap my hand around his elbow, clinging to it and crying like a freaking baby.

I can’t stop.

They’re here. My brothers are here.

Finally, we pull apart, and I swear there’s not a dry eye in the room.

Indy’s slashing tears from beneath her lashes, and Michael is digging his knuckle into his eye.

Deeks lightly slaps my arm and sniffs. “I hate crying, Bro. Stop it.”

My laughter is watery and I sniff in time with him, swiping a finger under my nose.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I croak. “Where the hell have you guys been?”

“That’s gonna take a while.” Michael smiles.

It’s the same. That quiet, unassuming grin. The gentle way his eyes crinkle at the corners.

“He’s not going anywhere,” Indy pipes up, moving in beside me so she can rest her hand on my arm. “Figure you guys have some stories to tell.”

They both look at my girl, their expressions turning solemn as they nod and take a seat.

Two hours later, I’m all caught up.

I’m kind of reeling at the shit they’ve been through, and I can’t believe they’re back at the ranch.

“What’s it like?”

“Not the same without him,” Deeks murmurs, a pain I understand flashing across his face before he forces a smile. “But it’s good. We’re fixing it up.”

Michael nods. “Bought some cattle.”

“No way! Really?”

“Yeah, man. We’re turning it into a working ranch again.”

I let out an awestruck sigh, wishing I could see it.

“We need all the hands we can get.” Deeks smirks at me. “Could use a big oaf to lug stuff around.”

“Big oaf!” Indy snaps. “You better not be talking about my boyfriend.”

I chuckle, then wince, gently holding my stomach and whispering, “It’s cool, baby. This moron’s just acting like my brother.”

She narrows her eyes at him, and he raises his hands. “He’s one of the only people I can insult this way. It’s a brother’s privilege.”

After a long, awkward beat, she snickers. “I guess I don’t have any brothers, so I wouldn’t really know.”

“Well, you play your cards right and you’re gonna score a whole bunch of them.” Deeks winks at her while Michael’s lips stretch into a grin.

He looks right at me. “Come home with us.”

The invitation blows my mind, and all I can do is gape at them for a minute.

“We’re trying to bring everyone back. If you return, there’ll only be Jake and Cooper left. If we can find them,” Deeks ends with a mumble.

“Jake’s at Stanford now.” The words pop out before I can stop them, and it’s instant regret.

My twin would *not* want me sharing that information.

“What?” Michael’s face lights up like a fireworks display. “You still see Jake? You didn’t get split up or separated?”

“No. We made it through high school together, and he got a full scholarship to Stanford.”

*Stop talking, Brody!*

“That kid always was smart.” Deeks whoops. “When can we see him? Do you have his number?”

My older brother starts pulling out his phone, and suddenly my mouth goes dry.

I glance at Indy. She gives me an empathetic smile.

“I, uh...” I clear my throat, not sure how much I should tell them. Jake will kill me if I spring these two on him with no warning. I have to speak with him first. But how do I tell Michael and Deeks that without hurting them?

“He’s probably sleeping at the moment.” Indy speaks for me. “He’s exhausted after being here for so long. He caught some sleep on a couch, but not enough, so we sent him back to his dorm early this morning. He might be back later.” Her voice peters off, but neither of my brothers seems to notice.

They’re too excited.

“Yeah, we get it.” Michael nods. “We drove through the night to get here.”

Indy and I share another look that must be more obvious, because Deeks suddenly snaps, “What? What are you not saying right now?”

I wince and keep my eyes on the white sheet covering my legs. “Jake’s... well, he’s...” I sigh, giving into the truth. “I don’t know if he wants to see you guys.”

Michael and Deeks don’t say anything.

I risk a glance and notice their clouded expressions, watch them work through their disappointment.

“He might need some convincing to...” Indy bites her lower lip. “According to him, Brody is his only family.”

Although delivered gently, it’s a brutal blow. Deeks fists his hand, then gives a stoic nod. Michael keeps his eyes on the floor, squeezing the back of his neck and looking pale.

“I’ll do what I can,” I murmur.

“Yeah, we get it. It’s okay. We’re the ones who left.” Michael’s voice diminishes on the last word.

“Sounds like you had your reasons.” I try to make him feel better, but the truth is they did abandon us, just like Cooper did.

It was easier for me, but Jake took it hard.

“Well, um...” Deeks punches his hands into his pockets. “We’d really love to see him.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Working his jaw to the side, Michael runs his hand through his hair. “And whether he comes or not, we’d still love you up at the ranch, man. It’s where you belong.”

I nearly say *I know*, but I bite the instinctive response back. I don’t know if Indy’s ready to hear that yet. Hell, I don’t even know if I am. I’m surprised the idea settles so easily in my brain.

The thought of going back to the ranch—the one place I was happiest—is cause for major celebration. But it won’t be without its complications.

What will Jake think if I disappear up there?

Will I ever see him again?

He’s my twin. We’ve stuck together since the beginning. Can I honestly just abandon him that way?



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## JAKE WALKS OUT THE DOOR

*Indigo*

DEEKS AND MICHAEL left a couple hours ago, and both Brody and I have dozed off. We drifted asleep talking about the visit, marveling in this unexpected miracle.

Listening to Brody cry as his brothers held him made my heart pulse in ways it never has before. The mix of pain and joy was such a powerful concoction, I couldn't keep my own tears at bay.

Brody's family has found him again.

And he's been invited back home.

Will he go?

The thought unsettles me, but I don't want to say anything. I can't force him to stay here with me, and the look on his face when his brothers asked him to come home... well, I know that's what he wants.

I hold my breath, willing my bleeding heart to stop feeling sorry for myself. If I love Brody, his happiness should come before mine. I'll just miss him so much.

Closing my eyes, I nestle against Brody's shoulder but have only just settled when there's a light knock at the door.

"Hey, guys." Jake slips into the room, his sweet smile tugging on my already bleeding heart.

His bright blue eyes, so unaware of the bombshell Brody's going to throw at him. When he texted me to check-in before, I didn't have the heart to mention anything. It's kind of Brody's place, plus I didn't want to do anything that might stop Jake from visiting.

I wonder how he'll take it.

I can imagine, but I don't really know him yet, and I can't predict what he'll say.

"Hey," Brody croaks. I can hear the tremor in his voice, and I tense without meaning to.

He threads his fingers between mine.

"How you feeling?" Jake's oblivious expression hurts. I hate that we're going to ruin it, but Brody has to say something.

Deeks and Michael are staying the night in LA. They're not heading back to Montana until they at least get a chance to see Jake. And it all starts with the youngest Barrett boy.

"Jake... we gotta talk," Brody murmurs.

Jake's eyebrows rise, and he runs a hand through his hair. The dark blond locks flop back over his forehead. "Sounds ominous. Better lay it on me quickly."

Brody sighs. "Deeks and Michael were here."

Jake flinches like he's just been slapped in the face, his eyes bulging wide. "What?"

"They heard about what happened on the news. They've been looking for us."

"Oh, really?" Jake's instantly skeptical. "Looking for us?"

"Yeah, that's what they said." Brody sniffs, the right side of his mouth curling into a smile. "It was so good to see them again. You should hear what they've been through and what they're—"

"I don't want to hear it," Jake cuts Brody off, his voice sharp and unrelenting. "I don't need some shitty-ass explanation. They left us. Just took off. They didn't even leave a frickin' note! As far as I'm concerned, I only have one brother. That's you."

"Jay, come on, man," Brody whispers. "You don't know their stories. They were scared kids."

"And we weren't?" Jake slaps his chest. "We needed them, and they left us!"

"They didn't know our foster home was going to fall through."

"It doesn't matter! They abandoned us, just like Cooper did!"

His yelling has caught the ear of a couple nurses, who pop their heads in to make sure everything's okay.

"Yeah, we're good." Brody raises his hand, looking weak and anything but fine.



The older nurse narrows her eyes at me, so I slip off the bed, giving her a contrite smile until she turns her stern glare onto Jake. “You need to stop that yelling. People are here to rest and recover.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jake gives her an apologetic smile, then turns back to his brother.

They stare at each other, a silent standoff, before Brody finally breaks.

“They really want to see you.”

“Well, they’re fresh out of luck.” Jake’s stance is quiet but firm. He sighs, knowing the comment stings but obviously not wanting to take it back. Crossing his arms, he grips his shirt sleeve and changes the subject. “I spoke to Carmen this morning. Their camera guy’s bailed on this trip they’ve been organizing. It’s filming a documentary in a national forest in Minnesota. She’s invited me to go instead.”

I glance at Brody. He doesn’t say anything, just bobs his head.

“If you’re good, then I’m gonna go, but...” His eyes skirt the room, then land on his brother again. “But if you need me, I’ll stay.”

“No, man, you should go. This is a great opportunity. And it’s Carmen, right?” He wiggles his eyebrows, making Jake snicker.

“Her boyfriend’s gonna be there. Unfortunately. This project is his baby. The guy wants to be the next David Attenborough.”

Brody snickers. “Well, this could be your perfect chance to prove that you’re the better man.”

Jake grins, looking doubtful.

“I guess I’ll see you when you get back?” Brody’s voice sounds small and tentative. It’s so unlike him.

“Yep.” Jake nods, then hesitates. “Where are you gonna be?”

Brody’s swallow is thick, but he eventually manages, “I don’t know yet.”

This answer hurts Jake. I can tell by his sad smile.

With a serious nod, he moves around the bed so they can share a quick fist bump. “I’ll call you.”

“You better.”

And with that, Jake walks out the door.



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COME WITH ME

Brody

IT'S hard to cheer up after Jake leaves. He reacted exactly the way I thought he would. I guess a small part of me hoped he wouldn't.

I want to be a family again. I didn't realize how badly until I saw Deeks and Michael standing at the end of my bed.

I miss my brothers. I want to go home.

Resting my head back on the pillow, I stare up at the ceiling, my mind torn right down the middle.

If I go back to Montana, do I lose Jake?

If I stay, I'm kissing goodbye to a deep-seated dream, one that's been lingering in the back of my consciousness.

"Are you okay?" Indy brushes her hand over my shoulder.

I curl my fingers around her digits. They're so tiny and cute. I kiss the tips and try to smile, but she sees right through it.

"You want to go, don't you?"

"Yeah," I reply before I can even think about it. "But I don't want to hurt Jake."

She sighs, her smile looking brave. "You know, just because you want to take your brothers up on their invitation doesn't mean you love Jake less. That's his issue to deal with. You don't have to own that. The idea of going to a beautiful, isolated little town in the mountains sounds freaking amazing. It'd be the perfect place for you to recover."

"You wouldn't mind it?"

She blinks, biting her lips together and nodding. "I want you to be happy."

“But I want *you* to be happy.” I grin, wishing I could sway her, but knowing the reality. “If you don’t want to go, then we don’t have to.”

“Wait, what?”

“What?”

We stare at each other in mirrored confusion, our heads jerking back in unison.

“You want me to go with you?” she finally asks.

I laugh. I can’t help myself. It’s like the world’s stupidest question. “Of course I do. I’m not going without you.”

Her mouth drops open and I laugh a little harder, instantly regretting it. With a painful groan, I nurse my side and try to speak. “Indy, I’m not surviving this and finding out you love me only to leave you.” Reaching for her face, I brush my thumb over her smile. “We’ve spent the last month living in each other’s pockets. I can’t just leave and start living miles away from you. You have to come with me.”

A glassy sheen covers her eyes and she presses her cheek into my hand. “I think we’d have a pretty big battle on our hands. My dad will never agree.”

“You’re a grown woman. He doesn’t have to,” I assure her. “Look, I know it won’t be easy, but we can try to convince him. There are a million good reasons for you to go. Like, the fact that it’s a quiet, mountain town. Peaceful. The perfect place for the love of your life to recover.” I wink and she starts to smile. “There’ll be no cameras, media, headlines. None of that intrusive crap. We could live up there until I’m strong enough to protect you again. And then if you still want to go back to Fitzroy or study someplace new, I’ll go with you.”

She shakes her head. “You are *not* putting yourself in front of any more danger for me.”

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

She goes still, staring at me like I’m insane.

“I would,” I promise her. “I love you, and I don’t want be without you.” I drop my voice to a whisper. “Please. Come with me.”

Her watery smile makes my heart grow with this inexplicable joy.

Finally, she brushes her lips against mine and murmurs, “Okay.”



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## I THINK I'M GONNA LIKE IT HERE

# Indigo

“THEY’RE HOME!” a female voice yells from the window.

The front door punches open, and a toddler with dark brown curls comes rushing out the front door. “Dee! Dee!”

Her little arms are raised high, her smile contagious as she runs for Deeks. He swoops her up in his arms, tossing her in the air and catching her against his chest.

“Hey, little one.”

“Holy shit,” Brody murmurs. “Deeks is like a dad.”

I giggle at the expression on my boyfriend’s face. “Is it totally weirding you out?”

“Uh-huh!”

A slender woman with long dark hair runs down the stairs, her smile wide with affection as she wraps Deeks in a hug, then kisses his lips.

“That must be Kena.” I watch her lithe movements. Deeks described her really well.

“And here comes Annie.”

A short firecracker jumps off the porch and straight into Michael’s arms. They make out enough for me to raise my eyebrows and share a look with Brody.

We stare at each other for a second, then start to laugh.

Brody groans and holds his side.

“Stop,” I whisper. “Stop finding everything funny.” I try to scold him, but that’s really hard to do when I’m also laughing.

“Look at them. They’re still going. You’d think they’d been away six

months.”

“Maybe six days feels like a lifetime.” I shrug, knowing I should open this door and go introduce myself, but also feeling kind of nervous.

What if these people don’t like me either?

I guess they know who I am already and they still invited me, so that’s a good start, but...

“Hey!” Kena waves and walks toward the car. “Welcome to the Barrett ranch.”

I match her grin as I slip out from behind the wheel. She’s holding the door for me while Deeks helps Brody out from the passenger side.

“Who you?” The little girl tips her head, pointing up at me while squeezing a dirty-looking stuffed rabbit against her chest.

“I’m Indy.”

“Like an Indian?”

“No, like Indigo. A color of the rainbow.”

“I know dat colder!” She starts jumping up and down. “Just like your hair.” She’s turning her *r*’s into *w*’s, and it’s the cutest thing ever.

I bob down so I’m at her eye level and ask, “What’s your name?”

“Arwee.” She grins while I try not to giggle. Deeks is right, she can’t pronounce her name yet, and it’s the sweetest thing in the world.

I hold out my hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Arley.”

“You too.” She points toward the house, then sticks out her hand for me to take. “You come.”

“Okay.” I glance over my shoulder to make sure Brody’s all right.

He’s leaning against Deeks, staring up at the house with misty eyes. Aw, bless his heart. He’s gonna cry again. I kind of love what a total softy he is. But I also understand that this is a really emotional moment for him.

This place was the only house that he really thought of as home. It was his safe haven, until the night his father destroyed it for them.

It must be so weird being back here.

All I can hope is that he’s filling his mind with thoughts of Grandpa Ray and not the unmarked grave on the ridge.

We head into the house, chatter coming at me from all sides as I’m introduced to Annie.

“My lil’ brother, Jackson, will be home from school soon. He’s busting his guts to see Michael again, and he’s real keen to meet y’all. The boys have been telling him big stories about their baby brother, and I think he’s turned

Brody into some kind of giant in his head.” Annie laughs and looks up at my towering boyfriend, then back to me. She’s a little taller than me, but she’s the closest thing I’ve got to understanding what it’s like to be little.

With a knowing smile, she gives me a sideways hug. “It’s good to have you here.”

“Th-thank you.”

I’ve never been given such a warm reception before. This is the weirdest thing.

I was so nervous driving here. It’s been a tumultuous week—arguing with Daddy, saying goodbye to Loretta and Azim, arguing with Daddy again, making promises I seriously have to keep, like calling home every day and coming back to visit as soon as Brody is well enough. Plus, I swore I’d make a decision about my future. I don’t know how I’m going to decide what to do. I don’t really want to go back to Fitzroy. But do I want to spend the rest of my life on this ranch? I’m still interested in becoming a vet, and if I project forward past my studies, I could be a really useful asset to the ranch. I mean, if we love it and we choose to stay long term. But that’s like years from now.

It’s hard to know what my immediate future’s going to hold. That’s what I said to Daddy, but he wouldn’t accept that, so I appeased him with my vow to have a serious think and make some clear decisions. I promised to research other colleges and come up with a firm plan.

It was enough for him to let me go, although he did insist that we take his private jet, and he arranged for a car to be waiting for us at the airport in Missoula. Thankfully a driver wasn’t included, so I was able to follow Michael and Deeks home. They left two days before us so they could be in Missoula when we arrived. They insisted on leading the way back to the ranch, and I’m grateful for it.

I feel kind of sorry for them. They hung around in LA for an extra few days, trying to speak with Jake and apologize, but he was not interested.

Poor guys. They were pretty sad about that.

I wish Jake would let up, but he’s obviously deeply wounded, and it’s going to take more than one conversation for him to get over it.

The brothers aren’t sure how they’re going to win Jake’s forgiveness, but I get a real sense that they won’t stop trying. Deeks, in particular, is determined to bring everybody home. Even Cooper, who is a complete mystery.

Deeks lowers Brody onto the couch, and I move around to check on him,



taking in the ladder that leads up to the bedrooms. Thankfully there are stairs on the other side, past the dining room, so Brody should be able to manage easily enough. I'll make sure he takes care of himself.

Taking a gentle seat beside him, I rest my hand on his thigh. "You doin' okay?"

"Better than okay." He kisses my cheek and stares at the fireplace. A sad expression flickers over his face, and I wonder if he's picturing that night his grandpa died, so I quickly distract him.

"Did you see the cattle as we drove up?" I ask, leaning my head against his shoulder.

"Yeah." Brody nodded. "From the yummy smells coming out of the kitchen, I wonder if we'll be eating one of them tonight."

"Ew." I wrinkle my nose.

Brody snickers and kisses my forehead. "It's okay, city girl. I'll look after you."

I tut but give in to a self-deprecating chuckle. I guess I have a lot to learn. "Tell me that story again, about you trying to round up the herd and falling off your horse."

He grins. "Why are your favorite stories always the ones that embarrass me the most?"

I giggle. "You just tell them so well."

"Yeah, yeah," he murmurs, but then goes on to oblige me, exaggerating the details until everyone within earshot is laughing.

"I remember that!" Michael calls from the table. "Oh man, I haven't thought about that in years."

"It's good to have you home, Bro!" Deeks calls from upstairs.

Brody's smile is rich and content as he gazes down at me. I kiss his lips, loving the joy radiating off him. I like seeing him this happy.

And it's easy to understand his emotion.

As the evening wears on and I'm enveloped by the Barrett clan, I'm starting to see what the big fuss is all about.

This place has the coolest vibe. It seems to emanate a love that I've never experienced before. There's laughter and joy here, fault and weakness, teasing and caring. As we eat dinner and dive into more details and stories from our pasts, I realize that I'm not sitting at a table of perfect people. We've all been wounded in our own ways, yet we can heal together. I'm not being judged. I'm being accepted.

It's probably too soon to say, but as Arley crawls into my lap and asks me to read her a story, I wonder if maybe I'm sitting with my crew. Opening the book, I look over the edge of it, smiling as Michael and Jackson rib each other and Annie laughs. Kena whispers something in Deeks's ear, and he turns to look at me, his eyes warming with a smile as I cuddle his little girl on my lap.

Brody's getting misty eyes again, gazing around the table, and I can't help a smile.

I think I'm gonna like it here.

I think I'm gonna like it a lot.

## EPILOGUE

# Brody

INDY'S LAUGHTER echoes across Nell's paddock, her bright smile brilliant, even from this distance.

"She's loving the horses." Aunt Nell takes a sip of herbal tea, her eyes glimmering with a smile.

I can't help but reciprocate, a grin stretching wide across my face.

It kind of sucks that I can't be riding with her, but I've had my orders. Nothing too physical for at least a month. It's been just over two weeks since I was shot and I'm already feeling a million times better, but I've got so many people around me ordering me to take it easy, there's no chance I'll push it too early.

Stretching my leg out, I sit in the sunshine watching Indy, Jackson, and Hailey canter around in circles. Hailey is a friend of Jackson's from school, and I'm pretty sure they're besties... or more. When I teased Jackson about it last night, his face went bright red and he told me to shut my pie hole.

Annie gave me a quiet whisper later. "Of course he's got a crush on her. He has since the day they met, but you can't go teasin' him about it. He's only a kid. Leave him be." Her blue eyes gave me a stern stare-down, and I apologized, promising not to hassle him again.

At least about Hailey.

I'll find other things to tease him with. It's a brother's right. I kind of feel obliged. Jackson fits so easily into this family, and even though Annie's protective of him, he can't get away without a few razzings from Michael, Deeks, and me. It's like a freaking rite of passage. He'll be fine.

Aunt Nell giggles beside me. "Look at those two." She points to Hailey,

tipping her head back and laughing at something Jackson just said. “They’re little lovebirds and they don’t even know it.”

“Yeah.” I snicker. “I guess it’s hard to admit sometimes.”

“Well, they’re young. They’ll figure it out eventually.” Aunt Nell chuckles. “Reminds me a little of Cooper and Ashlyn. Boy, those two were sweet on each other. They wouldn’t admit it, and they didn’t think anybody knew they snuck off to steal kisses in the woods, but I’m no fool.”

My forehead wrinkles with confusion. “Ashlyn?”

“You don’t remember her? My great-niece. She used to spend summers up here with me and Thomas.”

I try to remember some girl who Cooper had the hots for, but we pretty much stuck to the ranch and didn’t get many visitors. Grandpa was very protective, considering he had us here illegally.

After a few moments, I shake my head. “No, I don’t remember her.”

“Well, she hasn’t been back for a long while, although she’s still good at keeping in touch. Calls me once a month without fail.” She nods, then softly murmurs, “Family’s important. Love.” Aunt Nell’s eyes are on me again, doing her quiet study.

It’s a little unnerving, so I roll my shoulders and take a breath before turning to meet her gaze.

“I’m glad you found your special someone.” Her eyes go misty. “It’s what your grandpa wanted for all you boys. He’d be so proud, seeing you all big and grown up.” She sniffs, her voice wobbling for just a moment. “You think you’ll stick around and help run the ranch?”

I shrug. “I’d love to, but Indy’s gotta come first. She needs to decide if she wants to go back to college. For now, we’re just in that healing stage. We both need it. Me physically, her emotionally.” I shudder as I remember hearing her whimpering a couple nights ago. I was in the room next door and had to pad through the dark to reach her. She was dreaming again, and I woke her just as she started screaming. Crawling into my lap, she clung tight and cried against my shoulder.

“I opened my eyes, and I thought I was in that box again.”

I shushed her, stroked her hair and reminded her that I would never let anything like that happen to her again.

“I’ll keep you safe.” It’s a promise I never intend to break.

Aunt Nell lets out a sound of approval. “There’s no rush. You two have plenty of time to make your decisions. You just enjoy being here and falling

in love some more. Everything has a way of working out.”

“I hope so.” My tone gets heavy as I think about Jake. I spoke to him just before he left on his trip, and he was kind of pissed that I’d made the decision to come up here. He still doesn’t understand how I can forgive so easily.

“Jake’ll get there,” Aunt Nell murmurs.

I whip around to look at her, wondering how she knew I was thinking about him.

She gives me a knowing smile. “We all carry our wounds differently. Some find it easier to forgive than others. Some can leave wrongs in the past, while others carry them like scars. Jake was always a sensitive kid. Losing Ray hurt him more than he’d ever be willing to admit. He’s not really mad, Brody. He’s afraid. He’s scared to come back here. He’s scared to have his heart torn out again. Losing Cooper and your brothers... each abandonment was another whiplash.”

“But he had me.”

“Yeah, and he always will. What he needs to reckon with is that he has Deeks and Michael too. And I wouldn’t doubt that Cooper’s out there somewhere, missing y’all as well.”

“It doesn’t feel like it when he left that way. No word. Just... disappeared.”

“I know it, but that boy was traumatized, and he didn’t want you carrying the weight of that.”

“Do you think he’ll ever come home?”

Nell nods with certainty. “My prayer ever since you left this place is that God would bring you back. Well, three of you are here already, and I don’t think my God answers prayers halfway. So, I’m gonna just keep trusting that one day, I’m gonna walk up to that Barrett door and open it to find five beautiful Barrett boys causing a ruckus just like you used to.”

I laugh, multiple memories flashing through my brain. Deeks kamikaze jumping over the banister and onto the pile of cushions we’d arranged for him to land on, Cooper turning the hose on me and starting an epic water fight, Michael burning the French toast because he got distracted arguing with Deeks, Jake trying to play the guitar while I ruined it with my out-of-time drumming on the table. Grandpa’s belly laugh when he taught us how to play poker, using jellybeans for chips, and he cleaned us all out.

“It’s not the same without him.”

“No.” Aunt Nell shakes her head. “And it never will be. But there’s

nothing to say it won't be just as good... or even better. You think about Annie and Kena... Jackson, little Arley... and now Indigo. You boys are filling that house with rays of pure sunshine, and you'll thrive because of it. I believe that." She gives me a pointed look.

I grin, carefully leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Love you, Nell."

"And you know I love you too." She kisses me back just as Indy rides up and pulls Starlight to a stop.

The mild-mannered mare snorts and flicks a fly off her ears, waiting patiently for her rider to disembark.

I stand and rush over, wanting to be the one to help Indy down. She probably doesn't really need it, and I probably shouldn't be doing it, but I get there in time to lift her off the saddle.

"Careful of your stomach." Indy grips my forearms.

I ignore the pang in my belly and pull her in for a kiss. "Worth it," I murmur against her lips.

She smiles and deepens the kiss for a brief heated moment before leaning back and smiling up at me.

I love those eyes. I could stare at them all day, and I probably would have if Jackson hadn't hit me with his boot while jumping off the horse.

"Hey," I bark over my shoulder.

"Oh, sorry, did I interrupt the kissing?" His innocent expression doesn't fool me.

Indy laughs against my chest and wraps her arm around my waist. "You can get him back later."

"Oh, I will." We wander over to Nell, helping her carry in lemonade glasses and clean up after our visit.

"Don't you worry about the horses. Thomas and I will take care of them."

"Are you sure?" Hailey asks. "I can stay and help brush them down."

"You're such a sweetheart." Nell touches her cheek. "What time's your brother coming to get you?"

Hailey checks her watch. "Maybe half an hour or so."

"Okay, well, let's lead these three back to the stables."

"Can I help?" Jackson jumps up.

"Yeah, sure. Luke can drop you home on our way back to town." Hailey flicks her hand, and Jackson scrambles after her before I can protest.

Aunt Nell laughs at my expression. "It'll be fine. You two enjoy a quiet ride back home."

She hugs Indy goodbye, then sends us on our way.

I'm not allowed to drive yet, so Indy jumps behind the wheel, her little hands looking small and delicate.

Her father bought her the newest Subaru Outback to use while we're in Montana. It's a decent beast, and Indy's handling it like a pro. I kind of can't wait to drive it myself. Before meeting her, I'd never driven anything that was less than twenty years old. This car only came out three months ago! It had less than twenty miles on the odometer when we picked it up at the airport.

The throaty engine rumbles to life, and Indy carefully pulls out of Nell's driveway. It's a pretty short trip back to the Barrett ranch, and I nearly suggest we lengthen it, especially since Jackson isn't in the car.

But my phone starts ringing.

"Who is it?" Indy asks, glancing at my phone.

"It says 'caller unknown.'"

"Yikes. I hate those ones. Are you going to ignore it?"

"Yeah, I..." My voice trails off. Something in my gut is telling me not to. But why?

Biting the edge of my lip, I hover my finger over the Answer button, and before it can flick to voice mail, I impulsively press the screen.

"Hello?"

"Brody!" Jake's hard to hear, but I know it's him. Static is interrupting the connection, but one thing is abundantly clear—he's scared.

"Jake? Are you all right?" I sit up a little straighter, gripping the phone to my ear and struggling to hear him.

"...trouble! We need help... chasing... big deal!... huge!"

"I can't—I can't hear you!"

"Get help!"

My insides run cold. "Where are you?"

"Superior National Forest... hunting cabin... co-ordinates are..." He rattles off some numbers and I start scrambling for a pen. "Need you to... authorities. We have information they... see."

"What's happening?" I'm shouting, but I can't stop myself. "Jake!"

"... after us. We—"

His voice cuts off, and I swear I hear gunfire. Jake cries out, and then the line goes dead.

I stop breathing for a second, nearly jumping out of my skin when Indy

touches my shoulder.

“Brody?” She’s pulled the car off the road and we’re sitting there idling. When did she do that? “What’s the matter? Is Jake okay?”

“No.” I can barely get the words out, opening up Notes on my phone and punching in the numbers he rattled off. Dammit, are they the right ones?

“Brody, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

“Jake.” I swallow. “He’s in danger. I…” The words peter out of my mouth as shock slams into me like a sledgehammer.

“Where is he?”

I show her my phone.

“Are those co-ordinates?” Indy pulls out her phone and tuts. “Dammit, I don’t have decent reception out here.” Dropping her phone in my lap, she pulls back onto the road and starts racing home. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay. We’ll get him help.”

I nod, her words slowly sinking into me as my senses override the panic.

Gunshots don’t necessarily mean someone’s dead.

I’ve survived.

And Jake will too.

I’ll make sure of it.

We all will.

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**He agreed to a trip into the wilderness for a chance to win her heart.  
What he didn't count on was a chilling murder and a race for their lives.**

***Jake:***

Carmen is the woman for me. I've known it for months now.  
There's only one major problem... she's with another guy.  
But he's so wrong for her, and this trip is going to be my chance to show her that.  
She invited me, that has to mean something.

All I need to do now is get her alone for a few minutes so I can tell her how I really feel.  
But then a living nightmare happens—we witness a murder.  
And now we're on the run for our lives.  
Carmen and I are finally alone, just the way I was hoping... but not like this.

There's no time to tell her how I feel when all that matters is keeping her alive.

I'll do whatever it takes to make sure she gets out of this.  
My grandpa told me that there's no greater love than to give your life to rescue someone else. I'd give my life for Carmen. All I can hope is that I

won't have to...that I'll be smart enough, brave enough, to get us both out of this vast forest before the killers can eliminate all evidence of their crime.

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## A NOTE FROM JORDAN



Dear reader,

Well, I have to admit that this was a really challenging story to write. I had Indigo and Brody sussed. I knew how I wanted their romance to unfold... but that mystery. Oh man, it did my head in! LOL!

Thankfully, I work with amazing editors who helped me figure out how to make this story better for you. It's funny how less can be more. I have a tendency to overcomplicate things, and I really had to shred this story and reconstruct it again.

But life's like that sometimes, right? We have to break before we can mend. Like muscles at the gym, they need tearing to grow stronger. I don't understand why life is set up this way, but I do know that we have to wade through the hard times to become the people we need to be. I hope whatever hardships you might be facing right now that you can find hope in this truth. It will get better, and you will ultimately be stronger for it.

Before I go, I'd like to thank my amazing team—Emily, Rachael, Beth, Kelé, Karen and Kristin. Seriously, what would I do without you guys?

Thank you to my review team, who are still loving these Barrett boys. I can't wait to write some more stories for you.

Thank you to my amazing Forever Love Crew. You helped me so much with this novel. Those daily check-ins were instrumental to my success. I can't thank you enough.

Thank you to my readers and for all you do to support my work.

Thank you to my family, who stand by me no matter what. There is a lot of laughter, fun and understanding in this house. I'm grateful that I can live in a place where I don't feel judged and I can be myself.

And thank you to my ultimate protector. My savior. You gave your life to keep me safe, and I will never take that for granted. I love you.

xx Jordan

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